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A Case Study in Social Media Intervention: Hungarians and Slovaks

The question of media intervention by one state in the media system of another is usually related to the ordinary modes of conflict: seeking to intervene forcefully, often, to alter the flow of images. I seek here to report a case study in social media efforts that are interventionist, but interventionist by agreement. This is an example of bilateral intervention.

In 2008 the already existing tensions between Slovakia and Hungary escalated: verbal battles between leading politicians of the two countries became the norm rather than the exception. The conflict tended to lead to perpetuation or hardening of attitudes.

Some examples:

First, the educational policy of Slovakia related to the Hungarian minority. In 2008 and 2009, the two sides had disagreements about the use of Hungarian geographical names in educational materials of Hungarian schools in Slovakia and about the Minister of Education Jan Mikolaj’s plan to promote the development of Slovak identity in the Hungarian minority through revised history books in the Hungarian schools.¹ The Slovak educational sector was at that time dominated by Jan Slota’s Slovak National Party in the Slovak government, whose anti-Hungarian comments frequently caused controversies between the two countries.

Second, conflict related to imagery crept into that significant zone of passion, namely: soccer. The case is the aftermath of a soccer game in Dunajska Streda stadium between the Hungarian team Dunajská Streda and the Slovak team Slovan Bratislava on November 1, 2008.

¹ “Szlovák öntudatot akarnak verni a magyar gyerekek fejébe” MTI (Hungarian News Agency Corporation) on the Hungarian online daily Index  
http://index.hu/kulfold/2009/02/28/szlovak_ontudatot_akarnak_verni_a_magyar_gyerekek_fejeb e/ [accessed on January 10, 2011]
Continuing the long tradition of continuous confrontations at Hungarian-Slovak soccer games, the 800 Hungarian fans arrived in Dunajska Streda with banners of maps that referred to the “Greater Hungary,” made provocative revisionist comments and sang the Hungarian national anthem. The Slovak and the Hungarian fans started to throw smoke bombs at each other and continuously insulted each other verbally. At this point the Slovak police intervened, leaving many fans, dominantly Hungarians, injured. The proportionality of the police intervention was disputed between the two countries.²

A third example was the fascist and anti-Slovak activity of the Hungarian right-wing extremist group called ‘Hungarian Guard’ both in Slovakia and in Hungary, especially its demonstration in front of the Slovak Embassy in Budapest. The Hungarian Guard burned the Slovak flag, which caused outrage in Slovakia and was condemned by Hungarian politicians.

Can agreements bilaterally between states affect the flow of images and the impacts of such flows on attitudes? In order to reach some level of agreement between the two countries, the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and his Hungarian counterpart Ferenc Gyurcsány held official consultations in Komarno, Slovakia on November 15, 2008. The meeting was dominated by verbal attacks, but at the end the prime ministers did sign a relatively broad agreement on fighting extremism. This meeting was followed by official consultations between the Hungarian Speaker of Parliament Katalin Szili and her Slovak counterpart Pavol Paska on December 3 in Komarno, and between the Slovak President Ivan Gasparovic and Hungarian President László Sólyom on December 6 in Nove Zamky.

This consultation and agreement were not the end of the issue, nor the sum total of the “intervention” to affect the impact of rhetoric. In a Central European approach, the intelligentsia

of both countries expressed growing concerns that the two member states of the European Union would not be able to develop a fair relationship. Research centers organized symposia: for instance, the Research Center for Sociology and Ethnic Minorities at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Slovak Institute of Public Affairs (IVO, Bratislava) co-organized a workshop in November 2009 on Hungarian-Slovak relations.³

After the symposium, the question remained open: which sphere could be the sphere of legitimate public controversy if conflict was striking in the diplomatic sphere? The mass media in both countries covered the conflicts, and sometimes contributed to its maintenance, but rarely helped reach any kind of settlement.

A few days after the infamous soccer game in Dunajska Streda, Ratislav Pavlik from Slovakia started the group ‘Slovaks and Hungarians’ on Facebook. According to the English statement of the group (all direct quotations from Facebook are quoted verbatim, with no grammatical corrections made): “Today, in time of growing tensions between the extremists and some politicians on both sides is important that decent people can fundamentally position themselves when facing situation. And moreover, to stop escalation of current tensions between Slovaks and Hungarians with mutual active effort. We do hear extremists but not decent people from both states. Media coverage has been focusing on mutual verbal and extremist attacks, but not on positive aspects of relationship between two nations. Therefore this Facebook group was established with ambition to help cease escalation of hostilities and contribute to repeated convergence of Slovaks and Hungarians.” The group site also displays the Slovak and Hungarian versions of this text and the two flags next to each other as a logo.

³ Collected newspaper articles related to the workshop compiled by the Institute of Public Affairs (IVO) in Bratislava http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/rozne/Media_Budapest_HU.pdf [accessed on December 30, 2010]
When I asked Mr. Ratislav Pavlik in a Facebook message about his reasons to start the group, he sent me the following note: “After the football match in Dunajska Streda (Slovakia), where they overwhelmed the hooligans from the Hungarian and Slovakian sides with police, I saw a marked increase in mutual hatred. I felt that I had to do something about the increase in aggression. The social network Facebook seemed to me at that time to provide the best option. A friend said a friend, to intrude influential group.” Pavlik’s timing of the group and his aim resonated with many and led to a relatively popular and lively group. After reading the 833 comments in the group at the time of writing this, I identified seven major topics:

1. Public Statement

   For many, the only relationship to the group is the act of joining and probably the occasional reading of the discussions: the act of joining (with visible profile information) seems to be a kind of public statement.

2. Personal experience

   Many share their personal experiences related to their families, their jobs and their travels to these countries. People often use the description of the personal experience as a springboard to make general statements or to suggest reforms. According to Gyula Bóna: “I live near to the border so for me is an everyday experience, Slovakia. I even do understand Slovakian and can speak a few words. I have some good friends from there Vlado, Matej, Hanka and I grew up so that the best friend of my Grandma was also Slovakian, Darinka. It is only question of education and mentality how you get along with your neighbors both nearby at your house or your county.”

3. Statements against politicians
The Facebook group seems to agree that politicians of both countries play a relevant role in generating and maintaining the conflict. Many Facebook postings include explicitly negative comments on politicians, most of the time addressing both countries’ political representatives with the same level of criticism. According to Igor Papai: “I think the only reason why there is so much hatred between us (I mean Slovaks) and Hungarians are politicians. I am not going to name them, but they create a big tension between these two equally footed states. So I do not see any reason why to hate Hungarians, as many Slovaks do, and also vice versa.” Or all this in a short, very compressed version: “no politicians no problems !!!” (Stefan Fazekas, London)

4. Suggestions for the Facebook group

Multiple comments, especially at the beginning of the group, were self-referential discussing what role this initiative should play in settling the conflict.

First the language of the group had to be chosen. At the beginning, most comments were in Slovak, but following Dániel Antal’s suggestion (“Though we are neighbors we hardly understand each other so I propose to use English in this forum”), the participants switched to English.

Members of the group also discussed the application of this social media solution to other regional conflicts. For instance Tünde Lukács suggested that “We should also create the same type of group with Romanian and Serbians.”

And finally, participants also agreed on frequent offline meetings. The first meeting took place on December 7, 2008. They met in Sturovo and enjoyed local beers, meals, and conversations.

5. History
Discussions in the group tend to have a moderate style and a cooperative attitude. But emotions often run high when the historical past of Slovaks and Hungarians comes up. For instance, one passionate discussion was around the question of whether Hungary as a nation state was born after World War I or whether the Hungarian Kingdom had already behaved as a nation state after 1867. Some discussions addressed the different ways in which the two countries teach the common Eastern-European history. Many in the group also advocated for the complete avoidance of the historical discourse, preferring discussions which focus on the present relations between the countries.

6. Who is worse?

Another heated topic was the question, who is more responsible for the conflicts—whether Jan Slota or the Hungarian Guard posed a greater danger to the long-term relations between Slovaks and Hungarians. The Hungarian comments tended to emphasize that Slota’s party is in the Slovak government and thus cannot be compared with the Hungarian Guard, which is an extremist group outside of the Hungarian parliament. On the other hand, Slovak commentators made the claim that the Hungarian Guard has the potential to initiate direct and violent actions.

7. Information sharing

Finally, the group also served as a platform for sharing related news articles, pictures and blog posts. People shared their travel experiences and made suggestions about interesting places to visit, books to read, music to listen to, and movies to watch.

Conclusion
While the quality of the discussions cannot reach the level of intellectual debates in prominent journals, these comments seem to have a friendlier and more cooperative style than most comments on YouTube videos, newspaper articles, and blog posts. While other forums often include revisionist comments and various forms of hate speech from both sides, this group—with very few exceptions—tends to live up to the expectation of its statement. There seem to be three major reasons for this difference:

1. The social norms of Facebook as a communication platform. That is, that Facebook is an international, mostly English-based social networking site with certain software features such as the public display of participants’ names and images and the public display of the names and images of the starter and administrator of the group.

2. The size of the group compared to many groups on Facebook is relatively small. The number of those who actively participate in the discussions is a small fraction of those who “only” joined the endeavor. The group tends to have a certain small community culture, which is arguably better in enforcing social norms than a larger entity. People refer to each other by names and speak up against extremist behavior.

3. Based on the uploaded pictures, the writing style and the presented stories, the participants are dominantly under 40, well-educated, with at least a command of some level of English and a knowledge of how to use new media, and frequently travel or/and have lived in another country for some time.

A Facebook group cannot provide a long-term substitute for effective diplomatic communication between political representatives of Slovakia and Hungary. But it could have a positive effect on everyday relationships, especially if we consider the new generations of Slovak
and Hungarian citizens who are much less subject to the digital divide. For them, groups like the ‘Slovaks and Hungarians’ could be part of the many public spheres where they can articulate their ideas and feelings. On the other hand, it is questionable whether a for-profit American enterprise with disputed terms and conditions is the best platform for discussing complex Eastern-European public controversies.

The ‘Slovaks and Hungarians’ Facebook group is a fragile project, but currently one of the most promising in terms of facilitating continuing discussions between Slovaks and Hungarians. Countries and multilateral organizations could promote the set-up of informal communicational spheres such as this Facebook group to promote international and intercultural exchange.

This case study is also an example of what might be called “soft intervention.” It is an example of civic discourse encouraged through some level of elite political actions, in this case the meeting of the prime ministers. What is significant, theoretically, is searching for alternative examples of intervention—moving from the traditions of the past to modes that influence, ultimately, social media. Here, the Facebook example was the handiwork of an individual. But it occurred in the context of various mutual efforts to change imagery.