

THE INSTRUMENTALISATION OF POLITICS  
AND POLITICIANS-AS-COMMODITIES:  
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF SLOVENIAN PARTIES' UNDERSTANDING  
OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

*The article examines current processes in institutional politics and the often discussed tendency towards the professionalisation of political communication. It relates this tendency to the instrumentalisation of political life and its adoption of the commodity logic in public communication. The study proceeds from the perspective of critical theory and the political economy of communication. It connects this theoretical basis to Slovenian institutional politics with the aim to analyse whether and in which ways instrumental reason and commodity logic have been adopted in the political communication of political parties. The study is based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with key representatives of seven parliamentary and three extra-parliamentary Slovenian parties or groups.*

**Keywords:** political communication, instrumental reason, economic rationality, commodification, political branding, election campaign, professionalisation, critical theory, political economy

LA STRUMENTALIZZAZIONE DELLA POLITICA E POLITICI-COME-MERCE:  
ANALISI QUALITATIVA DELLE POSIZIONI DEI PARTITI SLOVENI SULLA  
COMUNICAZIONE POLITICA

SINTESI

*Il contributo esamina gli attuali processi nella sfera politica istituzionale e la tendenza verso la professionalizzazione della comunicazione politica. Questi quesiti vengono collegati alla strumentalizzazione della politica istituzionale e alla sua accettazione della logica della merce nella comunicazione politica pubblica. Il contributo deriva dagli approcci della teoria critica e dell'economia politica della comunicazione, questa base teorica, invece, viene collegata nella parte empirica alla politica istituzionale slovena. Lo scopo del contributo è quello di esaminare se la razionalità strumentale e la logica della merce vengono assunti nella comunicazione politica dei partiti politici, e – se così fosse – in che modo. La ricerca si basa sulle interviste semi-strutturate approfondite con i principali rappresentanti dei sette partiti parlamentari sloveni e dei tre non parlamentari ovvero coalizioni parlamentari.*

**Parole chiave:** comunicazione politica, razionalità strumentale, razionalità economica, mercificazione, branding politico, campagna elettorale, professionalizzazione, teoria critica, economia politica

*“You sell your candidates and your programs the way a business sells its products.”*

Leonard Hall, National Chairman of the Republican Party, in 1956 (in McGinniss, 1968/1988, 27)

## INTRODUCTION

In his talk entitled *The Modern Media Man and the Political Process*, Dallas Smythe (1960) stressed that political candidates had been turned into commodities, with politics being consumed as entertainment. He arrived at this view against the backdrop of the televised debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, two clear frontrunners for the next president of the United States. Smythe was not the first to draw such – for him at least – an unflattering conclusion. In his revisiting of the novel *Brave New World*, the renowned writer and social critic Aldous Huxley (1958/2007, 320-321) similarly noted the increasingly cynical nature of modern politics. He believed that politicians and their propagandists made a mockery of democratic procedures by appealing to the ignorance of the voters. It was “the personality of the candidate and the way he is projected by the advertising experts” (Huxley, 1958/2007, 321) which started to matter. Politicians came to be merchandised with similar methods as deodorant, leading to entertainer-candidates who had to be short and snappy in their communication in order not to bore the radio or television audience.

What is perhaps most surprising to somebody watching the debates of political candidates criticised by Smythe and Huxley today is not the lack of arguments present in them, but in fact how reasonable they appear in contrast to the modern state of affairs, especially if compared to the Republican Party primary debates for the US presidential elections in 2016 in which Donald Trump was the centre of attention at the time this article was being written. Having five minutes at the most to deal with ‘the great issues of the day’, as observed by Huxley, is a luxury that can hardly be imagined in an excruciatingly fast-paced, media-led political sphere where communication is reduced to sound bites, manipulative marketing and demagoguery.

Critiques of the depoliticised and trivialised institutional political process are becoming more common than a few decades ago. In these accounts, political communication is described as increasingly professionalised through public relations and political branding, whilst marketing and polling have become normalised and political candidates are often conceived simply as another commodity (Phelan, 2014, 53-54, 80-82; cf. Blumler, 1997; Sussman, Galizio, 2003; Negrine, 2008; Savigny, 2008). According to Crouch (2004, 21), politicians have thus become like shopkeepers in the world of politics, which has been turned into a spectacle. Different authors contend that these changes within the formal political process, which are rooted in instrumental reason and

commodification, should be closely related to the changes in the global capitalist political economy (Sussman, Galizio, 2003; Sussman, 2005; Savigny, 2008).

The research in this article focuses on the communication of political parties as central elements of the institutional political arena (even if their power is decreasing). Through an ethnographic inquiry into how political actors perceive democracy, public political communication, citizens, and their own organisational structure it analyses the extent to which the instrumentalisation and commodity logic have been extended to the practices of parties in Slovenia. The article aims to provide answers to two research questions:

RQ1: Whether and in which ways (if any) the instrumental reason and commodity logic has been accepted, adopted, internalised and normalised by political parties in a small and peripheral polity?

RQ2: In which ways (if any) do the parties differ in their acceptance of the (apparent) ‘rules of the game’ of instrumentalised political communication?

The study is theoretically based in the approaches of critical theory and the political economy of communication. This provides a basis for a normative understanding of democracy and the critique of instrumental reason, including the ongoing processes of commodification (section 2). In the empirical part (sections 3 and 4), this theoretical underpinning is used in an analysis of semi-structured, in-depth interviews which were conducted with representatives of Slovenian parliamentary and selected extra-parliamentary parties. First, the article turns to the broader context of the changes occurring in political communication and formal politics.

## POLITICS-AS-COMMODITY: A CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN CAPITALISM

Recent decades have seen various facets of politics undergoing profound transformations, impacting on how democracy is apprehended in theory and how it is carried out in actual political practice. In the 1990s, there was a significant upsurge in normative theories of democracy, with the deliberative model possibly receiving the most critical scholarly attention (see Habermas, 1996; Dryzek, 2002). Its appeal rested on the renewed interest in participatory forms of democracy, with a stronger focus on the political inclusion of citizens and a robust media system. As an intermediary infrastructure between civil society and formal political institutions, the public sphere was seen as important element of deliberative democracy, because it was assumed that it should provide an informal yet autonomous domain for non-distorted and non-coercive communication in which both the registering of public concerns and their (trans)formation are carried out (Habermas, 1996, 148; cf. Mayhew, 1997). Deliberative democracy therefore

goes beyond voting or political parties and rests on a never-ending process of public use of reason by a wide circle of participants whose opinions are not only identified, but also challenged, transformed and finally amplified, thus influencing political decisions. As such, it could also incorporate the bottom-up initiatives which have proliferated in recent decades into the formal political process.

Even though deliberative democracy was a response to the enduring crisis of Western representative democracy, the actually existing power relations not only made it impossible to come closer to this ideal, but in fact widened the gap even further. The discrepancy between *what is* on one hand and *what ought to be* on the other has continued to grow. We are now witnessing ‘a hollowing out’ of (party) democracy (Mair, 2013) and a deep crisis of public political communication (Savigny, 2008), coupled with profound changes in media systems (Papathanassopoulos, Negrine, 2015). The ‘mass party’, which in the past provided at least elementary forms of political socialisation, identification and an ideological foothold – even if it ultimately failed to reach the ideals of the richer political participation of citizens – now seems in terminal decline (Papathanassopoulos, Negrine, 2015; Mancini, 1999; Mair, 2013). Parties across countries are losing influence, support, membership, traditional constituencies, and legitimacy, with high electoral volatility and indifference to institutional politics on the rise (ibid.; cf. Blumler, 1997, 397; Negrine, 2008, Ch. 3). For Crouch (2004), there has even been a regression on a wider scale. He used the concept of post-democracy to describe a situation in which institutions (e.g. parliaments, parties) formally remain in place, but the actual decision-making takes place somewhere else, with power being transferred to corporate elites. In this situation, the growing disenchantment with politics cannot be a surprise.

### Professionalization of political communication as political marketing

The far-reaching professionalization of political communication, which has accelerated particularly since the 1980s (with the early rapid rise of political campaign management between the 1950s and 1960s), is often considered as perhaps the most significant change occurring in contemporary democracies. It presupposes a new type of professionals entering the political sphere, mainly technical experts such as advertisers, public relations experts, media experts, pollsters, political and marketing consultants, specialist lobbyists and spin doctors. The technical skills of these actors, in contrast to party bureaucrats of the past, are not confined to the political sphere, with politics not even necessarily being their

primary area of competence.<sup>1</sup> They are connected to the instrumental ‘rationalisation’ of persuasion in public communication, which has its ‘historical root and current core’ in market research (Mayhew, 1997, Chs. 7-8).

Political marketing treats voters primarily as consumers, not as citizens (Mayhew, 1997; Blumler 1997, 398; McNair, 2007, Chs. 6-7; Negrine, 2008). With the help of data-driven specialists, on one hand politicians target specific audiences “in a competitive environment where the citizen/consumer has a wide choice between more than one ‘brand’ or product” (McNair, 2007, 6) while, on the other hand, political ‘products’ are, on the surface, also ‘differentiated’. This is done through political advertising, which gives “meaning for the ‘consumer’, just as the soap manufacturer seeks to distinguish a functionally similar brand of washing powder from another in a crowded marketplace” (McNair, 2007, 6; cf. Sussman and Galizio, 2003, 317-320; Sussman, 2005, 133). For Savigny (2008, 4), political marketing “is informed by a set of economic assumptions that are antithetical to democracy and serve to disconnect the public from the process of politics” (Savigny, 2008, 4), thus further contributing to the ‘political malaise’.

Professionalization ratchets up financial requirements and produces ‘capital-intensive campaigns’ that exacerbate inequalities between actors in the political arena (Mancini, 1999, 236; cf. Mayhew, 1997, 238; Sussman, 2005, Ch. 6). Further, political consultants often affect the very essence of a party’s political identity. Particularly during election campaigns, they crave autonomy in decision-making and organisation “to the point where politicians and outside observers may wonder who is in charge” (Mancini, 1999, 237; cf. McGinniss, 1968/1988, 82). This seems especially problematic as campaigning is ceasing to be only a matter of pre-election time, with politics adopting the notion of ‘the permanent campaign’, which means political marketing is becoming part and parcel of political communication (Negrine, 2008, 66; Savigny, 2008, 2-5). Political parties and their membership have accordingly been largely replaced by outside professionals (Sussman, 2005), with Mayhew (1997, 223) noting that professionalization of management makes parties increasingly dispensable, even if their continuing relevance cannot be ignored.

### Subjugating political life to instrumental reason

The professionalization of politics has “cemented the detachment of the ordinary citizen” according to Papathanassopoulos and Negrine (2015, 156). Sussman and Galizio (2003) however criticised this concept in view of political communication being well embedded in the (global) political economy. In their opinion, professionalization as a concept portrays these processes as

1 On professionalization, see Blumler (1997, 398), Mayhew (1997), Mancini (1999), Sussman (2005, Ch. 5), McNair (2007), Negrine (2008), Papathanassopoulos and Negrine (2015).

an inevitable outgrowth of modernisation. Instead, they are an epiphenomenon of wider capitalist transformations, with politics “intensively industrialized, commercialized, monetized and transnationalized” (Sussman, Galizio, 2003, 312). Experts have indeed displaced functions formerly held by political parties, but they are not the primary agents, merely ‘brokers and retailers’ in a system where the political process has been appropriated by the global corporate class. In the ‘political-industrial complex’ elections can be compared to industrial production, with citizens simply factors in the wider circuit of (electoral) production (Sussman, Galizio, 2003, 312-314). In various ways politics is becoming the handmaiden of other powerful interests (cf. Crouch, 2004; Sussman, 2005).

Critical rethinking of these processes indicates that the aim of political marketing cannot be publicly relevant discourse in which common social problems are debated and solved, but the opposite: avoiding discussion in one-way communication through the *selling* of political messages and continuous spinning of issues, where in-depth deliberation would be essential (cf. Mayhew, 1997, Ch. 9). Its goal is therefore completely instrumental: on one hand it aims *to control* public political communication and the presence of politics in the media and, on the other, *to manipulate* information and images (Sussman, Galizio, 2003, 317; cf. *ibid.*; Blumler, 1997, 399).

In Frankfurt School critical theory, instrumental reason has been closely related to the development of modern capitalism and its specific forms of rationalisation (Horkheimer, 1974/2004). Economic rationality becomes socially predominant and starts to subjugate individuals and their social needs. The ongoing process of ‘economisation’, which necessitates the possibility of measuring and calculating, presupposes narrow-minded efficiency as the exclusive goal in the production and, eventually, in all other social processes as well (Gorz, 1989, 2-3, 20). According to Horkheimer (1974/2004, Ch. 1), there is an obsession with means in preference to ends, when relations are colonised by instrumental reason: instead of determining which normative social goals should be followed, by asking ‘why something should be as it is’, issues are only dealt with in a ‘how to’ manner. Instrumental reason is therefore oriented on utility and profitableness, with its objectives reduced to cost-benefit calculations and maximisation of self-interest (Fuchs, 2009, 8). Both asymmetric political communication and attempts at manipulation through propaganda must be defined as instrumental forms of communication because of the techniques they deploy and the consequences this has on society (cf. Mayhew, 1997, 190).

In this context, it cannot be surprising that political life started to resemble market relations, with parties’ objectives being consistently narrowed down. According to Negrine (2008, 22) the professionalised ‘catch-

all’ and ‘cartel’ party of today is “a machine for waging electoral contests” (Negrine, 2008, 22). The relationship with voters becomes “instrumental and necessary only insofar as they enable organisations to achieve their goal” (Savigny, 2008, 12). Other normative ideals are vanishing from the political horizon.

### ‘Selling you the candidate’: Neoliberalism and the commodity logic in political communication

Nowhere in political communication has the predominance of instrumental reason been more overwhelming and palpable than in its internalisation of the commodity logic. In *The Selling of the President*, McGinniss (1968/1988) offered an early first-person account of how the presidential candidate Richard Nixon, who subsequently won the elections, was ‘packaged’ for the mass media (specifically for television), sometimes in peculiarly miniscule details, and ‘sold’ to the right kind of audience. As noted by McGinniss (1968/1988, 27), politicians and advertisers started to work together “once they recognized that the citizen did not so much vote for the candidate as make a psychological purchase of him”. What was projected was what counted, meaning the professionally constructed image of the politician was what mattered. Form (e.g. image, style, personality, and emotional appeal) consequently began to prevail over substance (cf. McNair, 2007, 131-135) and political communication became increasingly trivialised and oriented toward entertainment.

This tendency towards the imitation of commodification in the political campaigns has wide-reaching consequences, even though authors like McNair (2007, 38) regard warnings coming from critical approaches as largely irrelevant. As stressed by Savigny (2008, 10), the predominance of marketing in political communication not only affects the presentation and style, but also “the methods and ways of thinking about what politics is, how it is, and how it should be conducted”. This essentially means that politics is being reorganised and succumbing to a logic other than its own (Phelan, 2014, 82).

The processes occurring in political communication can be connected to transformations in wider society, especially the extension of capitalist social relations to domains previously not under its control (see Sussman, Galizio, 2003; Crouch, 2004; Sussman, 2005; Savigny, 2008; Phelan, 2014). The expansion of capitalism as a system is dependent on commodification, which reduces everything to an exchange value and productivity (Amon Prodник, 2014). These processes have been so overwhelming in recent decades that even social spheres formally based outside of capitalist social relations are now in many ways mimicking its functioning. I recently proposed the concept of a ‘sleeping commodification’, which describes how commodification expands throughout society and permeates even intimate relations and seemingly insignificant pro-

cesses and micro-practices of our lives (Amon Prodnik, 2014). Moreover, even spheres, practices and activities not directly subjugated to capitalist relations are now increasingly legitimising themselves through categories associated with them (e.g. productivity, efficiency, utility maximisation). This does not mean they are becoming commodified *per se*, but that they are adopting the same logic *as if* they were commodities. In a similar manner, politics and politicians cannot be sold as commodities; however, they do *imitate* relations distinctive of the capitalist structure.

The perception that capital has started to permeate the entirety of the social fabric has especially been observed by authors writing on neoliberalism (e.g. Freedman, 2014). For neoliberalism to be successful, the primacy of the market must be adopted as the most viable way of arranging *all* social relations and activities, including governmental processes, intimate domains and individuals (Freedman, 2014, 39-40). According to Phelan (2014, 5), “for neoliberal common-sense to be politically effective, it needs to become imbricated in the common-sense assumption of other domains”. Commodity logic must therefore be naturalised in social practice, and in ideal circumstances present itself as though it is non-ideological. This also means it is often reproduced unintentionally, making it even more crucial to analyse how such logic is adopted and used in various social relations.

#### METHODOLOGY: INTERVIEWING THE POLITICAL ELITE

The critical insights presented above make for bleak reading, but in which ways can the tendencies regarding instrumental reason and commodity logic be translated into the political communication of parties in a small and peripheral political environment? The article moreover seeks to consider whether parties in Slovenia differ in any significant way when it comes to the (non)instrumentalisation of their public political communication (either due to their political positioning or their status).

In order to obtain answers to the research questions, we carried out semi-structured, in-depth interviews with representatives of Slovenian political parties that were conducted face-to-face by the author of this paper, who was leading the interviews, and Marko Ribač, a research fellow at the Peace Institute (Ljubljana). We performed ten interviews with the most relevant Slovenian parties or parliamentary groups, three of which were done with representatives of extra-parliamentary parties and seven with parliamentary parties or groups (see the appendix

for the list of interviews conducted). While the latter were selected for the obvious reason they currently have an influential position in institutional politics, there were different reasons for selecting the former three: in the case of the Slovenian People’s Party it was its reputation (being the oldest Slovenian party), in the case of Positive Slovenia it was its recent political relevance (the party with the most MPs between 2011 and 2014), and in the case of the Pirate Party it was its putatively alternative political platform compared to other parties. Our sample was diverse since it included actors with different ideological and institutional backgrounds, which also occupy varying positions in the system.<sup>2</sup>

With one exception, the interviews were conducted with the secretaries general of the parties.<sup>3</sup> Based on descriptions of their tasks and responsibilities, it can be said that they have organisational, technical/operational and financial responsibilities. Secretaries general are also closely connected to the day-to-day functioning of their party, including coordinating different sections, organising local committees and overseeing personnel and the head office. Two respondents used the notion ‘director of the party’ as an analogy for their function, while one spoke about ‘manager’ and another about ‘executive’ of the party. Even though their primary responsibility was not to oversee communication with the media (for some this was also their task) or to be involved in the ideational considerations (e.g. writing the party programme), our interviewees acknowledged they are nevertheless closely involved in these issues and have ample knowledge about them. In general, our respondents had due to the nature of their function a wide-ranging overview of all aspects of how their party operates.

The interviews were conducted as part of the Digital Citizenship project coordinated by the Peace Institute, and the aim was to gather comprehensive information about the parties’ internal and external communication and their views on democracy-related issues. Even though the questionnaire was standardised, the interviews remained open-ended and their structure was continuously adjusted depending on how interviewees responded and which issues were raised in their answers. This approach left us with room to expand on different topics by adding sub-questions or asking interviewees to elaborate their responses. We occasionally used leading questions to check the reliability of the answers and obtain information that might otherwise be withheld (see Kvale, 2007, 88-89). At certain points the interviews could also be described as confrontational (Kvale, 2007, 75-76), but this was not necessarily our intention.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On qualitative sampling, see Flick (2007, Ch. 3) and Kvale (2007, 43-45).

<sup>3</sup> One parliamentary actor, the United Left, is an electoral coalition of three parties. The interview was conducted with the head of communication of the parliamentary group because the electoral coalition has no secretary general function.

<sup>4</sup> According to Kvale (2007, 70), elite interviewees generally “have a secure status, where it may be feasible to challenge their statements, with the provocations possibly leading to new insights”.

Interviews are an established qualitative research method (Flick, 2007; Kvale, 2007). Even though ethnographic inquiries have been linked especially to interpretative and constructivist approaches, researchers with a materialist outlook also implement them. The political economists Meehan, Mosco and Wasko (1993), for instance, called for their adoption when deciphering social relations, especially when they are taken for granted by the actors involved in them (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993, 108): “Personal interviews and other primary documentation provide the most authentic and reliable data” (Meehan, Mosco & Wasko, 1993, 113), even though they must be assessed with caution. Interviewing actors who are part of the elite can even be described as a unique interview form, the so-called elite interview (see Kvale, 2007, 71). In such cases, group members have a privileged status in the area of research as they hold a greater degree of influence compared to members of the general public. Our aim was both to gather factual evidence on how parties function (objective reality) and what is the representatives’ (necessarily subjective) understanding of how their party functions. The interviews were therefore a combination of factual and conceptual interviews (Kvale, 2007, 70-72).

#### POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND POLITICAL PARTIES IN SLOVENIA: RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

Slovenia is clearly a miniscule political community, which considerably limits institutional political actors in how they behave in the sphere of institutional politics. Almost all of our interviewees correspondingly noted the large financial constraints their parties face in their daily functioning, political communication and campaign management, which were further exacerbated by a new campaign law which additionally restricted who can finance campaigns and in which ways. For example, a representative of an established coalition party, Uroš Jauševc (SD), noted that they try to replicate what their ‘sister parties’ around the globe do, but that the contexts, especially when it comes to financial resources, are often entirely incomparable. When speaking about Barack Obama’s election campaign in 2012, he pointed out that financially “these are incomprehensible numbers for us”. Most of the ideas therefore cannot be “copy-pasted”, Jauševc noted, because the “*type of the campaign* is completely different there”. Nevertheless, he added that one can “use some of them and see how they function”.



*Fight in the Ukrainian parliament on December 4, 2014. Vir: BO Свобода. File:Volodymyr Parasyuk 04.12.14.jpg. From Wikimedia Commons.*

By way of illustration, the winning party at the 2014 early elections for the national assembly, the Party of Miro Cerar, officially spent less than EUR 100,000 on its entire campaign (see the table in the appendix). It should be stressed that this is a relatively small amount even for Slovenian standards since the party played on its 'newness' as a trump card throughout the campaign. The winning party at the 2011 parliamentary elections, Positive Slovenia (PS), for instance, spent almost EUR 600,000 on its campaign, while the Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), which came in close second, spent even more, nearly EUR 700,000. At the 2014 general elections, the total money spent on all parties' election campaigns in Slovenia was only approximately EUR 1.7 million, whereas in 2011 it was nearly twice that, approximately EUR 3 million. The considerably smaller amounts spent on the campaigns in the 2014 elections can be attributed to the enduring economic crisis, the changed legislature on campaign financing and also to the fact that Slovenia saw two other elections in the same year, namely elections for the European Parliament and local elections, which drained the financial resources of the parties. Nevertheless, even in 'normal circumstances' the money spent by the parties is modest in an international perspective.

The considerable lack and even shrinking level of party funding runs counter to other political environments (see Sussman, 2005). This logically begs the question: to what extent can other tendencies present in established Western democracies, especially when it comes to the political communication of the parties, be directly transferred to Slovenia?

#### **'Non-Professional professionalization'? Political parties imitating professionalism**

What could be described as partial compatibility is perhaps best demonstrated in the most general trend occurring in most political systems, namely professionalization. A common development in Slovenia could be labelled with the oxymoron 'non-professional professionalization'. Even though there are certainly large differences between parties when it comes to the use of professionals, with established and bigger parties in particular being able to utilise them for a variety of purposes, no party has sufficient financial means to overwhelmingly professionalise all aspects of its functioning. They either use professional consultants occasionally or alternatively, professional advice and analyses from 'external experts' are even primarily provided on a friendly, non-paid basis.

Let us take a look at some of the key tendencies more closely. All actors included in the analysis had some kind of in-house PR service which dealt with the media and their own communication channels (e.g. publishing news on the party website, managing online social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter). A large majority of them also acknowledged their representatives were involved in professional trainings (either in the past or currently) to improve their rhetoric and style in communication with (and in) the media. This included parties as varied as the smallest extra-parliamentary parties and the established, bigger parties. Many representatives mentioned that different consultants had offered them overall help with performance and style before a television appearance, which is then followed by an analysis after that public appearance (cf. McGinniss, 1968/1988, 72-76). Robert Ilc (NSi) even stated that his party used a "rigid PR school of politics and political performance" for its media appearances, in which "no matter what they ask you, you must *sell* your message" (cf. Mayhew, 1997, 242). External experts are also included in the writing of promotional texts aimed at voters during campaigns.

If these types of external specialists can be seen as nothing out of the ordinary, not all the parties were able to pay for independently conducted opinion polls intended for their internal use (e.g. with a focus on their potential voters and, accordingly, on how to position themselves regarding specific political issues).<sup>5</sup> A smaller, yet established oppositional parliamentary party New Slovenia (NSi), for example, also conducts such polls which help it with its political strategy. In such surveys, the party is interested in:

*"Age, demographic data, who we should address and so on, who views us as being a promising [party], who doesn't, and based on this we then form our political positions as well as our strategy. For example, we will not try to address someone who states s/he would under no circumstance vote for our party, he is lost for us [...]. But these are usually pretty extensive surveys and we don't do them every month /.../, they are quite expensive [...], we call this segmentation of the voting body, [it is done] every couple of years" (Ilc, NSi).*

Alenka Jeraj (SDS), a representative of the biggest oppositional party, which has the greatest financial leverage amongst all political actors in Slovenia, similarly mentioned that they carry out surveys when they are interested in why their support is rising or declining.

<sup>5</sup> According to Mayhew (1997, 214), using information from polls enables the possible construction of target groups and identification of issues that could lead to electoral success (political messages can be managed accordingly) (cf. McGinniss, 1968/1988, Ch. 10; Savigny, 2008). Several interviewees admitted that their party has constructed target groups (even if only abstract voter profiles). They also indicated it is important to know both who the party is aiming at in the media and which media to use with specific type of messages and audiences. Different interviewees also conceded they are willing to significantly change the form of the message depending either on the communication channel, type of media or specifics of the targeted voter.

They have regular consultations three or four times a year within the party and such surveys help them analyse what their voters expect of the party and what they think about certain parts of the programme (e.g. their views on the economy).

Nonetheless, the regular conducting of polls seems more like an exception to the rule than anything else. Party-financed polls, considered a central element of professional campaign management and political marketing (see Mayhew, 1997, 212-213; Slaček Brlek, 2009), are performed irregularly and chiefly on 'special occasions', such as elections. An established extra-parliamentary party, the Slovenian People's Party (SLS), for instance carried out an analysis before the elections, but also *after* they were over, with the aim to understand why they had been unsuccessful, how to construct their communication strategy in the future and to provide themselves with a general analysis and profiling of the party voter (or, to use the words of the interviewee, Tadeja Romih, the SLS was interested in "basically the entire story"). Perhaps most indicative was when Jauševc (SD) mentioned they were willing to mobilise considerably more financial resources for public opinion polls and for truly professional research on how to conduct the campaign (including hiring consultants from the United States) only when there was a realistic chance the party could ultimately actually win the elections.

What can be derived from the tendency toward 'non-professional professionalization' is that even when no external experts are directly involved party officials often either try to *imitate* in different ways what these experts would bring to the table, or try to find other means to acquire comparable knowledge. One respondent, Nikola Janovič Kolenc (ZL), mentioned they independently conducted a non-professional survey before the elections, while Ilc (NSi) mentioned they often do small online surveys on how to position themselves regarding certain issues (they are carried out via their mailing list). The secretary general of a small oppositional party, Roman Jakič (ZAAB), also stated that it is the publicly available polls, which deal with key political issues and the popularity of politicians and parties that are very important to them, conceding that the party carefully follows even seemingly irrelevant polls. A representative of what is currently parliamentary party with the highest number of MPs, Erik Kopač (SMC), likewise pointed out: "Our prognosis [regarding the elections] was based on the surveys made by the renowned media houses and that was it". When asked whether they plan to conduct their own polls in the future, Kopač answered: "That's quite likely, but this is it, when you start to do all of these things, you become just like them [i.e. the established parties]" (Kopač, SMC). In some cases, parties were able to receive the results of media-conducted polls a day

or two in advance. Because they could not afford to do their own, they used them as benchmarks to show how well they were doing and, in some cases, even how to position themselves regarding certain issues.

Parties attempted to circumvent the fact they lacked their own resources by either resorting to other means of bringing in expert knowledge or by relying on their own employees. Some parties, like SDS, had educational trainings for party members on how to use online social networking sites to promote the party, with such training being carried out by members of their own staff. Several party representatives also mentioned they received expert help regarding both the form and the content (on how to politically position themselves) of political communication from professionals they did not need to pay because they were prepared to intellectually assist them on a voluntary basis. Regarding the assistance of external professionals, Jakič (ZAAB) for example noted: "I think basically all parties do it now. Yes, you take experts' opinions into account. Yes, this is part of our preparations and, of course, also when you form policies". But it is not uncommon that such services are provided for free.

Such an approach, which could border to amateurism, can quickly become a possible obstacle in future political endeavours. For the biggest party, which largely engaged in non-professionalised political communication during its first campaign, this became a hindrance:

*"We learned all this know-how the hard way, which means learning from mistakes, and here no strategic approach was taken on our side from the start. [...] Our way of thinking is far from political pragmatism, which on one hand causes us headaches and on the other enriches us. But the problem is, how does the public perceive you and, for now, it doesn't perceive us particularly well" (Kopač, SMC).*

Later in the interview, Kopač noted that even though it is not yet fully professionalised, the party decided to obtain the assistance of a crisis communication expert after the elections because they were getting 'bombarded' from everywhere (especially the media).

Even though it would be far-fetched to state that Slovenian institutional politics is overwhelmingly professionalised, it does not subsequently follow that the parties have not adapted considerably in line with how political actors in economically wealthier countries function. As described above, they have adequate knowledge about political activities in other countries and, accordingly, significantly modify their functioning in a way they deem rational. Even when no external professionals are used, parties try to *imitate* their expertise and even act as if they were part and parcel of their internal structure.<sup>6</sup>

6 Whether this is actually a successful move is a completely separate issue.

### Self-promotion, marketing and branding in instrumental communication

The tendency towards instrumentalisation can most plainly be observed in how parties construct their public communication and how they perceive their (potential) voters. They have overwhelmingly internalised and naturalised the commodity logic, a trend indicated in a variety of instances in the interviews. To give an example: even though no marketing experts were necessarily involved in the analysis of the public opinion surveys conducted by particular parties, certain interviewees spoke about “segments” of voters, which were either explicitly or, in other cases, implicitly, comprehended as ‘niches’.

Some party officials also brought to the fore the notion of a permanent campaign, *without* being asked about anything related to it. A representative of the second largest coalition party, Branko Simonovič (DeSUS), observed: “Look, the political campaign starts on the same day the elections are over, it starts on that day”. Later in the interview, he repeated this assertion. Ilc (NSi) likewise noted: “For us, the campaign goes on every day, it is only a little more intense for that month” of the official campaign. Some other respondents were self-critical because their party had failed to communicate with its voters on a more regular basis after the election campaign, but it seems this was mainly because they saw the promotion of their opinions in a one-way communication as an important element of re-election, not because they wanted an equal exchange of opinions with citizens (cf. Mayhew, 1997, Ch. 9).

The instrumentalisation of party communication evidenced above is further compounded in areas such as online communication. Self-promotion and marketing – of party positions, party ideas, public statements and media appearances – was overwhelming and commonsensical for the interviewees when they spoke about communication via party websites or social networking sites. A representative of an oppositional electoral coalition of parties, Janovič Kolenc (ZL), who was otherwise critical of the current state of democracy and lack of possibilities for citizens’ participation, openly acknowledged that when it comes to online channels of communication “we all know it is promotion, I mean, it is always promotion” (even though for the party, at least declaratively, content always comes first). Kopač (SMC) likewise asserted that the party “in these social media, in principle, promotes itself”, while also emphasising they plan to intensify promotional activities. Others generally shared this view. Jakič (ZAAB) stated they use Facebook to “present their story”, while Ilc (NSi) mentioned they constantly communicate digitally, because “for us, this digital part is very important in a PR, broader sense, or marketing sense if you want”. He also noted that Facebook is important for the marketing of messages and getting attention, adding how they were successfully “selling the party programme” through this channel.

The instrumental utilisation of digital media can extend beyond official party profiles on social networking sites. As described by Romih (SLS), a representative of an established extra-parliamentary party, they urged their candidates to “take advantage of what is, after all, also an opportunity for promotion that is free of charge”. The biggest party in opposition had a similar intention. As Jeraj (SDS) noted: “We [i.e. the party] again had a training session [i.e. for party members] where we demonstrated to the people how, and in which ways, this is supposed to be carried out and also agreed this is meant for the promotion of the party”. A representative of the smallest extra-parliamentary party in the sample, Rok Andreé (PP), extended this instrumental logic the furthest when he pointed out that one of the two reasons they “want more feedback” on social networking sites such as Facebook is because “bigger engagement means a wider reach, it’s basically a PR thing, a marketing thing”.

Some interviewees even likened their parties’ online communication to the advertising activities of companies, with the secretary general of the formerly biggest party, Tina Komel (PS), openly asserting: “Websites are there for self-promotion [...], I think a company makes a website because it wants to promote itself... thank God it is like that. There is nothing wrong with that and a party must promote itself, this has to be, this is marketing... this is healthy competition”. Willingly comparing a political party to a business, embedded in a competitive environment akin to a marketplace, might seem like something out of the ordinary for the interviewees, but this was not the case. Ilc (NSi) defended his party’s promotional activities in a similar way, using an analogy whereby a business would promote a competitor on its own website if their party’s primary aim on their website were not self-promotion.

At particular points, many respondents spoke bluntly about the ways in which they ought to sell their party programme, market their opinions and even how they viewed their leaders and parties as brands. As emphasised by Andreé (PP), when referring to the party’s offline campaigning, which was done on a voluntary basis: “When you talk to 1,000 people about the same issue, it becomes clear pretty fast what is your brand, what are your messages, what are your stories”. Later in the interview, Andreé acknowledged they invited experts from the field to help them “concretise the brand”, while also noting they are now in the process of “building the PR-marketing aspect of the party” because in the past they had been unsuccessful with their communication. Simonovič (DeSUS) similarly asserted they are “taking advantage of this... commodity brand, which has some value”.

### Form dominating over content

Party-branding was taken the furthest by two parties that used the name of their publicly recognisable presi-

dent in the name of the party. Jakič (ZAAB) had no problems in conceding this “was a marketing move”, while also disclosing personalisation was their clearly defined goal. Kopač (SMC) had an almost identical explanation for the party name, which in itself seems indicative:

*“This is basically a brand and it was also the reason why this amusing or really peculiar name was chosen, but this was the brand. Look, it was pragmatic because here you act in a way that if you want to play this game, if you go into this game, you go, because you want to win and you will do anything, well, not anything, but you will use what you have optimally, and in our case this was M.C. [...]”.*

When asked about the very apparent effort to personalise the party communication in the past, Romih (SLS) even acknowledged that their former president’s (i.e. Radovan Žerjav) recognisability could “essentially be used as a brand, in a positive sense”. She continued by pointing out how the party could, with the help of their president’s personality, “in essence better sell our ideas, our programme and basically our wishes and values”. In addition, she candidly spoke about how in media communication the “whole package” is important when it comes to politicians, and conceded that the success or failure of a party (which, incidentally, she also saw as a brand) would in the end boil down to whether you have successfully sold your product. When asked why, in her opinion, the party had failed to enter parliament, Romih’s response was: “We simply did not know how to sell ourselves well enough, we had good things, but we simply did not know how to pack them nicely in a beautiful box and pass it on to the voters”.

Even though the content of messages can considerably ideologically differ between parties, it is rearranged to a specific form and style, which has a big impact on how the content appears in the public sphere. Different examples demonstrated how the form delimited possibilities of a more reasonable public discussion that would move it beyond the existing political malaise. Jakič (ZAAB) tautologically illustrated the increasing predominance of the form and its consequences, evident especially in the above-mentioned personalisation, in the following way: “It’s not the party anymore, it’s only faces. /.../ It’s not that we want to push the content away or that we would be a party without content, but because it is... it is what it is, what is chosen is the face”.

Successful access to the media and *promotion* of the ‘brand’ is becoming as important as ever for parties. The decreasing importance of the content and what Phelan (2014) defines as post-ideological ideology is perhaps best illustrated in the case of the party that won the last parliamentary elections, which has since been very tellingly renamed *The Modern Centre Party*. As Kopač asserted about the party’s beginnings: “There was 17 of

us in this story /.../ and our members of the Parliament, we had to teach them /.../ only when the elections were already over they got to know the story”. The party was readily constructed around the personality of its leader, with the content and even the views of other candidates as an issue of secondary importance.

## CONCLUSION

*“Politics is the entertainment division of the military industrial complex.”*

Frank Zappa

The aim of this article was to enquire whether and in which ways instrumental reason and commodity logic have been adopted in the political communication of Slovenian parties. While it may not be surprising to answer in the positive to both queries, one of the more unexpected findings was the interviewees’ readiness to speak so openly about their party and how they (pragmatically) practise politics. Most interviewees had little reservations in making direct analogies between the world of politics and the marketplace, meaning they by and large internalised and naturalised the commodity logic present in political marketing and viewed it as commonsensical. The interviewees frankly spoke about self-promotion through online communication, permanent campaigning, selling of the party and its programme, niche targeting and branding opportunities. Even though the parties are not overwhelmingly professionalised, largely due to financial constraints, the oxymoron of ‘non-professional professionalization’ can be used to describe both the tendency of the parties to obtain help from professionals on a friendly (non-paid) basis and to imitate what knowledge professionals would offer, as *if* their assistance had indeed been acquired (even if it had not).

Ideological differences remain between the parties, as were also apparent in the interviews. The differences were further intensified after the start of the 2008 global capitalist crisis, with a deep legitimisation crisis of the formal political environment in Slovenia and significant perturbations occurring throughout. This could be a wake-up call for how politics ought to be done, but parties have nonetheless generally adopted the existing rules of the (institutional political) game, in which they seem to be bound to instrumentalise their functioning. Indeed, they have done so without much hesitation, as is particularly evident in the form of political communication which follows the commodity logic, with the findings largely generalisable across the political spectrum and to all types of parties. For instance, Janovič Kolenc, a representative of a left-wing electoral coalition of parties, who otherwise demonstrated comprehensive understandings of alternative and participatory models of democracy, admitted they take part in the fast-paced logic of the media and adapt their messages. As he acknowledged, sound bites are pragmatic for the group,

which is forced to move towards populism, “to even get attention, so you can communicate”. For them, this is a “purely tactical activity so we get attention, which we otherwise wouldn’t”.

Slovenian institutional politics attempts to use comparable techniques in political communication as politics in Western countries, even if it falls behind in the intensity and extensiveness of its adoption. Many interviewees were in fact critical of both how they and their party act and how media industries function, with the latter especially having an important influence on how they construct their public communication. Yet

they seemed trapped in the structural context of institutional politics and resigned to follow its logic, which is influenced by both its own rules of the game and other social spheres and relations (e.g. media-as-industries, promotional culture, global context and capitalist social relations). The parties are far from autonomous in how they operate in the political sphere and seem *forced* to adapt to it if they want to survive. However, they also have means available to make significant changes to the system, but instead readily use various techniques to attract attention, collect votes, and play the only game in town.

## INSTRUMENTALIZACIJA POLITIKE IN POLITIKI-KOT-BLAGA: KVALITATIVNA ANALIZA STALIŠČ SLOVENSКИH STRANK O POLITIČNEM KOMUNICIRANJU

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## POVZETEK

*Prispevek raziskuje aktualne procese v institucionalni politični sferi in težnjo po profesionalizaciji političnega življenja. Ta vprašanja povezuje z instrumentalizacijo institucionalne politike in njenim sprejemanjem blagovne logike v javnem političnem komuniciranju, ki vodi v ponotranjenje in normalizacijo političnega trženja ter znamčenja, javnomnenjskih raziskav ter prodajanja programov strank in političnih kandidatov. Prispevek izhaja iz pristopov kritične teorije in politične ekonomije komuniciranja, kar po eni strani nudi podlago za normativno razumevanje demokracije, po drugi pa odpira možnosti za kritiko instrumentalnega razuma in aktualnih procesov poblagovljenja. V empiričnem delu so ta teoretska izhodišča navezana na slovensko institucionalno politiko, pri čemer je cilj prispevka raziskati ali sta instrumentalni razum in blagovna logika bila prevzeta v političnem komuniciranju političnih strank v tem majhnem in perifernem političnem okolju, in – če je temu tako – na kakšne načine. Raziskava temeljni na polstrukturiranih poglobljenih intervjujih s ključnimi predstavniki sedmih parlamentarnih in treh izvenparlamentarnih slovenskih strank oziroma strankarskih koalicij. Čeprav institucionalna politika v Sloveniji predvsem zaradi finančnih omejitev ni celovito profesionalizirana, so intervjuvanci odkrito spregovorili o samopromociji v spletnem komuniciranju, permanentni kampanji, prodajanju stranke in njenega programa, tržnih nišah in možnostih znamčenja. V mnogih pogledih so torej ponotranjili in naturalizirali blagovno logiko, ki je prisotna v političnem marketingu, in jo pričeli dojemati za samoumevno. Glede na analizo je velik del trendov, ki so prisotni predvsem v zahodnih političnih okoljih, v občutnem obsegu mogoče zaznati tudi v slovenski politiki.*

**Ključne besede:** politično komuniciranje, instrumentalni razum, ekonomska racionalnost, poblagovljenje, politično znamčenje, volilna kampanja, profesionalizacija, kritična teorija, politična ekonomija

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## APPENDIX

Name of the interviewee	Function in the party	Name of the party	Result at the 2014 early parliamentary elections <sup>7</sup>	Current party status	Money spent on the 2014 election campaign <sup>8</sup>	Result at the 2011 early parliamentary elections <sup>9</sup>	Interview length (in minutes)	Date and time of the interview (start)
Robert Ilc	Secretary General	Nova Slovenija - Krščanski demokrati / New Slovenia - Christian Democrats (NSi)	5.59% (5 seats)	Opposition	EUR 172,967	4.88% (4 seats)	91	17.11.2014, 10:47
Rok Andrej	Secretary General	Piratska stranka / Pirate Party (PP)	1.34% (0 seats)	Extra-parliamentary	/	Officially formed in 2012	124	18.11.2014, 13:04
Roman Jakič	Secretary General	Zaveznitvo Alenke Bratušek / Alenka Bratušek alliance (ZAB)	4.38% (4 seats)	Opposition	EUR 189,236	Formed in 2014 (split from Positive Slovenia)	112	19.11.2014, 10:02
Erik Kopač	Secretary General	Stranka Mira Cerarja / Party of Miro Cerar (SMC)	34.49% (36 seats)	Ruling coalition	EUR 89,836	Formed in 2014	94	19.11.2014, 12:35
Nikola Janovič Kolenc	Communication group coordinator of the electoral coalition	Koalicija Združena leвица / United Left (electoral coalition) (ZL)	5.97% (6 seats)	Opposition	EUR 26,735	Not a coalition, united in 2014	96	24.11.2014, 10:58
Alenka Jeraj and Klavdija Operčkal	Secretary General/ public relations representative	Slovenska demokratska stranka / Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS)	20.71% (21 seats)	Opposition	EUR 168,942	26.19% (26 seats)	93	5.12.2014, 11:21
Branko Simonovič	Secretary General	Demokratska stranka upokojencev Slovenije / Democratic Pensioner's Party of Slovenia (DeSUS)	10.18% (10 seats)	Ruling coalition	EUR 237,930	6.97% (6 seats)	89	10.12.2014, 12:31
Uroš Jauševc	Secretary General	Socialni demokrati / Social Democrats (SD)	5.98% (6 seats)	Ruling coalition	EUR 246,954	10.52% (10 seats)	106	11.12.2014, 10:17
Tina Komel	Secretary General	Pozitivna Slovenija / Positive Slovenia (PS)	2.97% (0 seats)	Extra-parliamentary	EUR 243,976	28.51% (28 seats)	103	10.2.2015, 11:01
Tadeja Romih	Secretary General	Slovenska ljudska stranka / Slovenian People's Party (SLS)	3.95% (0 seats)	Extra-parliamentary	EUR 231,552	6.83% (6 seats)	77	16.2.2015, 09:33

**Table: List of conducted interviews used for the article and information about the political parties the interviewees represented**

<sup>7</sup> For detailed results, see the website of the Republic of Slovenia State Election Commission (<http://volitve.gov.si/dz2014/en/>).

<sup>8</sup> Political parties conducting a formal campaign have to send their official financial statements to the Court of Audit of the Republic of Slovenia (see: <http://www.rs-rs.si/rsrc/rsrseng.nsf/>), which performs a supervision with regard to whether the campaign was carried out in compliance with the campaign law.

<sup>9</sup> See the website of the Republic of Slovenia State Election Commission (<http://www.dvk-rs.si/arhivi/dz2011/en/>).