

# DELIBERATIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF AUTHORITARIAN SENTIMENTALISM AND DISINFORMATION CHAOS

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## ABSTRACT:

In an era of multiplatform journalism and the extraordinary ease of presenting views online, democracies face a key challenge, namely convincing citizens of the rightness of the solutions put forward. The concepts of “deliberative communication” offer a seemingly simple solution to the search for social consensus. However, citizens are much more exposed than in the past to disinformation, misdirection and purposeful manipulation. This study examines the quality of public debate in the adoption of major health legislation in the Slovak Republic. The aim is to highlight the different attitudes of the participants to the debate and the different motivations of the participants in the broad public debate. The study presents an analysis of the outputs of professional organisations and political representatives at national and regional level. It highlights the biased coverage of local media and the level of debate involving an exceptionally large range of speakers.

## KEY WORDS:

deliberation, healthcare, implementation, disinformation, public debate, public opinion, reform

## 1 Introduction

The promotion of a broad-based dialogue, on the basis of which consensual solutions to social problems are adopted, is encountering in Slovakia a growing leaning of the population towards authoritarian forms of government. During the uncertain social and economic situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of citizens who want a strong and decisive leader at the head of the country, who does not have to be burdened by elections or parliament. In the Globsec Trends 2021 survey, 38% of respondents expressed support for such a leader. In the previous year, 25% of respondents supported an authoritarian form of government.<sup>1</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> HAJDU, D. et al.: *GLOBSEC Trends 2021: Central & Eastern Europe One Year into the Pandemic*. Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2021, p. 66.

The rising support for the non-democratic system in times of crisis is also significant according to the results of the research of the Institute for Economic and Social Reforms, with a sample of 1,020 respondents, although the researchers themselves note that it is not easy to formulate the wording of a question by which representative surveys ask the general public for alternatives to the current state of democracy. In 2016, 24% of respondents called for the abolition of the parliamentary system and the establishment of a dictatorship; after modifying the research question, only 16% of respondents expressed support for a dictatorship in early 2017. However, shockingly enough, 28% of respondents in both surveys saw a return to the pre-1989 socialist system as an alternative to the current state of democracy.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Slovak citizens are particularly vulnerable to disinformation and conspiracy theories,<sup>3</sup> which can significantly limit the level of deliberation. The results of the Voices of Central and Eastern Europe study, conducted by the NGO Globsec, showed that 56% of respondents to the survey in Slovakia were likely to believe a claim that contained a conspiracy or a lie. The findings were significantly worse than in Bulgaria (48%), Romania (39%) or Hungary (35%). There is a significant correlation between belief in conspiracy theories and disinformation and the willingness to give up democratic freedoms in exchange for other benefits. *“60% of respondents in Slovakia believe that world events are not decided by elected leaders, but by secret groups and societies that seek to create a totalitarian world government.”*<sup>4</sup>

Social media have become one of the main sources of information for the Slovak population, bringing virtually limitless opportunities for spreading disinformation narratives into the public space. 56% of the Slovak population<sup>5</sup> draws information from social media and 65% of Internet users say they have detected fake news on social networking sites. As many as 81% of respondents to a 2muse survey in December 2021 said that expressing opinions on social media divides society.<sup>6</sup> Disinformation is also a particular challenge for the education system in Slovakia. A 2019 Focus Agency survey showed that 53% of teachers would recommend their pupils to read the conspiracy magazine *Zem a vek* (in English *Earth and Era*) and 57% the disinformation portal *Hlavné správy* (in English *Main News*).<sup>7</sup>

A report issued by the Slovak Presidium of the Police Force notes that disinformation has become a significant security threat in times of the pandemic. In 2021, 189 hoaxes were analysed, 151 of which related to the pandemic. According to the data, misinformation was not only reflected in the rate of vaccination of the population against COVID-19, *“but also resulted in verbal and physical attacks against the rank and file of state institutions (health workers, police officers, sanitary workers, vaccination teams, etc.)”*.<sup>8</sup>

In the disinformation chaos surrounding the pandemic, and at a time of the greatest strain on the health system that the Slovak Republic has ever faced, the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic put forward a key reform of hospitals. According to *Slov-lex.sk*, 1,197 comments were submitted to the Draft of the Act on Categorisation of Inpatient Healthcare and on Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts in the comments section, and the submitters were often confronted with a lack of discussion with citizens and health professionals in the regions directly affected by the reform.

In this case study, we analyse the media outputs of state officials, representatives of health organisations and the public on this issue. We assess the level of deliberation that was directly influenced by disinformation<sup>9</sup> and the efforts of elected representatives to win the favour of the population at the level of local governments, the National Council of the Slovak Republic and the Government of the Slovak Republic. There has been a wide debate on healthcare reform that will directly affect the lives and health of citizens, which provides us with ideal research material to assess deliberation. The aim of the study is to highlight the different approaches of the participants to the debate and to assess the level of deliberation and motivation of the participants in the broad public debate in the adoption of key changes in the state in the field of health policy. We focus on the analysis of the media outputs of professional health organisations and the information presented by some political representatives that directly influenced public opinion, regardless of the public interest.

## 2 Deliberation as Constructive Public Debate Versus Emotional and Incompetent Arguments

Ensuring public participation in the legislative process in order to adopt the best possible proposal is the challenge of any liberal democracy. The concept of “deliberative democracy” is based on the idea that the whole population has a stake in political decisions. The most effective and consensual decisions, according to this concept, will be reached after a fair and reasonable debate in society. *“It describes a form of active democracy (democracy between elections) that brings ordinary people into political decision-making – it is a way to decide together to make a difference.”*<sup>10</sup> In solving problems, deliberative methods can bring innovative approaches that government cannot solve on its own. Involving citizens in the debate facilitates the identification of society’s priorities and makes it easier to overcome opposition from interest groups and intra- and inter-party divisions.<sup>11</sup> Political scientists look to deliberation for ways to minimise the shortcomings or overcome crises in democratic societies. As early as in 1957, Anthony Downs formulated the hypothesis that political parties establish their policies strictly as a means to maximise the number of votes they can get in elections. *“They do not seek to gain office in order to carry out certain preconceived policies or to serve any particular interest groups; rather they formulate policies and serve interest groups in order to gain office.”*<sup>12</sup> Understandably, the media play an extremely important role in this process and shape public opinion.<sup>13</sup>

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas admits that participants in deliberative debate can be purposely misled in order to gain benefits, but the manipulation must go unnoticed. The basic goal, he argues, is to win the approval of a universal audience for one’s problematic proposal in a non-coercive and regulated competition for better arguments.<sup>14</sup> According to John Rawls, who formulated the so-called ideal of public reason, deliberative democracy is a situation *“when citizens deliberate, they exchange views and debate their supporting reasons concerning public political questions. They suppose that their political opinions may be revised by discussion with other citizens; and therefore, these opinions are not simply a fixed outcome of their existing private or non-political interests.”*<sup>15</sup>

2 GOLIAŠ, P.: *Diktatúru či vystúpenie z EÚ už chce menej ľudí*. Released on 21<sup>st</sup> February 2017. [online]. [2022-01-16]. Available at: <<https://www.ineko.sk/clanky/diktaturu-ci-vystupenie-z-uz-uz-ucce-menej-ludi>>.

3 ŠKARBA, T.: Pristupy v boji proti dezinformáciám a hoaxom. In SÁMELOVÁ, A., STANKOVÁ, M., HACEK, J. (eds.): *Fenómén 2021: Pandémia covidu-19 a médiá*. Bratislava: Comenius University, 2021, p. 160.

4 HAJDU, D., KLINGOVÁ, K.: *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe*. Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2020, p. 15.

5 See: NEWMAN, N. et al.: *Digital News Report 2021*. 10<sup>th</sup> Edition. Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2021. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <[https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf)>.

6 See: 2MUSE: *Dezinformácie a zmena pravidiel fungovania sociálnych sietí*. Bratislava: Agentúra 2muse, 2022.

7 GODA, J.: *Hlavné správy a Zem a vek patria podľa prieskumu medzi najdôveryhodnejšie médiá medzi učiteľmi*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2019. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/blog/1571691/hlavne-spravy-a-zem-a-vek-patria-podla-prieskumu-focusu-medzi-najdoveyrodnejšie-media-medzi-ucitelmi/?ref=in>>.

8 *Správa Policajného zboru o dezinformáciách na Slovensku v roku 2021*. Bratislava: Odbor komunikácie a prevencie Prezídia Policajného zboru, 2022, p. 4.

9 For more information, see: PANASENKO, N. et al.: COVID-19 as a Media-Cum-Language Event: Cognitive, Communicative, and Cross-Cultural Aspects. In *Lege Artis: Language Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 2020, Vol. 5, No. 2, p. 122-210.

10 CARSON, L., WALKER, I., KEUTGEN, J.: *An Introduction to Deliberative Democracy for Members of Parliament*. London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2021, p. 5.

11 OECD: *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions – Catching the Deliberative Wave. Highlights 2020*. [online]. [2022-01-04]. Available at: <<https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf>>.

12 DOWNS, A.: An Economic Theory of Political Action in a Democracy. In *The Journal of Political Economy*, 1957, Vol. 65, No. 2, p. 137.

13 For more information, see: RADOŠINSKÁ, J. et al.: Politainment: Reflecting on Political Affairs via Audiovisual Media Entertainment. In *European Journal of Transformation Studies*, 2021, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 72-90.

14 HABERMAS, J.: *Between Facts and Norms*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, p. 228.

15 RAWLS, J.: *The Law of Peoples: With the Idea of Public Reason Revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 138-139.

Supporters of deliberation consider active and rational discussion among interested groups of citizens as the basis for a better functioning democracy, which eliminates its shortcomings.<sup>16</sup> Jane Mansbridge et al. point out that academic research on deliberation in democracies has long focused either on analyses of deliberations in legislatures, including campaigns by political participants, or on statements and proposals by small deliberative initiatives in which citizens deliberate. However, to understand the broader goal of deliberation, they argue, it is necessary to analyse the larger framework of institutions and processes and their interaction within the system as a whole.<sup>17</sup> *“A systemic approach allows us to see more clearly where a system might be improved, and recommend institutions or other innovations that could supplement the system in areas of weakness.”*<sup>18</sup> Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson emphasise that deliberation can only be successful when debaters show mutual respect for all the arguments presented. When deliberation works, the principles of freedom and opportunity are reinforced in citizens. Substantive debate can open up new possibilities in politics and set new directions that make the implementation of proposals more feasible than anticipated. Protecting the principles of freedom and opportunity requires that officials and citizens justify their actions in a way that is consistent with the principles of deliberative democracy.<sup>19</sup> According to Jon Elster, the process of collective decision-making is subject to three procedures. Voting, which includes bargaining and vote trading, reassessment of interests, which is based on rational discussion (deliberation), and distortion, which can lead to a misassessment of interests.<sup>20</sup> Deliberation can only be successful when elected representatives collectively consider the benefits and impacts of their decisions without injecting market mechanisms into the debate in an attempt to reach their target constituency.

However, there is still no precise and uniform model of how deliberative debate should take place. Academics point to the shortcomings and unattainable goals of deliberative democracy. Zsuzsanna Chappell notes that deliberation requires a very high level of cognitive thinking, and that participants in deliberation need to have a highly developed capacity for rational analysis to understand other people’s perspectives. It may happen that debaters are not convinced by facts and arguments, but succumb to their emotions and become less competent. The competence of debaters can also be affected by a number of prejudices.<sup>21</sup> According to Majid Behrouzi, only a small number of people can participate directly in decision-making, because the basis of deliberation is interactivity, otherwise it loses its meaningfulness.<sup>22</sup> According to Jens Steffek, the logical problem faced by democratic philosophers is the practical impossibility of allowing all affected parties and citizens to participate in such a process.<sup>23</sup> Daniel A. Bell questions Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s recommendation that citizens continue to have an open debate on a topic with which they morally disagree. Democracies, he argues, could slip into years of fruitless and frustrating debates that would poison the atmosphere so much that no one would want to discuss sensitive issues anymore. Some issues, such as economic policies, are so complex that it is difficult for ordinary people to contribute meaningfully to the debate and these issues should not be left up to the people.<sup>24</sup> John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse note that in real life deliberation can produce unproductive emotions that can deepen rather than narrow power differences. People may feel frustrated with the system that brought them to the debate. The use of deliberative processes is inappropriate for many topics, they argue, and may lead to worse decisions than if no deliberation had taken place.<sup>25</sup> Given that, the addressed topic is even more complex than we would think.

16 Compare to: PANASENKO, N., GREGUŠ, L., ZABUZHANSKA, I.: Conflict, Confrontation, and War Reflected in Mass Media: Semantic Wars, Their Victors and Victims. In *Lege Artis: Language Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, 2018, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 132-163.

17 MANSBRIDGE, J. et al.: A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy. In *Deliberative Systems*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 1-2.

18 MANSBRIDGE, J. et al.: A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy. In *Deliberative Systems*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 4.

19 GUTMANN, A., THOMPSON, D.: *Democracy and Disagreement*. Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 224.

20 ELSTER, J.: Introduction. In *Deliberative Democracy*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 6.

21 CHAPPELL, Z.: *Deliberation Disputed – A Critique of Deliberative Democracy*. London : London School of Economics and Political Science, 2008, p. 177-178.

22 BEHROUZI, M.: *Democracy as the Political Empowerment of the People*. Plymouth : Lexington Books, 2005, p. 180-181.

23 STEFFEK, J.: The Legitimation of International Governance: A Discourse Approach. In *European Journal of International Relations*, 2003, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 263-264.

24 BELL, D. A.: Democratic Deliberation – The Problem of Implementations. In *Deliberative Politics. Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 77.

25 HIBBING, J. R., THEISS-MORSE, E.: *Stealth Democracy*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 191.

### 3 Deliberative Communication in the Adoption of Hospital Reform in 2021

Efficient and accessible healthcare has been a pillar of the government’s programme statements for a decade. The single party government led by Prime Minister Robert Fico stated in its programme in 2012 that *“the health of citizens is the greatest value and source of wealth of society, which must be protected and developed”*.<sup>26</sup> The cabinet set itself the goal of promoting the optimisation of the network of healthcare providers.<sup>27</sup> In the following electoral period, (2016 – 2020), the government was, again, led by Robert Fico and subsequently by his successor Peter Pellegrini. Both ran for trust with an identical programme statement, in which they set themselves the goal of *“rethinking the end-to-end network of hospitals, taking into account geographical, financial and regional needs, as well as patient safety. The aim of such a review will be to ensure that the hospital bed stock is optimised according to the needs of the regions, with an emphasis on improving the quality of chronic beds, optimising the outpatient healthcare network, centralising medically demanding and specialised activities, and providing the necessary affordable healthcare”*.<sup>28</sup> The government of Igor Matovič and later Eduard Heger in the 2020 – 2024 electoral period also has the reform of the hospital network in its programme statements. *“The Government of the Slovak Republic will propose to reform the hospital network based on regional need in order to ensure the availability, efficiency and quality of the services provided.”*<sup>29</sup> The adoption of sweeping changes to healthcare delivery has met resistance across electoral periods, not only among the top leaders of the state government, but also in the regions. In addition to representatives of the vertical hierarchy of the state, both professional and lay organisations were involved in the debate. Healthcare reform, therefore, offers us an ideal perspective for examining the quality of deliberative debate in the Slovak Republic.

After the unsuccessful effort to adopt ‘stratification of the hospital network’ in 2019, which led to the resignation of Health Minister Andrea Kalavská, the leadership of the Ministry of Health began to communicate the reform in terms of ‘optimisation of the hospital network’ after the 2020 parliamentary election. The intention to reform the health sector was declared by Minister of Health Marek Krajčí shortly after taking office. The debate has been intensified by the EU’s Next Generation mechanism, through which EU Member States can draw 750 billion euros for recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The Slovak Republic can receive an investment package of more than 1.5 billion euros for the reconstruction of the health sector. The introduction of the reform was only presented on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021 by the new Minister of Health, Vladimír Lengvarský, who stressed from the very first moment that the proposal does not envisage the closure of hospitals: *“The reform is intended to bring quality affordable healthcare to patients, and to give doctors, nurses, and other health workers quality and decent conditions to work in. It will also strengthen the bed stock for follow-up and long-term care and create room for catch-up treatment, as well as better conditions for chronically ill patients.”*<sup>30</sup>

The debate on the presented proposal for a major society-wide reform was immediately criticised on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021 by the president of the Medical Trade Union Association, Peter Visolajský. He pointed out that the professional public has very little information about the presented proposal for transformation or possible abolition of beds.<sup>31</sup> Michal Pišoja, a member of the board of the Association of Hospitals of Slovakia,

26 *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky*, from May 2012. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/2008\_programove-vyhlasenie-vlady.pdf>.

27 *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky*, from May 2012. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/2008\_programove-vyhlasenie-vlady.pdf>.

28 *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky*. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/6483\_programove-vyhlasenie-vlady-slovenskej-republiky.pdf>.

29 *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky na obdobie rokov 2021 – 2024*, from 28<sup>th</sup> April 2021. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=494677>.

30 MZ SR: *MZ SR predstavilo úvod najväčšej reformy zdravotníctva za posledných 15 rokov*. Released on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <https://www.health.gov.sk/Clanok?reforma-zdravotnictva-predstavenie>.

31 LÁNIKOVÁ, P.: *Najväčšia reforma nemocníc? To nie je žiadna reforma, že zmeníte lôžka, tvrdí Visolajský a výhrady majú aj ďalší*.

criticised the preparation of the optimisation of the hospital network on the basis of mathematical models, without a broad discussion: *"It is necessary to go to the regions and really try it out, because the commuting time is different in summer and in winter."*<sup>32</sup> The Slovak Medical Chamber also addressed the lack of dialogue with stakeholders: *"As the spokeswoman of the chamber, Nancy Závodská told TASR, they did not receive the comprehensive material despite the fact that they had requested it from the Ministry of Health (MH) of the Slovak Republic."*<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the professional public, political representatives from both the government coalition and the opposition were involved in the debate on hospital reform. In early June 2021, the former Health Minister and current deputy chairman of the opposition political party HLAS-SD Richard Raši warned that *"the government has decided to liquidate the regional health service and wants to de facto abolish 22 regional hospitals and 30 maternity hospitals"*.<sup>34</sup> R. Raši and subsequently other political leaders referred to a secret document that was supposed to have been leaked from within the health ministry.<sup>35</sup> Health Minister Vladimír Lengvarský denied the information directly in Dolný Kubín, where, according to the leaked document, several wards were to be closed down: *"We are not going to close any hospitals. All the discussions that are being held here on the basis of some list that is circulating in a reproachful way are not true."*<sup>36</sup>

## 4 Public Debate at Municipal Level

A heated political debate was sparked by the reform in the regions that were to be directly affected by a leaked document from within the Ministry of Health. According to the online portals *peticie.com* and *mojapeticia.sk*, citizen petitions for preserving the character of the hospital were held in Komárno, Dolný Kubín, Partizánske, Trebišov and Snina. In Vranov nad Topľou, a petition was launched to save the entire district. On the basis of disinformation in the public space, local civic activist Štefan Goron was convinced that *"the government coalition and the Government of the Slovak Republic are subtly and quietly preparing the abolition of the districts. First they will abolish hospitals, courts, district offices... And then entire districts that do not suit them"*.<sup>37</sup> The petition to 'save' the Vranov nad Topľou district was signed online by only 44 people, but the actions against the actual reform of hospitals in the regions are not insignificant. In Komárno, more than 5,516 people had signed the online petition as of 30<sup>th</sup> January 2022, in Dolný Kubín more than 8,157, in Partizánske 5,663, in Trebišov 6,082 and in Snina 6,160. Information on the number of people who physically signed the petitions in the regions is not available from public sources.

The reform of hospitals resonated at the municipal level and in the local media. A municipal television channel based in reported that on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2021, on the basis of media reports about a secret document presented by the opposition MP Richard Raši, the Partizánske town council held an extraordinary meeting and rejected the liquidation of the wards in the local hospital. In the news item, the editor speaks directly about the closure of several regional hospitals, including the hospital in Partizánske. The director of the Svet zdravia Hospital in Partizánske, Gabriel Krbúšik, was also invited to an extraordinary meeting of the city council and told the TV station that if the presented goal of the leaked list is hypothetically fulfilled, it will mean the end of the maternity ward and the disappearance of the neonatology department, including the children's ward.

Released on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <<https://www.webnoviny.sk/vzdravotnictve/najvacsia-reforma-nemocnic-tocnie-je-ziadna-reforma-ze-zmenite-lozka-tvrdi-visoľajsky-a-vyhrady-maju-aj-dalsi/>>.

32 Lengvarský: *Chceme, aby si pacient nemusel hľadať odborníkov sám*. Released on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/lengvarsky-chceme-aby-si-pacient-nemu/551975-clanok.html>>.

33 *SLK je už teraz sklamaná z plánovanej reformy zdravotníctva*. Released on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2021. [online]. [2022-01-23]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/slk-je-uz-teraz-sklamana-z-planovanej/552539-clanok.html>>.

34 RAŠI, R.: *Nemocnice, kde chce vláda zrušiť viaceré oddelenia*. Released on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/151962591495628/photos/a.760245857333962/5820155281342969/>>.

35 *Unikol prísne strážený zoznam: 22 nemocníc a 30 pôrodníc sa má zrušiť!*. Released on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.lpluska.sk/rady-a-tipy/unikol-prisne-strazeny-zoznam-ministerstva-tieto-nemocnice-maju-zrusit>>.

36 DULAIOVÁ, M., MERČIAK, J., BARMOŠOVÁ, L.: *Optimalizácia nemocníc*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://lekom.sk/stranka/06072021-informacie-v-mediach>>.

37 GORON, Š.: *Proti zrušeniu okresu Vranov nad Topľou*. Released on 13<sup>th</sup> October 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.peticie.com/pzv>>.

The editor further reports on the possibility of the alleged closure of maternity hospitals in nearby Topoľčany and Bojnice, and that women in the region will be left with the option of giving birth only in Trenčín, Považská Bystrica or Nitra. The mayor of Partizánske, Jozef Božik, assures the citizens in his contribution that the town's leadership is ready to fight for the local hospital: *"We have started the fight for the hospital again, and we are calling on other towns and regions to cooperate. I will discuss this issue, as I have already informed the mayor, also at the level of the Trenčín Self-Governing Region..."*<sup>38</sup> The broadcast report was biased and did not contain any opinion of the Ministry of Health or any other professional organisation. *Partizánske Municipal Television* also covered the visit of Boris Kollár, the Speaker of the Parliament and the Sme rodina political movement, who together with municipal politicians was intensively involved in 'saving' regional hospitals. In a story from 28<sup>th</sup> October 2021, the editor reported that the Partizánske Municipality continues to fight to preserve its general hospital. In front of the cameras, the mayor, municipal deputies and the hospital director signed a petition to save the hospital in Partizánske. The director of the facility, Gabriel Krbúšik, presented the achievements of the hospital's neurological department and the employees' fears for their future. He and the Speaker of Parliament agreed that it is unrealistic for citizens to travel to distant hospitals for healthcare. Boris Kollár said in Partizánske: *"If we were to move this now to a hospital that is I don't know how many kilometres away and it would take another 45 minutes or maybe an hour to get there (...) I don't know who would have saved those people there."*<sup>39</sup> Even this broadcast report did not respect the principles of objectivity, only pointing out the speculative risks of the reform from unofficial sources and not presenting any position of the Ministry of Health.

The document, which was supposedly to be the basis of the hospital reform, was also covered by the local TV station *Televízia Dolný Kubín* in its newscast on 21<sup>st</sup> June 2021. The editor informed that, based on the information leaked to the public, the Dolnooravská Hospital should be downgraded from a regional to the lowest community level, which would in practice bring about the closure of several departments. In response to the media reports, Silvia Pekarčíková, director of the Health Department of the Žilina Self-Governing Region, told the TV station: *"The fear is well-founded, it certainly did not add to our good mood. Badly covid-tested hospitals have now received another hit in the form of this optimisation... Society wants reform, it wants to improve the quality of healthcare, which is commendable on the one hand, but on the other hand we have to do it very sensitively and prudently based on relevant data..."*<sup>40</sup> Pekarčíková added that the publicised map has not been presented to them officially and the Region is yet to have a discussion on the issue. The news item presented a statement from a representative of the Slovak Hospital Association, to which the local hospital belongs. He said that the specific parameters of the reform are yet to be discussed with the Ministry of Health. The director of the hospital, Jozef Mintál, described the situation as serious, but believes that based on the set criteria his facility will not be missing from the final document. Pavol Lorko, the head of the Dolný Kubín District Authority, described the leaked document as an initial outline that will be further discussed. In its broadcast, the TV station also objectively presented the complete opinion of the Ministry of Health with the objectives of the upcoming hospital reform.<sup>41</sup>

In Trstená, anecdotal information about hospital reform sparked a protest in October 2021 with the slogan *"Don't take hospitals away from the people"*, which was attended by approximately 500 people. Marian Tholt, director of the Hornooravská Hospital in Trstená, said that *"someone is making decisions about our hospital, and yet has never been there... If someone does not come here to map it out and reform it on the basis of the needs of each region, we will take more drastic steps. If this does not help, I will go on hunger strike in front of the Slovak parliament"*.<sup>42</sup> After the protest, Boris Kollár, the Speaker of Parliament and of the Sme rodina

38 MTP: *Odmietli likvidáciu oddelení v nemocnici. (Full Video) HD*. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8oSXwleHjA>>.

39 MTP: *Partizánske navštívil predseda parlamentu. (Full Video) HD*. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tltvusNpD9k>>.

40 TVDK: *MZSR vidí Dolnooravskú nemocnicu na najnižšej úrovni. (Full Video) HD*. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rI9csZqKmU>>.

41 TVDK: *MZSR vidí Dolnooravskú nemocnicu na najnižšej úrovni. (Full Video) HD*. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rI9csZqKmU>>.

42 ŠTENČLOVÁ, E.: *Oravci búrlivo protestovali proti reforme nemocníc. Riaditeľ slubuje hladovku*. Released on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://spravy.pravda.sk/regiony/clanok/604507-proti-reforme-nemocnic-protestovali-na-orave-stovky-ludi/>>.

movement, visited the region and, in front of the locals, described the proposed reform as senseless: *"I have never seen such premises, such dedicated and well-cooperating staff anywhere. I give them a five-star rating. I am absolutely delighted. I will not allow something like this to be abolished. I will not allow these people to lose their healthcare. The regions will rise up."* Boris Kollár's visit was also appreciated by the director of the local hospital, Marian Tholt, who called on officials to come to Trstená and map the situation in Slovakia.<sup>43</sup> After the emotional atmosphere, Health Minister Vladimír Lengvarský also visited Trstená. He presented to the local inhabitants his conviction that their hospital will have its place in the optimised network and stressed that the quality of the facility in question in some areas exceeds the limits that are the standard in Slovakia. After the minister's visit, the director of the hospital, Marian Tholt, thanked Vladimír Lengvarský. In a reassured atmosphere, he said that the minister had assured him at the meeting that no one would disturb the hospital, which is functioning.<sup>44</sup>

Of the representatives of the ruling coalition, which had guaranteed the adoption of the reform in its programme statement, the most important speaker against its adoption was Boris Kollár, the leader of the Sme rodina movement. After a joint discussion with representatives of the Medical Trade Union Association and representatives of local governments, he supported the demands of the Memorandum for Better Healthcare, who demanded that the reform be stopped and reworked. In addition to the optimisation of the hospital network, they also demanded the revitalisation of the outpatient sector, the creation of an incentive system and the support of medical faculties. The memorandum was signed by representatives from across the country, in addition to medical trade unionists, it was also supported by representatives of the Košice, Prešov and Banská Bystrica Regions and the mayors of Brezno, Jelšava, Revúca and Zvolen. After the meeting, the Minister of Health guaranteed the signatories that he would prepare a legislative proposal that would meet their demands.<sup>45</sup> Boris Kollár said that if the requirements of the memorandum are not met, the deputies from the Sme rodina movement will not support the reform in parliament.<sup>46</sup>

After a stormy discussion in the plenary of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the deputies approved by a narrow majority the Government Draft of the Act on Categorisation of Inpatient Healthcare and on the Amendments and Additions to Certain Acts. The legislation was adopted without the Sme rodina movement, by seventy-six votes. The motion was supported by three non-attached MPs who left the government coalition during the election period.

## 5 Conclusion

Participants at all levels of government, experts and the general public have entered the final public debate on adoption. Drawing on theoretical models and concepts of deliberative democracy, hospital reform is a textbook example of exploring the benefits and negatives of deliberation.

1,197 comments were submitted to the Draft of the Act on Categorisation of Inpatient Healthcare and on the Amendment and Addition to Certain Acts in the comment procedure, and the submitters were often confronted not only with a lack of discussion with organisations representing health professionals, but also with discussion with citizens and health professionals in the regions directly affected by the reform. We can see from the media communications that analysts in the Ministry of Health focused on the technical preparation of the new system for the provision of inpatient healthcare. However, in the ensuing wide-ranging discussion, the professional debate that could have produced the best possible solution has been lost. For example, the

reservations of the Medical Trade Union Association, which called in particular for reform and stabilisation of the outpatient sector, did not resonate in the public arena, but the deliberation shifted to the populist level of evoking the emotion of fear of the closure of wards or entire hospitals. On the basis of a single document, the origin of which has not been explained, politicians at national and local levels have been given the opportunity to cast themselves in the role of the saviours of the citizens. It has often been said in the debate that the health sector needs reform, but certainly not this kind of reform. In any case, we cannot say that the participants in the deliberation put aside their personal interests. Many took advantage of the situation to score easy political points on the basis of fear-mongering among citizens.

We have observed the absence of constructive debate especially at the regional level. Local media, which are largely funded directly by local governments, are mostly used to represent the leadership of the municipalities and often carry only the official views of the political leadership of the municipal authority.<sup>47</sup> The problematic functioning of town hall media in Slovakia has already been pointed out by Transparency International Slovakia, which analysed dozens of complaints about the misuse of local media for political purposes as part of the project *Hlásne trúby* (in English *Bugles*). A qualitative analysis in 2018 showed that *"out of a total of 86 newspapers included in the evaluation, 47 offered no critical opinion on town hall politics or reserved less than one per cent of their content dedicated to local government topics for it"*.<sup>48</sup> According to Ján Višňovský and Jana Radošinská, one-sided reporting and the absence of plurality of opinion lead to a decline in trust in the media: *"The last years have shown that multiplatform journalism might be as progressive as it gets, technologically superior and easy to access, but also vulnerable when it comes to wider social controversies that mistake politics for popularity contests, science for a matter of individual opinion, or truth for something to deny, refuse or distort."*<sup>49</sup>

Hospital reform was not a new issue and a proposal on the same principle had been unsuccessfully attempted by the previous government. Its representatives who came into opposition in the new electoral term used the same misleading and misinterpreted arguments that they themselves had defended themselves against in executive office. The 2016 – 2020 government tried to push through a complex reform shortly before the parliamentary election, during a fully-fledged election campaign, which was politically untenable even among the coalition partners at the time. However, even in the middle of the new parliamentary term, there was no consensus among the coalition partners, and politicians in power could not resist the temptation to make personal gains on the issue. Instead of a professional debate, we watched a struggle for crowd favour, and it was not enough for municipal politicians to concede that the real optimisation of the hospital network would only start after the 2022 municipal elections and that in practice they did not have to worry that pushing through necessary but unpopular changes would affect their electoral outcome.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of the impact of the debate on society, the petition drives that have been launched in the regions should not be taken lightly either. Petitions addressed to the National Council of the Slovak Republic must be debated in plenary if they are signed by 100,000 citizens. However, a petition signed by 10,000 people must be discussed by the relevant public authorities.<sup>51</sup> Many of the petition actions fell far short of this quorum and, instead of constructive deliberation, citizens acted under the influence of disinformation.

Fruitful deliberative communication requires a high level of political culture and constructive civic engagement. The topic of hospital reform in Slovakia was not new and could not have surprised any of the

43 PAVELEK, M.: *Podľa Kollára hrozí, že regióny povstanú kvôli nemocniciam a súdom*. Released on 25<sup>th</sup> October 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://myorava.sme.sk/c/22770410/podla-kollara-hrozi-zc-regiony-povstanu-kvoli-nemocniciam-a-sudom.html>>.

44 *V. Lengvarský: Verím, že trstenskú nemocnicu sa bude rozvíjať pre ľudí*. Released on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/v-lengvarsky-verim-ze-trstenska-n/590109-clanok.html>>.

45 *Lengvarský: Pripravíme návrh, ktorý by garantoval požiadavky memoranda*. Released on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/lengvarsky-pripravime-navrh-ktory/595250-clanok.html>>.

46 *Kollár: Poslanci Sme rodina budú hlasovať proti reforme nemocníc*. Released on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2021. [online]. [2022-01-30]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/kollar-poslanci-sme-rodina-budu-hlaso/597804-clanok.html>>.

47 Sec: PRAVDOVÁ, H., HUDÍKOVÁ, Z.: Correlations of Culture, Game Principles and Media Productions. In *Communication Today*; 2021, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 4-19.

48 *TIS: Masové zneužívanie mestských novín ohrozuje feroú kampaň*. Released on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2018. [online]. [2022-02-07]. Available at: <<https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/tis-masove-zneuzyvanie-mestskych-no/353476-clanok.html>>.

49 VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J., RADOŠINSKÁ, J.: Introductory Chapter: Journalism Facing Both Pandemic and 'Infodemic'. In VIŠŇOVSKÝ, J., RADOŠINSKÁ, J. (eds.): *Fake News Is Bad News. Hoaxes, Half-Truths and the Nature of Today's Journalism*. London: InTech Open, 2021, p. 9.

50 FOLENTOVÁ, V.: *Reformu nemocníc pripravuje Oskar Dvořák: Rozdelenie zverejníme až po komunálnych voľbách*. Released on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2021. [online]. [2022-02-03]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/2578707/reformu-nemocnic-pripravuje-oskar-dvorak-rozdelenie-nemocnic-zverejnim-e-az-po-komunalnych-voľbach/>>.

51 *Zákon č. 29/2015 Z.z. z 28. januára 2015, ktorým sa mení a dopĺňa zákon č. 85/1990 Zb. o petičnom práve v znení neskorších predpisov a ktorým sa dopĺňa zákon č. 305/2013 Z.z. o elektronickej podobe výkonu pôsobnosti orgánov verejnej moci a o zmene a doplnení niektorých zákonov (zákon o e-Governmente) v znení zákona č. 214/2014 Z.z., from 1<sup>st</sup> September 2015. [online]. [2022-02-03]. Available at: <<https://www.slov-lex.sk/pravne-predpisy/SK/ZZ/2015/29/20150901>>.*

participants in the discussion. The promoters of the legislation did not seem to have attempted any deliberation, but prepared a technocratic proposal and hoped to push it through, also in view of the possibility of drawing funds from the EU Next Generation mechanism. Both the executive and the legislature were motivated in adopting the reform by an investment inflow of 1.5 billion euros, which may never be repeated.

The deliberation itself was uncontrolled and arose from circumstances to which Ministry of Health officials had to react in order to calm an escalating situation. It should be pointed out that the participants did not enter into the discussion with the aim of deliberation, and the elements of deliberation are sought in a purely academic manner. It is evident that, after previous experiences, the representatives of the executive were not interested in stirring up a broad public debate at an early stage. Further study of the circumstances surrounding the adoption of healthcare reform in Slovakia can be a valuable insight in the preparation of a controlled and effective deliberation that will bring real benefits to the debate. However, at a time of growing populism and the favouring of authoritarian styles of government by a large section of the public, the question is whether a fruitful broad debate based on facts will be of interest not only to political leaders but also to the electorate.

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