

The Problems in Ethics and Professionalism of Slovak Journalists
(Case Studies from August 2002 to October 2003)

Gabriel Šípoš
INEKO, Institute for Economic and Social Reforms

INEKO, Institute for Economic and Social Reforms

Bajkalská 25
827 18 Bratislava
Slovak Republic

Tel.: (+4212) 53 411 020

www.ineko.sk

International Academic Board:

Chairman: Peter Weitz, in memoriam

Lajos Bokros

Michal Mejstřík

Brigita Schmögnerová

Honorary Chairpersons of INEKO Board:

Katarína Mathernová

Daniela Zemanovičová

Chairman of INEKO Board:

Grigorij Mesežnikov

Director:

Eugen Jurzyca

December 2003

ISBN 80-89026-14-1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Purpose of the Publication	...	4
On the Project and the Authors of the Publication	...	5
Case Studies, by Subjects	...	6
The Conflict of Interests	...	6
A PR Article?	...	11
Oh, Those Headlines!	...	13
Mixing Commentaries with News Reporting	...	16
Partiality, Missing Reactions of the Opponents	...	19
The Designation of Expert Names and Sources	...	24
The Missing Context of the News	...	28
Basic Math Watch	...	33
Lack of Economic Thinking	...	35
Logic	...	40
Statistics, Surveys, Charts	...	43
Other Ethical and Professional Issues	...	48

THE PURPOSE OF THE PUBLICATION

The role of the mass media in controlling the ethics and professionalism in the society, starting from the government, through businesses, down to NGOs, is generally known and widely practiced in Slovakia. But who controls the journalists? Seldom do the journalists take a critical view of themselves. The politicians or companies will think twice whether or not to make enemies of the mass media knowing that they will be at their mercy a week or month later.

This publication has endeavoured to invite a wider debate on the quality and problems of Slovak journalism. They are similar to the journalistic dilemmas encountered in the other parts of the world, however, unlike the advanced democracies, in Slovakia they are oftentimes left unresolved. The cases cited in this publication outline three groups of problems.

The first group covers ethical problems falling in the category of the conflicts between the business/personal interests of journalists on the one hand and their professional mission on the other, or, between the advertisers or PR agencies and news reporting. The second group of problems relates to the lacking professionalism of journalistic work, such as deceptive headlines, mixing of commentaries with news reporting, unbalanced nature of articles as a consequence of denying the parties concerned the opportunity to defend themselves, insufficiently portrayed context of the piece of news in question, or failure to cite the information sources. The third type of problems of Slovak journalists relates to their frequent mathematical and logical missteps and a lack of economic thinking.

The selected case studies are especially intended for the working and studying needs of journalists, students of journalism, regular mass media consumers, or just individuals keen to learn more about the work of the media.

ON THE PROJECT AND THE AUTHORS OF THE PUBLICATION

The case studies have been chosen based on the monitoring of the selected Slovak press (especially SME and Pravda, opinion-leaders among the dailies, the TREND economic weekly, and the Domino fórum weekly covering socio-political affairs), within the framework of the **Slovak Press Watch** project (slovakpresswatch.blogspot.com), covering the period between August 2002 and October 2003.

The project focuses on the promotion of professionalism in writing newspaper articles (especially economically-oriented articles), notably on the:

- distinction between facts and (personal) opinions
- correctness of facts
- logical set-up of a newspaper article and its consistency
- adherence to technical rules (an article based on more than one information source/opinion, a headline, which corresponds to the news contents, citation of the table data source).

The Slovak Press Watch does not monitor the above-mentioned periodicals because they are the ones with the worst journalists – rather the reverse. They produce some of the best journalism in Slovakia and are taken very seriously by the policy-makers.

The Slovak Press Watch is a project of INEKO, non-governmental **Institute for Economic and Social Reforms (www.ineko.sk)**. INEKO's main mission is to examine and solidify the formal and informal institutions, which promote the country's economic growth. Among its key projects are The Evaluation of the Socio-economic Measures at the National Level (HESO Project) and the Regional Level (HESO Regions). INEKO also takes an active part in the analyses of the pension reform drafts (the Institute has developed the pension calculator for the new system); it, too, is involved in examining the impact of social capital on the economic development and of the public opinion on the quality of economic reforms.

The Slovak Press Watch project is edited by **Gabriel Šípoš** (born 1974). He is a graduate of the Central European University (CEU) in Budapest, where he studied economics and political science (1996-1999). He also studied journalism at Academia Istropolitana Nova in Bratislava (2000/2001). Between 2000 and 2001, he contributed to The Slovak Spectator, Transitions Online, and Media Online periodicals. Currently, he works as an economist with INEKO, Bratislava. Also, Laura Kelly, free-lance journalist and lecturer in journalism, currently positioned with the American University in Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria, has been contributing to Slovak Press Watch with her valuable advice.

Case Studies, by Subjects

Note: In order to make the context understandable, in rare cases, the original online contributions are supplemented, abridged, or otherwise edited. In original time sequence, the contributions are archived on Slovak Press Watch website (slovakpresswatch.blogspot.com).

THE CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The conflict of interests arises, if other relations infiltrate in the journalist's detached view of the subject, be it family, (un)friendly, business, employer/employee or other ties. The best safeguard against compromising the journalist's integrity is to replace a journalist, who is in conflict. If this is not feasible, it is prudent to inform the readership of the conflict. Even an impression of a conflict arising, not inevitably its factual consummation, may pose a problem.

Writing about oneself: In SME daily, Oliver Ondriáš gives an account of a scuffle between Peter Kaleta, journalist of Tatranský denník, and the director of the Kežmarok Civic Centre, while doing an interview with her. The big problem of the article is that its author works with Tatranský denník, where Peter Kaleta is editor-in-chief. The sentence "Peter Kaleta is known to his colleagues and the editorial board as a mild person, who tries to bring the maladies of the Tatra mountain region to public attention" acquires a different meaning. If the information on one's superior or colleague cannot be avoided, the reader should be informed in the text about the actual nature of these relations. The fact that Tatranský denník and SME have one owner should not be overlooked either.
October 21, 2002

Majský and the media: Since Tuesday, the mass media have been reporting on the detention of Jozef Majský by the police. Twist Radio, of which a half is owned by Majský's children according to Pravda daily, when reporting on Majský's problems, did not make a single mention to the listeners of its relations with Majský (at least, this is the impression one gets from the transcription of the programme). It may very well be that Twist editors are independent in what they are doing, however, it looks, as if they are hiding something.

The same applies to SME daily. According to the information from the annual reports on the state of the Slovak society published annually by the Institute for Public Issues, until 2000, SME had been owned by VMV Inc., in which Jozef Majský was a shareholder. It is unclear, whether he also has a participating interest in the new publishing house Petit Press (it was established through merger of VMV and the German Verlagsgruppe Passau). But when SME reporters carried out a historic survey of Majský's business activities in the Wednesday edition, why was the reader not informed of Majský's (former) business interest in SME? Is it negligence or intent?
October 25, 2002

Majský in SME: Tomáš Velecký, reporter of SME, responds to my comment made on Friday that in his article on Majský's business career he did not mention Majský's links with SME:

"Because of limited space, I've narrowed down the historic survey of Majský's business activities to his most important participating interests in companies, in whose management he took an active part. Majský had 9.2 per cent equity ownership in VMV, former publisher of SME daily. I didn't think this interest to be all that important, therefore, I didn't mention it in my article (as opposed to his majority interest in the publisher of Smena daily). Majský does not have any equity ownership in Petit Press, which is the current SME publisher (50 per cent owned by Vajda, 50 per cent by Verlagsgruppe Passau)."

I agree, in an ordinary article on an XY entrepreneur, it is perfectly all right to focus just on the entrepreneur's major participating interests. This, however, cannot apply to the news media, because in my opinion, even a one percent participating interest is relevant enough to communicate the information to the reader or the listener. True, this is former equity ownership, but it's always better to make it public and avoid any suspicion.
October 28, 2002

Ad Majský in SME: On the commentary page, SME daily publishes my commenting the conflict of interests in several mass media, and also the reaction of Alexej Fulmek, director of Petit Press, publisher of SME.

Fulmek argues as follows:

"SME editorial board has not mentioned that Jozef Majský was a former shareholder in the publishing house, most likely because it has never perceived the fact as any conflict of interests or as a pressure on the part of shareholders. This is evidenced by the fact that it was SME daily to have first published the transcription of the conversation between Majský and Vladimír Fruni."

I don't think either that SME's coverage of Majský has been purposely influenced by someone. But this also applies to a number of other companies or politicians. Despite that, any reputable company will publish an annual report on its operational performance and its ownership structure. Theoretically, BMG or Drukos Výnos could be reputable companies, however, keeping the investments and the income from their activities in secret has given rise to suspicions. Each MP is required to register his/her interests and assets irrespective of his/her conduct in the past. After all, it is about the future potential conflicts of interests. So, if a journalist writes about a subject, individual, or a company having relevant personal or professional relations, as a reader, I'm keen to learn about it directly from the journalist or the periodical. By the way, if we urge the politicians to comply with the principles of transparency and ethics as set out in the laws of our western model, why not apply the same to journalists?

October 29, 2002

Abortions in Poland: In the foreign news coverage, Pravda daily publishes an article by "Ol'ga Pietruchová, contributor of Pravda", on the Polish situation regarding the debate on abortions. The article pinpoints the great number of negative implications of the ban on abortions. However, what Pravda did not tell the reader was that the author was in apparent conflict of interests. Not only is she a contributor of Pravda, but she is also the chairperson of Možnosť voľby association (The Possibility of Choice), which is among the non-governmental organisations that advocate a liberal approach to abortions. To give space to such an individual in news reporting is rather inappropriate and if that cannot be avoided, her membership in such an organisation should be made public.

January 22, 2003

An interview with the boss: Eva Čobejová and Ján Štrasser of Domino fórum weekly made an extensive interview with Alexej Fulmek, director of Petit Press, about the SME daily. It pretends to be a regular Domino interview, however, one cannot speak of a routine interview. SME is a sister of Domino newspaper, as they are both published by Petit Press. As it turned out, the reporters made an interview with their big boss, who is the superior of their editor-in-chief. However, the reader is not warned that the two relations they have are in a serious conflict: the journalist vs the boss and the journalist vs the reader. It would have sufficed to write that the gentleman is director of Petit Press publishers, which among others, also publishes the weekly in question. Knowing about the conflict, the reader would have been given a better opportunity to judge the interview.

P.S. The best bit in the introduction to the interview is that the authors write seriously about their big boss "has become a top-quality manager." This sounds as if someone is asking for pay increase.

January 23, 2003

SME versus Pravda: In the most recent edition of TREND, Sylvia Páľková maps out the increase in the sale figures of both dailies in recent months, whereby she quotes SME and Pravda editors-in-chief. It's a pity that she forgot to tell the reader that some time ago, she worked with Pravda, and that her boss was Šabata, its current editor-in-chief. This is a clear conflict of interests. What else has she kept away from the readers?

March 8, 2003

An interview with the co-owner of the newspaper: Pavol Komár, Pravda reporter, made an interview with Juraj Široký, boss of the national hockey union. Široký is also a co-owner of Perex company, which is Pravda publisher – this leads to a conflict of interests because of the relationship between the reporter and the source of the interview vs the employee and his breadwinner. Pravda should have brought this conflict to the reader's attention.

May 15, 2003

Deals in culture events reporting? Juraj Kušnierik, referred to as a bookseller in a Pravda article, conducted an interview with the manager of Pohoda music festival. One of the questions was as follows: "Literary podium is a traditional part of Bažant Pohoda. What mission does it have?"

Firstly, the bookseller Artforum owned by Kušnierik is the co-organiser of Pohoda and secondly, he is the repertory advisor to Literary podium. However, Pravda readers have not learnt anything about this conflict of interests. Why not?

July 7, 2003

Media partnership 2: The Czech weekly Reflex gives coverage of an interesting story about an alleged consent of MF Dnes daily not to publish any negative news on the Karlovy Vary film festival while the festival was on. This led to the dismissal of Sabina Slonková, co-author of a critical article, which was prepared for publishing. However, according to Reflex, MF Dnes claimed that the controversial article was not finalised.

Last week, I referred to an unfair coverage by Pravda and Domino fórum of Pohoda festival without the media disclosing their business ties with the festival. Is it by coincidence that neither of the mass media gave coverage of but a single serious injury at the festival?? We learnt about it from SME, for instance, which was not among the mass media partners to Pohoda festival...

July 28, 2003

One more ethical slip in Domino: Ján Štrasser, journalist of Domino fórum, has written an extensive article on the theatre Studio L+S/Studio S, marking its 20th anniversary. However, he forgot to tell the reader about his former or current link with the theatre, be it in his position of repertory adviser or co-author of the Evenings of Milan Markovič, performed on the stage of this theatre. The conduct of the weekly's own staff places the criticism of arrogance and cynicism of Slovak politicians on the part of Domino in a rather strange light.

August 30, 2003

The friendship with journalists: In an interview for Pravda Saturday edition or an interview for SME Friday edition, Ján Mojžiš, former director of the National Security Office, refers to his "personal links" with the entrepreneur Miloš Žiak. In late August, Žiak also referred to his "relationship" with Mojžiš, in an interview for SME. At the same time he mentioned that Martin M. Šimečka, editor-in-chief of SME, had been his best friend ever since the communist time. In early February, both Žiak and Mojžiš attended the traditional SME ball. The daily did not hide the fact, on the contrary. The main photo of the ball shows two couples seated next to each other at a laid table. SME comments on the photo as follows:

Director general of Petit Press, Alexej Fulmek with spouse Denisa (left), having a conversation with Marina, spouse of the chairman of the Israeli Chamber in Slovakia - entrepreneur Miloš Žiak (second right), during the performance of Sisa Sklovská.

I don't know much about balls, but persons aren't seated next to the boss of a publishing house by coincidence. Another photo shows another couple and the text under it reads as follows:

Traditionally, Ján Mojžiš, director of the National Security Office (with spouse), had a great time at SME ball. His face did not show any signs of fatigue despite the fact that he had attended another ball the night before. "I think I'll end up this year's ball season at your ball. I'm not really a ball-goer, but I must admit that my wife also has the right to have a good time. I was greatly surprised to have been asked for the introductory dance, because my time comes after midnight. I'm fond of dancing, don't let my figure confuse you, I used to dance in a traditional dance ensemble".

It seems to me that for some time now, there have been close friendly relations among Žiak, Mojžiš, Fulmek, and Šimečka. Is it a problem? Not really, it's their business. The real problem emerged in conjunction with the "group" case and with the recalling of Mojžiš. Then it is a problem, because SME daily, under the pressure of recent developments, has been compelled to write about the friends of their editor-in-chief and their publisher. On the one hand, the daily and its reporters have endeavoured to report on the case and to explain it while maintaining a detached view and professionalism in seeking its causes and implications, on the other hand, this endeavour has been compromised by suspecting the prominent individuals from SME of having friendly connections with the prominent individuals involved in the case. The fact that a lot of the information is based on assumptions and anonymous information sources, which allows for a rather extensive space for manipulation, makes the suspicion even more serious.

What can be done with this conflict of interests? SME cannot not report on the case. The editor cannot be replaced either, because it concerns the whole daily. I believe that the most efficient way for SME to cope with the conflict is to have Šimečka or Fulmek explain their relations with Žiak and Mojžiš in a separate column. The point is that the general public should be told that SME is aware of its conflict of

interests (be it real or alleged) and that it has taken action to minimise it, say, by increasing the number of editors, even free-lancers, reporting on the "group" and Mojžiš. Such an explanation would promote transparency of the media in this country. Laura Kelly, American journalist (my former professor), who has been lecturing on the ethics of journalism the world over for a number of years, would add that such a step on the part of SME management would be, at the same time, a well-used opportunity to show the responsibility it has vis-à-vis its readership and to introduce them to the complexity of news reporting, to which the work for mass media is oftentimes exposed. Such an educative facet could eventually lead to exerting public pressure on the journalists who would work towards transparency – SME would set a positive example for the evaluation of the work of other media.

Last but not least, SME reporters deserve a similar explanation (unless explanation has been given to them in the meantime). In the eyes of the general public, their work and articles are overshadowed by the above conflict. Therefore, the management owes them some room for a discussion.

The clarification of relations in public has been in delay for more than a month. But, better late than never.

P.S. What have the reporters of other competitive media been doing that the conflicts in SME have not been given any coverage? Is it because we're all friends, or because we know each other's secrets?
October 5, 2003

Solving the conflict of interests in Radio Free Europe: Milan Žitný, editor of Radio Free Europe, did a lot of news reporting on the Slovak Intelligence Service (SIS) and security issues. Currently, he does not cover these issues at all. In response to my question, why not, he wrote:

"It's a basic rule that needn't even be put on paper, everyone should know it. Given the fact that my name was on the "group" list – and it makes no difference whether it's a blunder schemed in someone's sick head – I simply can't write about things, which are connected with it. At this moment, it wouldn't be fair to the public. The general public could rightfully object that my position isn't unbiased and I've no arguments now to refute this."

This is similar to my recent explanation to M. Slovák, chairman of the Slovak Television Council, that he was in conflict of interests when he was simultaneously a free-lancer working with STV and paid fees by it and the moment the CEO froze the payment of fees for some time, the chairman of the Council raised objections. I tried to explain to him that he was not on the Council to advocate the interests of the community of actors, although he was nominated by it; instead, he was on the Council to advocate the interests of the public at large as a whole.

Similarly, if the editors of private television Markíza sued interior minister V. Palko, then none of them, i.e. of those suing him, should be reporting on the minister's activity. This concerns each and everyone bringing an action in court, so, if there's anyone from programme directors, production team, etc. in the group that sued him, TV Markíza cannot even broadcast such contributions.

To me, these are also ideal solutions, but for practical reasons they are not always workable (the case of Šimečka as editor-in-chief). The second best solutions should be about informing the public of the conflict so that it is more alert. I believe that in the case of Šimečka as an alleged member of the "group", SME has been doing its job pretty well, and the dispute between KDH and Markíza has also been given a fairly broad coverage. The case of friendly ties with Žiak and Mojžiš is nebulous for the general public and the case has not been explained by SME management. This is a blow for the credibility of the daily.
October 7, 2003

Pittner and anti-Semitism: I think, it's good that SME has taken a serious approach to the alleged anti-Semitism cases, especially when the names of high government officials are at stake. But there's a "but", just like in SME's coverage of the "group" case. The more serious the subject gets, the more cautious the journalist must be to minimise suspicions of his/her ulterior motives. If he/she fails to do so, not only that the weight of his/her word would be lessened, but also the accused would get away with it more easily, should they be found guilty. Hence, the journalist would not be of much help to the society, on the contrary.

I have already covered the "group" vs SME case (October 5, 2003). And what does SME owe to its readership in Pittner case? The publishing of TASR news from several days ago:

Bratislava, October 17 (TASR) – "Peter Pittner, the son of SIS director, "won" a half million crowns and

an apology from SME daily publisher, in a personality protection lawsuit at the Bratislava 4 District Court today. According to the judgement, which has not become effective as yet, the publisher, Petit Press, which is held liable for the contents of the periodical, will have to apologise to Pittner for the piece of information published on April 5 of this year that the son of the boss of intelligence service owed 30 million crowns to a certain company. According to the court, this is not a true piece of information and P. Pittner has been discredited. Today's hearing has taken place in the absence of the legal counsel of Petit Press publisher. The lawyer apologised, as he represents the case at the Constitutional Court of the SR. According to the judge of Bratislava 4 District Court, the publisher could have been represented by another lawyer from the lawyer's office, which represents the opposing party. The judgement has not become legally valid as yet. SME publisher may lodge an appeal with the Regional Court in Bratislava."

By the way, the article on P. Pittner was published on April 7, and not on April 5; it was written by Monika Žemlová, who is also the author of today's article.

I think that the media should inform their readers and the general public of any lawsuits and legal actions, to avoid any needless suspicions that they might be after someone partly on the grounds of having a personal grudge against the individual...They trade with information and it is hard to recover lost trust in this way.

October 29, 2003

A PR ARTICLE?

Some Slovak journalists believe that the so-called PR materials are a fairly frequent sight in the media, i.e. articles written to the order of individuals from the outside, with the purpose to manipulate the public opinion. These need not necessarily be paid articles, which pretend to be news reporting. Articles that glorify only one-party position will also be included in this section.

Moratorium on polls: If someone wanted to write a PR article on polling agencies, its text would not differ dramatically from that of today's article "Lifting the moratorium on polls will help the electorate" (Zrušenie moratória na prieskumy pomôže voličom) – and also the agencies, the headline may add. The article has not devoted any space to the moratorium advocates. After all, someone must have drafted the law.

September 27, 2002

A PR article in SME: An advertisement of a certain university under the guise of TASR news has been placed on SME news reporting page:

„BRATISLAVA – Seven programme fields in the English language are offered by the Prague branch of the New York State University to the applicants from the Slovak Republic...For more information, those interested in the studies should contact the Bratislava office of the non-profit organisation American Cultural Exchange in Pražská Street 11, or phone Bratislava telephone numbers 5249 5677 and 5729 7268. (tasr).“

Will an explanation be given tomorrow?

November 5, 2002

Profit advertising paper?: The new edition of Profit weekly (No.44), co-owned by Majský's company Sipox Holding, does not report on the problems of its co-owner either. However, in the "Weekly Overview of Home Affairs" („Týždeň doma"), page 7, there is a PR article (apparently written to the order of a certain company or individual, which, by its format and design, pretends to be news reporting, i.e. it is not designated as advertising). The name of this article is "A Bigger Choice - a More Diverse Food" („Väčší výber – pestrejšia strava"), which promotes an Austrian food producer coming to Slovakia, which, allegedly, "offers ready-made meals without preservatives, colourings, and taste enhancers...meals produced from seasonally fresh raw materials, bla, bla..." May I remind the reader that this is a section intended to cover the main events of the week, other articles report on the EU, unemployment, state budget, and the like. What is journalism about in Profit?

November 6, 2002

PR for a private company: For reasons unknown, a journalist promotes Slovenská ľudová majolika (Slovak Folk Majolica), manufacturer of ceramics, on the pages of SME. The article is placed in the Capital section; however, one will learn nothing about the company's turnover, profit/loss, or its headcount. Instead, the reader is informed of all those that damage the company and how environment-friendly its production is. The beginning of the article sounds interesting:

„The overproduction of cheap ceramic articles and the mass market have resulted in the winding up of several producers of traditional ceramics in the Czech Republic, Germany or Italy. The management of Slovak Folk Majolica, folk art production co-operative based at Modra, warns that Slovak manufacturers may meet a similar fate.“

Overproduction? The mass market? Was it not, by any chance, the co-operative director telling this to the reporter? Said in plain Slovak, is it not about low labour productivity and poor marketing? The reader will not learn, which other Slovak producers are threatened by extinction. In my opinion, this is but a cliché, which, translated to plain language, means: "our company is having problems, we want subsidies or other kind of state aid".

The article continues:

"Slovak Folk Majolica is burdened by a loan totalling several million crowns, which had been imposed on the production co-operative by the state in the pre-November period".

One would think that entrepreneurs complain about inaccessible loans. In this case, however, the state managed somehow to impose a loan on a company, which, alas, is paralysed. True, for once and all, the

banks should stop imposing such big loans on our companies, otherwise, the entrepreneurs will quit right away.

December 7, 2002

What are our companies short of?: "The companies are increasingly deficient of technical engineers," („Podnikom začínajú chýbať technickí inžinieri,") writes SME. Want a proof?

„The new rector of the Slovak Technical University...is saying that he has been approached by the directors of big companies clamouring for technical engineers."

Period. The article is based on a single source, the rector, that is. Via SME, the boss of a school solicits clients, the actual reactions of companies are not cited. The main thing is that their opinion is presented in the headline. This looks like advertising, a PR article.

February 27, 2003

A PR interview? I don't have the slightest idea how the following "interview" with the head of one central government agencies has found its way to SME. It sounds like the 1980s. This is how it begins (is that the underlying reason for writing the article?)

„An interview with chairman...on the role and new tasks of the Office of Industrial Property of the SR."

Here are four out of five questions posed by the journalist:

What is the current position of the Office of Industrial Property of the SR? Are the central government agencies responsive to the work and the outputs of the activity of your Office? What are the HR, material, and financial arrangements to ensure the running of the Office? Part of the professional community has voiced reservations regarding the work of the Office, part of the community perceives you in a positive light. What is your position on that?

I really don't get it how something like this could appear in a reputable newspaper.

May 6, 2003

A PR event for Tuesday: SME covers a brief TASR news: Amslico is placed second

BRATISLAVA – In the first six months, the gross profit of AMSLICO AIG Life Insurance Company was SKK 134.5 million. The amount of the total prescribed premium exceeded SKK 1.6 billion. During the first six months, the claim payments of AMSLICO totalled more than SKK 189 million. In the first two quarters of this year, its share on the life insurance market exceeded 18 per cent, which has placed Amslico second. (tasr)

The context of this piece of news is missing. What was the profit and market share a year ago, i.e. what are the development trends in the company? Who is placed first or third on the market?

In this case, SME at least took the information from TASR and not from a PR agency or the company's press department. To get a clearer picture of the nature of these articles, which look like the products of a PR agency representing Amslico, I suggest today's articles in *Národná obroda*:

"..The priority of the company's investment strategy...is to safely place the confided clients' funds so as to ensure an adequate income. In this fashion, AMSLICO AIG Life also contributes to the promotion of the Slovak economy...."

or in *Hospodárske noviny*:

"..Amslico AIG Life...offers its services via 41 agencies, agents, and several broker partners. The insurance company is a member of the American International Group, Inc. (AIG), which, according to its market value, is among the leading insurance and financial institutions. Its services are regularly given the highest ratings by Standard & Poor's and Moody's rating agencies."

Come on, this has nothing to do with journalism.

October 14, 2003

OH, THOSE HEADLINES!

A very frequent malady: the headline and the article say two different things. Headlines are important, since the attention of a lot of readers is caught only by the headline relating to a certain subject, but they have no time or interest to continue reading.

Deceptive headlines: If, according to a survey of the ministry of education, 25 per cent of children indulge in sports regularly, 45 per cent occasionally, and 30 per cent not at all, how can one arrive at a headline "Slovak children refuse to go in for sports" („Slovenské deti odmietajú športovať")? If this year's harvest yield is lower than last year's, which was the first profitable year for the farmers in the past ten years, can the headline say "Harvest almost finished, yields are reported low"? Low according to whom?

August 6, 2002

Schuster's legislative activity: To date, Slovak president has referred back to Parliament many more laws than his predecessor, Michal Kováč or his Czech counterpart, Václav Havel. Maybe, his activity is good, maybe not. The author of the headline in SME has already made his opinion: "Too many laws referred back by the president" („Prezident vracia priveľa zákonov)."

August 12, 2002

Small Slovakia: Probably, the bias of the headline in SME "The Slovak economy placed 86th" („Slovenská ekonomika je až na 86.mieste"), follows from an in-born pessimism. The UN table in question simply arrayed the economies by size and not by performance, growth indicators, etc. Slovakia, with a population of 5 million, is unlikely to rank among the economic giants. This does not bother anyone, as it is the standard of living, i.e. the economic performance, and not its relative size in a global ladder that is important. By the way, regarding the size of GDP per capita (the living standard, so to speak), Slovakia has been placed as "low" as the 46th notch in the global comparison, and according to the UN Human Development Index, as "low" as the 36th notch.

August 14, 2002

Who gives more?: SME – "The onslaught of a once-in-a-hundred-years water of the Danube today or tomorrow" („Storočná voda Dunaja dorazí dnes, alebo zajtra"). Hospodárske noviny – "A more than once-in-a-hundred-years water to overtake Bratislava" („Na Bratislavu sa valí vyše storočná voda"). Pravda – "A once-in-five-hundred-years water is approaching Bratislava" („Na Bratislavu sa valí 500-ročná voda"). Národná Obroda – "A once-in-thousand-years water to roll through the Danube tomorrow" („Dunajom sa zajtra prevalí tisícročná voda.")

August 15, 2002

Ivan Lexa is out of prison: and, according to the government and the coalition representatives, wrongfully. On the contrary, opposition parties are satisfied. Apparently, SME reporters are on the side of the former, judging by the headline "An odd verdict of the panel of judges in Lexa case" („Senát o Lexovi rozhodoval čudne"). Why not leave such statements for the opinion page or to the reader?

August 17, 2002

Is Schuster's poisoning out of question?: Pravda reports that "[the Austrian physicians] corroborated the opinion of their Slovak colleagues that the President's health problems have not been caused by poisoning." However, SME reports that the physicians in Vienna "refused to fully exclude [poisoning] before knowing all the examination results." What's the truth, then? Strangely enough, in the headline "The country's image damaged by the rumours about Schuster's poisoning" („Krajine škodia fámy o otrave prezidenta"), SME states that poisoning is out of question. Moreover, the opinion of two unnamed individuals has been foisted into a news headline once again.

August 30, 2002

Milk smuggling: Czech customs officers claim that Slovak milk is smuggled into the Czech Republic and Slovak producers contest that. Apparently, a SME headline trusts the custom officers more: "Milk smuggling not admitted to" („Pašovanie mlieka nepriznali"). Why? How can we tell that it was really smuggled?

September 27, 2002

"A terrorist" set free: "A terrorist set free in Sweden" („Vo Švédsku prepustili únoscu"), reports a headline in SME. It is clear from the article that the young man was set free for lack of evidence, however, the investigation was to continue. Why does SME refer to him as the kidnapper??? By the way,

SME referred to this gentleman as a terrorist on September 4, 2002 ("The Swedish terrorist is said to be mentally deranged" - „Švédsky terorista je vraj popletený“), and a day later, an article under the headline: "Sweden's September 22" („Švédsko má svoj 11.september“), reporting on his detention. October 1, 2002

The rightists disunited?: The leading article in Pravda on the creation of the coalitions for municipal elections comes with the headline "The rightists enter the municipal elections disunited" („Do komunálnych volieb ide pravica rozbitá“). However, the article denies this statement. Of the eight regional towns, the rightists are disunited only in Bratislava, in Banská Bystrica they have not come to an agreement yet, and in Prešov, the situation is not quite clear. Has the author of this headline read a different article??

October 8, 2002

The writing of the headlines: In an interview for Pravda, Ivan Šimek, director of Taylor Nelson Sofres, gives the following answer to how much the introduction of peplemeters will cost: "The total project cost for Slovakia is between 38 and 47 million crowns annually". And now, let's have a look at the headline: "The annual project costs will be 47 million."

November 13, 2002

Few or fewer?: "Few laws submitted by the Government" („Vláda predkladá málo zákonov,“), reads the headline of a news article in SME. An evaluative, subjective headline. It may very well be that presently, the government submits fewer laws to Parliament as usual, however, whether it's little or much is a subject for the opinion column. The reporter cites Hrušovský, speaker of Parliament (who agrees that too few laws are presented), however, the government representative is not given a chance to explain.

January 10, 2002

Pregnant women at work: "When a woman becomes pregnant during probation, she is fired" („Keď žena otehotnie v skúšobnej dobe, vyhodia ju“), reads the headline of a SME article. A categorical conclusion. And what evidence is there? The author portrays the stories of two women, one had the above experience, the other one didn't. So, the headline could read just the opposite, which would not change a thing about its truthfulness, judging by the contents of the article.

March 18, 2003

A detective story with subtitles: Today, based on agency and own newspaper sources, SME reports the following in its news articles:

First page: "Tikrít has been taken, is the war over?" („Padol Tikrít, je dobojované?“). Inside the foreign affairs section: "Arms laid down, Tikrít also captured" („Dobojované, padol aj Tikrít“)

And the next headline reads: "The conflict is still not over, warns Blair" („Konflikt ešte neskončil, upozornil Blair“).

April 15, 2003

Who does UPC think it is?: "UPC cable company disconnecting defiant customers" („Kábllovka UPC odpojila vzdorujúcich zákazníkov“), reads the headline of a SME article. However, after several twists, it turns out that UPC may have disconnected defiant, but above all, delinquent customers. It remains a mystery to me why the headline tactfully makes no mention of that.

July 22, 2003

Have our purchases increased or remained the same?: "Income has dropped but purchases have increased" („Ľuďom klesli príjmy, ale nakupovali viac“), "Spending remains the same, but savings have dropped" („Rovnako mňame, ale menej sporíme“), are the headlines of two SME articles reporting on the same figures.

July 22, 2003

Headlines, headlines, headlines: Today, Pravda reports: "SDKU party did not pay taxes" („SDKÚ neplatila dane“). When seeing such a headline, I would expect this to be a statement of an official government authority (moreover, not involved in the case). Actually, this is a suspicion of a certain NGO and SDKU denies that. What makes Pravda support one side both in the headline and the article??

A SME editor used even a stranger news headline: "Bad news from Baghdad" („Zlé správy z Bagdadu“). CTK news agency piece refers to the killed American soldiers and Iraqi civilians. Which is the bad news and which is the good news depends on a lot of facts, for instance, on the perception of the role of USA

in Iraq. For presenting opinions, SME should use the opinion page and not mix them with news reporting.
October 25, 2003

MIXING COMMENTARIES WITH NEWS REPORTING

It is important for the reader to know what really has been going on and what is just someone's opinion of the event. All reputable newspapers separate news coverage from the opinion pages. The analysis of events is something between the two genres. In any case, the genres of articles should be clearly distinguished and they should not overlap. However, this is frequently not so in Slovakia.

Quotation of the day: SME reporting on Karol Martinka:

"It is **not unknown** what Martinka's sources of financing of his costly living style abroad are. Under Vladimír Mečiar's government, for two years, he ran the Devín banka, which went bankrupt, and in the privatisation of Piešťany spa he reportedly through fraud enriched himself to the tune of SKK 602 million at the expense of the National Property Fund."

September 15, 2002

What must be done: "The approach to the rural regions must change" („Je potrebné zmeniť prístup k vidieku"), informs a SME headline. The headline is just perfect for the opinion page. The problem is that the article was placed in the section covering economic news. The headline of a Pravda article "Expensive Slovak groceries are cheap for the Europeans" („Drahé slovenské potraviny sú pre Európanov lacné"), faces the same problem. What is the definition of "expensive groceries?" How much is expensive milk? And how much is cheap milk?

October 16, 2002

Expensive government: "The new government has been streamlined, but it is still expensive" („Nová vláda je štíhlejšia, ale ešte stále drahá"), comments (rather than informs) Pravda. There is not a single word in the article explaining why the current government is expensive, or why the former government was expensive. Hence, the headline of a news article is inappropriately subjective and in addition, it does not even correspond with the piece.

October 17, 2002

Money bypasses the rural regions: claims the headline of an article in SME. Again, this is a subjective headline. It follows from the article that this is an opinion of the interest groups, which advocate the interests of the rural regions. Despite that, the author agrees with it - just refer to the first sentence of the article: "A look at the funding of non-governmental activities in regional development tells us that Slovakia neglects the rural regions." Oh, indeed! Such a look would indicate nothing. Can the fact that foundations have allocated 15 per cent of their budgets for rural development be used as evidence? And what percentage should have they allocated for the rural regions? The rural lobbyists have not explained why the share should be higher.

P.S. Attila Lovász has written three news articles for SME this week (plus two adapted ones from SITA and Reuters agencies). In all three articles the private farmer Tibor Matus as a was quoted. Is it not well over the top? Is it by coincidence, is it a friendly contact, or is there even something more behind it?

October 18, 2002

Support of the EU and NATO membership: A SME article on referenda reads:

„The public opinion polls indicate that the Slovaks are supportive of the accession to the Union (about 70 per cent are "in favour"), and slightly over 60 per cent of the population will cast their ballots in the referendum. The support of Slovakia's membership in NATO is more of a problem. The polls indicate that about 50 per cent of the respondents are supportive of the membership".

More of a problem?? It depends, for whom. Why implant personal/government opinions into news reporting? When speaking about referenda, the information on how many people want a NATO referendum is missing.

October 21, 2003

Powell's evidence against Iraq: The leading article in SME "Powell has shown to the world that Iraq is lying" („Powell ukázal svet, že Irak klame") is the author's opinion, this is not honest reporting. Actually, there is not much difference between this and his commentary published separately: Iraq lies, period. This is claimed by the USA, however, others are not convinced – this should be the backbone of a news article and not the author's own conclusions.

February 6, 2003

Voting on Iraq: "It was a business deal, some MPs claim" („Bol to obchod, tvrdí časť poslancov“), reports the headline of a Pravda article. Was it really a pre-arranged deal? The author approached three MPs, one did not think it was, while the two others said that "it could be so" and "it could be some sort of deal". So they did not claim it was, they admitted it might have been. Instead of asking fairly about their opinion on the motives for voting, the reporter asked a misleading question on the possibility of bargaining. Their statements are far from corroborating the fact that the deal was also the main motive, which determined their voting positions. This is a classical article when the journalist abuses the reporting for the sake of presenting his/her own interpretation of the facts, irrespective of the fact, whether this interpretation is true or false.
February 8, 2003

Moratorium broken: Today, right in the headline, SME appeals to the public to participate in the referendum; it advertises the event together with Pravda. Given the fact that it is unclear, whether the moratorium has been broken or not, an explanation from the editors-in-chief of their conduct and motives would come in handy. Or, do they think that by calling for poll in the referendum law has not been violated? Or, do the "ends justify the means?" Yesterday, the latter was criticised by SME commentator Marián Leško.
May 16, 2003S

SME supports the EU: That's perfectly all right, nobody is going to take away the daily's right of opinion. However, mixing one's opinion with news reporting is not a good idea. After the Friday appeal for polls even today, some articles are influenced by the official SME position: "Sad primacy of Žilina region" („Smutné prvenstvo Žilinského kraja) (low turn-out), or, "Turn-out polls were optimistic" („Prieskumy účasti boli optimistické", i.e. indicated a high turn-out). Sad, optimistic – it depends, for others, it may be joyful and pessimistic. So, when SME publishes an article "for the undecided" under the headline "the pros and cons of the EU" hardly anyone will trust such an article that pretends to be objective. Simply, SME is losing its credibility in reporting on the disadvantages of the EU membership.
May 19, 2003

Bútora+SME=big love?: As early as May, Eva Čobejová from Domino fórum indicated the tacit support of SME daily for Martin Bútora as a potential presidential candidate. At that time Bútora's profile was published, bearing similarities with a PR article. Although to date, Bútora has not made his candidacy public, SME has reported on one event (Bútora meeting friends and celebrities) for two consecutive times – today, it is an article very similar to that from Thursday.

This sheds negative light on SME news reporting. Needless to say, the same reporter covers especially big and delicate investigation cases and oftentimes, she uses anonymous sources. This requires a very special trust on the part of the readers. However, she loses it because of the articles of the type published today. All what it requires is fairness with the readers and sharing with them the opinion on Bútora in an editorial, rather than pushing one's personal liking into news articles.
July 11, 2003

Who was misinformed by who: The Pravda article writes "The Australian government has also misinformed public about Iraq" („O Iraku zavádzala aj vláda v Austrálii").

Not only the British but also the Australian government tampered with the evidence on the Iraqi weapons of mass destruction to engage the country in war. Since yesterday, the Australian committee of deputies has been endeavouring to ascertain whether the intelligence used in the arguments of Prime Minister John Howard for Iraq invasion corresponded with reality. Some experts believe that they did not...The conclusions of the investigation, which was initiated by the opposition in...the Senate should be made public in early December."

It looks as if Pravda knows the results ahead of time.
August 23, 2003

Playing with circulation: Today, SME presents an adapted TASR news:

"Nový Čas remains to be the Slovak daily with the highest circulation; it has 25 per cent share on the readership market. Placed second are dailies Pravda (9.1 per cent) and SME (8.6 per cent), after rounding off using the poll methodology, with a 9 per cent share of readership respectively."

Pravda daily does not round off anything and declares upfront to be the most read opinion-leading daily...However, due to the statistical error, SME article is more accurate and the position of the dailies remains the same, in fact.

Interestingly enough, the results of the last but one survey were not rounded off in SME, to stay on the safe side, since the results were just the opposite (i.e. SME ended up with 8.4 per cent and Pravda with 8.0 per cent share), and so SME could claim to be the most read opinion-leading daily. The advertisements in the daily happily publish that.

A lesson for the reader is simple: the more news reporting relates to the private interests of the news media and its journalists, the higher the likelihood of half-truths and misleading information. The question is, how far their interests go in news reporting.

October 8, 2003

Circulation II.: Pravda goes back to the circulation figures survey conducted by Median agency and repeats the assertion that Pravda is the most read opinion-leading daily. I have spoken to Median staff and according to them, the statistical deviation in results has 1.2 percentage point tolerance.

In fact, what the poll indicated was that the circulation of Pravda can be found between 7.9 and 10.3 per cent, while that of SME between 7.4 and 9.8 per cent. Two thirds of the above intervals overlap, and, in reality, SME circulation may be higher than that of Pravda. In practical terms, the position of the two dailies is the same, similarly to what the first poll conducted early this year indicated.

Several respondents in the article attributed the deterioration of their own figures to the summer season. However, there is a year-on-year comparison to help eliminate this influence. Such figures are missing in the article.

My favourite citation from the poll – a reaction to the results of the circulation survey:

Alexej Fulmek, director of Petit Press publisher: I'm satisfied, because our circulation has increased. Given the possible statistical error, I deem our result equal to that of Pravda daily.

So, an increase (from 8.4 to 8.6 per cent) is real, however, comparison with the competitor (8.6 vs 9.1 per cent) falls within the error tolerance...

October 9, 2003

PARTIALITY, MISSING REACTIONS OF THE OPPONENTS

The information value of an article and a constructive seeking of problem solution are distorted if the opinions or reactions of other relevant parties are not represented.

Costly Slovak internet: "Our neighbours have cheaper internet" („U susedov je internet lacnejší“), claims SME on its first page on the basis of an information of the Internet for All Association. However, it follows from the table that this is (partly) true (save for Poland) only for low traffic internet (evenings, weekends), while in peak-time traffic, it is Slovakia, which is the cheapest. Why such a biased article, moreover, based on a single source without the reaction of Slovak Telecommunications?
August 5, 2002

Economic legislation in Parliament: Several articles on the debated economic laws are quite biased in today's SME issue. In the news on the adopted packaging law, the journalist embellishes the reasoning of the sponsors of the laws by such words as "it is said", "officially", and "ironically". His bias is present by inserting his commentary in the introductory sentence of a news article: "The public will have to cope with new environmental concerns". Without quoting or naming, it merely mentions the disagreement of the "economists" with the law. Identical mode of expression was used when informing of the retail chain law, which was not passed (this time, the author's position is clearly affirmative). Example: it is said that hypermarkets want low prices, Slovak suppliers want them high. The non-restriction of hypermarkets means that "[their] prices... will continue to be affordable for the buyer."
August 21, 2002

A witch-hunt for UPC: News coverage of UPC, a cable company, similarly to Slovenské telekomunikácie coverage, is single-sided almost everywhere. This is corroborated by a headline in Pravda "UPC has broken an agreement with the civic activists" („UPC porušila dohodu s občianskymi aktivistami“). Says who?
The civic activists, of course. UPS disagrees. So why does the news article headline agree with one party? The author was not able to avoid subjective evaluative words, such as "[UPC]...continues to bully its clients."
August 22, 2002

A day with Fico: SME has decided to spend a day of the election campaign with the party leaders. Today's profile of Róbert Fico is rather negative (and satirical), unlike the profile of Mikuláš Dzurinda from a week ago. Fico is given less space (no interview) and of four photos, three portray him in a negative light (Fico's poster in a dust bin, two protests against SMER at a rally). On the contrary, Dzurinda's photos were more promotional (with Peter Šťastný, Ľubo Višňovský, Béla Bugár, by the car, indulging in sports).
September 2, 2002

How Slovak Telecom (ST) keeps its promises: is the subject of a SME article. From a secret contract, the author brings to light the undertakings of Deutsche Telekom, co-owner of ST, and informs of the investments in Slovakia, which, as it seems, will not meet the expectations. I find the publishing of such a privatisation contract to be in public interest, but it would be worthwhile to find out, why it was a secret contract – some good grounds might be found (or maybe not). In principle, the problem of the article is the absence of the reaction of the government representatives, especially of Ivan Mikloš, who is currently responsible for the telecommunications sector. After all, it was the State selling ST and signing the contract and it is still the majority owner. Why has it not been given space in the article?
September 2, 2002

Childbirths in water: are said to be popular, informs Pravda. The only article source is – surprise surprise! – the head physician of the maternity hospital, which practices such childbirths. And what do mothers have to say? None have been approached. The article looks like hidden advertising of one head physician.
September 3, 2002

A case or not?: SME reports on the alleged speculations with the money of the National Property Fund by its representatives under Mečiar's government. It follows from the article that this is the suspicion of the police and criminal proceedings have probably not been started. Therefore, I am questioning the value of this piece of information. However, the headline takes the suspicion for fact – "They had no government bonds, it was leverage." In the article, the two persons accused were not given any space for reaction. The headline of an article on debt restitution "The repayment of Russian debt is not

transparent“ („Splácanie ruského dlhu je nepriehľadné“), is also subjective. However, this is claimed only by one person, Alexander Duleba. My colleague, Andrej Salner, brought the following headline to my attention: “The NGOs want to control the income of political parties”. This headline is also misleading – as it concerns only one organisation of the whole body of NGOs. As Andrej says, “this is as if the headline read that the business community wants to sell roller bearings....”
September 12, 2002

How to get rich in HZDS: Today, SME brings to light the scandal in HZDS (alleged asset looting of DMD Holding). Again, this is a case, which is still under investigation and SME got it from its secret sources. And because elections are looming, I would be especially careful with bringing such cases to light. The motivation of the police is clear – they are under pressure to demonstrate the achievements of Dzurinda’s cabinet. The article takes the findings of the investigators for facts embedded in stone and this opinion is presented right in the headline (“How people got rich in HZDS”). It would have sufficed to state these findings without the reporters commenting on them and to leave it to the reader to make his/her own opinion. To me, like to others, the case is pretty clear (like that of Lexa), but I see no reason why journalists should decide for me in news reporting. In no time – partly thanks to the media – no one will take courts seriously and journalists will judge people by the materials they get from them. No one will take presumption of innocence seriously. True, the work of courts is not always perfect and justice often suffers. Did people from HZDS get rich on DMD Holding? I’ll be happy to read the journalist’s opinion in the opinion column.
September 13, 2002

Asset skimming at the National Property Fund?: Just like SME some days ago, Pravda reports on the police investigation of an alleged asset skimming at the National Property Fund under Mečiar’s government. Again, we will not learn why the information is so important now: is it because it’s a breakthrough in the investigation, is the investigation drawing to a close, is there a new witness, or is it because the elections are looming? The article claims that the police refuse to comment on that. So, where did Pravda get the information from (except from SME, which will not be given credit for it)? From an anonymous source from NPF, i.e. from an institution with clearly political interests. Pravda quotes some documents, which are not further detailed, and therefore, their credibility is questionable. In addition, some quoted allegations tell us nothing: is it fraud when a company with a book value of SKK 109 mill. is sold for SKK 9 mill? Book value has nothing to do with market value. Also, the damage of NPF is referred to in various ways. In the introduction, one learns about “hundreds of millions of crowns”. The mysterious source says that the Fund lost “over two billions crowns” in securities transactions. In conclusion, the source - the well-informed individual, that is - refers to the Fund claims of “almost 10 billion crowns”, which is direct loss in practical terms. Apparently, the reaction of the principal accused, Milan Reháč, former NPF president, is not of any interest to the readers, so why present it. After all, everything’s perfectly clear.
September 17, 2002

A strong crown: “The crown had strengthened before the elections“ („Koruna deň pred voľbami posilnila“), reads the headline of a SME article. Actually, it is the replica of the reporter’s otherwise good article from yesterday’s edition. Its placement on the first page of today’s issue sounds like pro-government election propaganda. Moreover, the news peg - this modest gain in the exchange rate by about 0.6 per cent is a common and rather dull piece of market information.
September 20, 2002

Communists (KSS) in Parliament: Last Friday, the Slovak Press Watch commented on the election supplement in SME as follows:

“Although SME claims that it has selected the political parties by their significance and the readers’ polls, I miss KSS and SNS in the supplement. Especially KSS and its agenda are very little known to the general public. Which issues will it support and which not, if it gets in Parliament? Its votes may prove valuable in various disputes.”

While KSS was included in the survey of Trend weekly economic programmes as early as August, SME was reserved in covering the party during the campaign and for a change, Pravda did not cover it at all. Election supplements of the two dailies did not inform about the communists, as opposed to SDA and SDĽ (in SME daily, OKS was not covered either), i.e. political parties, which ended up with poorer polls than KSS, according to the polls carried out during the campaign. SME at least published an interview with KSS leader and covered two of their rallies. Pravda did nothing. Although as early as September 6, Pravda published an article under the headline “The most recent polls: will communists also succeed?” (“Posledné prieskumy: uspejú aj komunisti?”), it included the leaders of SDA and SDĽ and not of KSS in its pre-election interviews.

September 23, 2002

Financial sharks: A SME article on the suspicion of asset looting in RIF Fund refers to Penta, Istrokapitál, and J&T companies as "financial sharks" (without quotation marks). Is this an economic term or a popular label? Why not apply the same attribute to [finance] minister Hajnovič in an article placed next to it? Apparently, this is a journalist's subjective opinion - in news reporting...
September 25, 2002

What got out of the physicians' control: SME covers the case of a woman from Prešov dying at childbirth. In the second sentence it is said that: "the labour and its consequences... got out of the medical staff control." This is what the family of the dead patient claims, but the official investigation of the case has just been started. Hence, the reporter implants his own conclusion into the news.
September 30, 2002

How to conduct a preconceived interview: A good example is offered by Pravda. An interview with František Chmelár, chairman of the Slovak Olympic Committee, was subjectively headlined: "Chmelár pretends that he does not dance with the politicians" („Chmelár sa tvári, že s politikmi netancuje"), and the author added the following introductory part:

"A letter to the Prime Minister, however, not from the inhabitants of [satirical] Horný Výplach, but from the chairman of the Slovak Olympic Committee, turned out to be the sensational item on the agenda of the Sunday's General Meeting of the SOC ..."

Question one: "What made you write to the Prime Minister?"

Then the last question and Chmelár's answer are not surprising to me: „The SOC does not enjoy the best image either – why's that?"

"It is also thanks to you, some journalists, who seriously damage it. You are biased, you do not want to see what's done well. The only thing you want to see are problems and you make up various cases. You haven't reported on our Olympic training. All you have written was that Ďurišinová left the plenary session crying."

Indeed, the SOC may be in serious problems, but after an interview conducted by a journalist, who knew all the answers beforehand, I kind of begin to like Chmelár. My liking for him may be unfounded, who knows. Thanks to one journalist.
November 19, 2002

How to write about prices: A week ago, a Pravda journalist wrote that: "Cheap pork is hard to get" („Lacné bravčové kúpite málokde"). Today, when prices have fallen by 5 per cent, the headline of his article reads: "Pork sales are detrimental to pig breeders". It seems that higher meat prices are a problem and cheaper meat is also a problem. Of course, it applies to various social groups, but why does the journalist always look at the worse side? The best thing would be to look at several sides together. The author of today's article does not make a single mention of the benefit for the buyers.
November 27, 2002

Makeshift budgets of regional towns: "Without [approved] budgets, municipalities are not at risk" („Mestám bez rozpočtov nič nehrozí"), informs Pravda in an article on regional towns – only three out of eight have approved their next year's budgets. Pravda journalists jumped into the conclusion in the headline by asking just the representatives of the municipalities, the budgets of which were not approved... Municipalities with approved budgets were not given a chance. How then, can the reader make his/her opinion?
December 5, 2002

Devolution of hospitals: The reporter of Pravda commences the article as follows: "Some municipalities are likely to refuse to take-over medical facilities, which they should be running instead of the State as of January. To date, the government has not been able to re-capitalise them."

Fine, but what evidence is there at hand that would support her assertion that the municipalities will probably not take-over the hospitals?

"It can't be ruled out", said [vice-chairman of the Association of Slovak Towns and Municipalities].

I see. Well, then the article could have been phrased just as well that the municipalities were likely to take-over the hospitals despite the debt....
January 7, 2002

A veiled statue in front of the presidential palace: SME published a biased, evaluative article on the request of the Office of the President to remove one statue from the presidential garden. The request was quoted as second-hand information, but no time was found to approach the authors of the request. In addition, the article sounds rather illogical. On the one hand, the author of the article claims that "everyone has the right of individual taste", on the other hand, he compares the dismantling of the statue to the communist ban on the arts.

February 13, 2002

Who intercepts who: I find the coverage by journalists of the new cases of alleged phone tapping dubious and irresponsible. Firstly, I don't know why the alleged transcriptions of telephone calls should be published before their authenticity has been checked. On Saturday, a SME reporter wrote an article, in which part of a telephone conversation with names (including the entrepreneur Badžgoň) was made public, with no evidence given that it was not a counterfeit. Pravda did the same the following Tuesday. Yesterday, SME was able to authenticate 3 of 25 transcriptions, however, they were all telephone calls of no relevance. Despite that, SME published excerpts from 5 alleged telephone calls, however, none of them had been verified by the journalists. Today, Pravda has published the fourth authenticated phone call, with the director of the National Labour Office, Šumný. This gets interesting, in it, he and entrepreneur Badžgoň were believed to have haggled over the purchase of a building. The journalists did not even bother to explain, whether that was a problem, whether inviting public bids was mandatory. However, if a suspicion of a collusive activity is raised, suspicion is cast on Šumný and his use of public funds. Pravda tacitly bypasses that. Instead, it publishes another transcription, and, as usual, it is not authenticated.

Secondly, Badžgoň as a person "close to SDKÚ". SME said that on Saturday, and Pravda followed on Tuesday (its article was published under the headline: "Tapping: this time, it concerns SDKÚ"). If that's the case, the reader was not given any explanation, according to whom or based on what he was close to the party, how I am to understand that. To my big surprise, interviews with Badžgoň are published both in Pravda and SME today; he was asked by the journalists about his relationship with SDKÚ. The entrepreneur did not assert his exclusive "closeness" to SDKÚ (he stated, he had contacts with a lot of politicians), and in their counter-questions, the journalists did not present any evidence of his closeness to the party. The main thing is that they had "known it" before making the interview with him. Pravda even poses a question: "You are referred to as an entrepreneur, who is close to SDKÚ. Do you find yourself to be close to it?" A day earlier, the same journalist presented it as a fact in his article and this time, he pretends that it was someone else making the reference!!

Thirdly, in yesterday's article, SME, apart from repetitively misspelling Badžgoň's name, stated that the transcriptions of the alleged telephone calls "have been sent by someone to two news media and several politicians". Today, it writes that those transcriptions "have been given to SME and some politicians." Someone is either telling fibs, or not explaining or correcting his/her incorrect information.

February 17, 2003

The interception of Badžgoň's phone calls: Again, SME is not treating its readers fairly today. It writes: "Badžgoň is an entrepreneur close to SDKÚ and from the transcriptions, the authenticity of which has been verified by four individuals so far..."

...and here comes more:

"In the transcriptions, Badžgoň implies a close link between the economic and political lobby groups..."

We are still not clear on what "close to SDKÚ" means. The authenticity of the transcriptions as a whole, as induced by the author, has not been verified by anyone. Of the total of 25, four transcriptions have been verified. Those transcriptions, in which "a close link" is implied, have not been verified by anyone and anything.

February 26, 2003

Slandering a company: SME gives space to three anonymous individuals, who complain about their Irish employer taking them in and not paying their wages. Where is the reaction of the company it concerns? Nowhere. How can we be so sure that these individuals are not making up stories?

August 5, 2003

Blair's doubts about Iraq: Yesterday, Pravda published brief TASR news: "Blair doubted Iraqi weapons."

LONDON – British Prime Minister Tony Blair misled the general public; two weeks before the war in Iraq, he had admitted that Iraq did not have usable weapons of mass destruction. Robin Cook, former foreign

minister, claimed it in his book, from which some excerpts were published in yesterday's The Sunday Times."

It was similar in SME, where ČTK information was cited:
"Blair off-the-record: Iraq has no chemical weapons."

"LONDON – Before the war in Iraq, British Prime Minister Tony Blair had admitted in private conversations that Iraq had no chemical weapons fit for a rapid deployment. However, in public, he declared the opposite. This is claimed by ex-minister of foreign affairs, Robin Cook, in his book, from which excerpts were published in yesterday's edition of The Sunday Times daily. Blair's former foreign minister wrote that a lot of the cabinet members criticised the country's involvement in the war, and he even compared their action to a mutiny. Cook left the cabinet shortly after the war was started, since he opposed it."

The above articles talk about a serious allegation. Where is Blair's reaction to it? OK, the journalists did not make it over the weekend. But Yesterday at noon, BBC news reported that Blair deemed Cook's allegations absurd. However, Slovak newspapers remain silent, after all, who would want to know what the incriminated person had to say...

October 10, 2003

Sugar was wholesome: announces a SME headline: "Sugar kept in the State tangible reserves sold by Jednota co-operative was of good enough quality, claims the State Veterinary and Food Administration, after an analysis was conducted. Laboratory tests made at Jednota's request reported identical result. "We shall sue the association of sugar producers", claims Adrián Ďurček, chairman of Jednota Board of Directors. On October 2, the association made a statement that dirty sugar of inferior quality was sold by Jednota. Mlyn Šurany producer is also deliberating upon bringing an action against the association."

The author is not quite innocent: he took the statement of the association for his own and in the first sentence of his article, he communicated to SME readers that

"Old and inferior-quality sugar sold again in Slovakia."
October 18, 2003

THE DESIGNATION OF EXPERT NAMES AND SOURCES

The spirit of articles depends on the selection of the so-called experts, on whose opinions the journalists base the explanation of the situation. The selection and designation of these experts is subjective and it can be easily abused. The use of anonymous sources should be handled with special care; with them, the reader's chances to learn about the trustworthiness of these individuals are slim.

Experts on everything: It has become a useful habit of the journalists to approach all kind of experts to comment on various topics, as it enhances the credibility of their articles. However, a frequent weakness is that the reader knows nothing about the employer or the ideological focus of these experts. Yesterday, Pravda approached "politologist" Svetozár Krno. Today, SME quotes "politologist" Grigorij Mesežnikov and "analyst" Miroslav Švec. Where are these individuals employed, what are their books or projects about, or, under what ideological labels do their positions fall, as a rule? What makes them experts – is the fact that they have been given space to present their opinions in the media?
September 6, 2002

Judge in political lawsuits: SME informs that a judge who released the alleged boss of Nitra mafia a few days ago, had been sending political dissidents to prison prior to 1989. Want evidence? An anonymous source (reportedly one of the convicted accomplices) and unspecified "information of SME daily" – is that the unnamed sources, or rather some "hard" data, minutes of meetings, a judgment, etc.?? The judge refused to comment on it. Isn't the threshold for the verification of the information contained in this article way too low?
September 14, 2002

Who will be in the new government: Pravda continues to speculate about the set-up of the new government, without making a distinction between verified and unverified sources. So, contrary to what yesterday's issue claimed, Zuzana Martináková would no longer be in charge of the social affairs, instead, she might be appointed deputy speaker of Parliament, and Ivan Šimko might be appointed justice minister rather than the minister of the interior. Daniel Lipšic might not be appointed justice minister and the new economic minister would be Jozef Banáš and not Robert Nemcsics. Why all these changes overnight? Is it the work of new anonymous sources, or have the old ones been mistaken? An explanation is not given. Is Pravda pulling the reader's leg? Or has someone engaged gullible journalists in political complots? SME has given up its everyday speculations, and the article by Roman Pataj on coalition negotiations is factual and clear to everyone.
September 25, 2002

Golian's debt: Pravda journalists continue to investigate the past business activities of the state secretary of the ministry of agriculture Ján Golian, which is good. Pitifully, they publish things they have not checked. Today, they inform that Golian owes money to his former employees (allegedly confirmed by court in some cases), and also to the labour office. And the proof? Three anonymous sources!!! Needless to say, that court decisions and labour office subsidies are facts the journalists can find out using formal channels.
October 19, 2002.

Alleged Dzurinda's classmate: In a table on the new police officials appointed by minister Palko, Pravda writes that Jozef Križalkovič (new head of inspection) is "allegedly a secondary school class-mate of Prime Minister Dzurinda". Allegedly? Is it really a problem to check that? What are journalists for? These "allegeds" are at the root of many made-up scandals. If the journalist has not checked on a piece of information, which is easily verifiable, let him not write about it now and leave it for the next day, to allow for time for checking.
October 30, 2002

Travelling to hospitals: "The patients may have to travel 50 kilometres to get to the hospital" ("Do nemocnice ľudia možno pocestujú aj 50 kilometrov"), reads the headline of an article in Pravda. Want evidence? This would be so, if, for instance, Nová Baňa hospital was closed down and the nearest hospital is said to be in Žiar nad Hronom, which corresponds to those 50 kilometres. Who has suggested closing down the hospital at Nová Baňa? Nobody, according to the article. Is there a risk the hospital will be closed down? Its director does not indicate anything to that effect either. The article does not present more examples of the closing down of hospitals. I find those 50 kilometres completely made-up.

In another Pravda article, a professional opponent of the draft laws of the health minister Zajac, is Juraj

Štofko, "head physician of the Department of Neurology at the University Hospital in Bratislava". The reporter forgot to remind the readers that, by coincidence, he was also the shadow health minister for SMER, the opposition party. His criticism may be competent, but it is also political, for sure. Once again, this is an undisclosed conflict of interests; apparently, it does not bother the journalist and the reader is taken in one more time.

November 7, 2002

Social reforms: In last week's Domino fórum, a journalist wrote an article about the problems of the current social system. The article draws on two sources: the state secretary of the labour minister Beblavý and "sociologist" Radičová. But she is at the same time an external advisor to the minister, an information which the readers should be told. Hence, the article draws only on pro-governmental information sources.

December 18, 2002

Cloning the humans: In the US, an animated discussion is underway in the journalistic community, whether the news on Clonaid and its alleged first child cloning should have been published or not, because the Raelian sect and their Clonaid are doubtful. Initially, Clonaid had SME's full confidence (refer to article "The first human clone born - „Narodil sa prvý ľudský klon"), although the articles that followed were more sceptical. Pravda was sceptical right from the beginning, although, on the other hand, the news was printed in bold letters as the leading article of the day...

January 6, 2002

The reform of the courts: "The public fears the slowing down of court decisions" („Ľudia sa obávajú spomalenia rozhodovania súdov"), reports Pravda. The first sentence of the articles reads:

"The judges and citizens do not believe that the measure of the justice ministry, which proposes cutting the number of courts as of next year, will speed up court decisions."

This is followed by the statements of four persons, three chairmen of courts, which are to be closed down and one political representative of a region, in which the regional court is to be abolished. These are apparently individuals with the biggest personal interest to oppose the reform. It is good to listen to them, but why pretend that they represent the opinions of the "citizens and judges" as a whole??

April 14, 2003

Plagiarism of foreign sources: Kateřina Zachovalová wrote an interesting story for the internet magazine on Eastern Europe Transitions Online (PS: In the past, I wrote a few articles for Transitions Online and even currently, I translate for them selected articles from Slovak press); the story is about a correspondent of MF Dnes, who covered the recent Iraq conflict, and now and then used the citation or situation description of other journalists without quoting the source. It is apparent from the article that such methods are not unknown to other Czech journalists.

And also to Slovak ones - that's what my experience is telling me. Let me quote an example from yesterday - Jana Mikušová from SME:

JERUSALEM – The Palestinian self-rule and the Israeli government did not come to an agreement last night on two other Palestinian towns, from which the soldiers of the Jewish state should be withdrawn...In the Wednesday night meeting, Dahlan refused the Israeli request to disarm the Palestinian militants. "The disarmament of the militants is an Israeli concept and we refuse it", he stated and announced that the self-rule authorities would not arrest any extremists before the truce came to an end...

Signed by Jana Mikušová. Did she really write it from Jerusalem and did she attend the press conference? If not, where is the information source?

August 2, 2003.

Letters: Jana Mikušová from SME reacts to the missing information source of her article from last week, about which I wrote on Saturday:

"I should like to explain your objection of August 2, 2003 to my article in SME daily. The article was undersigned the standard way, using the abbreviations of my name and the agency, which is customary, when I cover locations I have not visited in person. It is not my fault that in the subsequent editing process, the article was undersigned using my full name. This has happened without my personal involvement. I should also like to say that I find the word plagiarism too strong, since I quoted the agency source in my original text."

Yes, my apology, it is my fault that I personalised this responsibility, because several explanations were possible. Irrespective of that, it remains plagiarism, no matter how it all happened. Today, I see no correction in SME, so I don't have the slightest idea, whether it is taken seriously or not. By the way, Reuters was the agency whose work was not attributed in the article.
August 5, 2003

Anonymous sources from other media: It is risky to publish a piece of information on the basis of anonymous sources. Even riskier is to take over such information from other media, because I know nothing about the way, in which the information was obtained, I don't have the editor in question under control. The biggest risk is when information I didn't personally verify is taken from the medium which is politically influenced and about which I write articles how these journalists deceive their audience.

Therefore, I'm very surprised that SME has the guts to take over TV Markiza information (through TASR news agency), which Markiza claimed to be taken from two anonymous sources, and place it on the first page... (Pravda also covers the information, although it was cut out from the online version...)
August 20, 2003

Kaník about unemployment: SME writes: "Minister Kaník projects a dramatic drop in unemployment next year." "I find it realistic that we will reach a normal European level of around 10 per cent", he says.

Apparently, this citation (like others in the article) was taken from an interview the labour minister gave to SME last Thursday. The exact citation of the answer to the question about the future development of unemployment is as follows:

"I am sure that the trend will continue. In any economy, the cycle will reverse with the coming of autumn and winter, and a transitional moderate increase in unemployment may be expected. As long as we adhere to the current policy, it is far from reaching its level from last January. In the year that will follow, we will hit the lower notches. I find it realistic that we will reach a normal European level of around 10 per cent. This, however, takes more time."

So, those 10 per cent is not to be expected next year, it takes more time. Checking on politicians, their statements and promises is one thing...but what about not misguiding the public by tampering with the context, in which the statements were made?
August 26, 2003

What the physicians, economists, beekeepers have to say...: Pravda writes that according to Slovak beekeepers, the honey sold in shops is a fraud in most cases. Then it cites one beekeeper with such an opinion. The author's colleague in a different article cites the opinion of one physician, who is critical of the drug prescription limits and the journalist states that: "this opinion is shared by the majority of physicians". In a discussion on the pension reform versus early adoption of EURO, SME journalists write that: "according to some economists, NBS [Central Bank] position to favour the adoption of EURO over the reforms is short-sighted" and then one economist is cited.

If I have several similar opinions, why not use them in the article with short citations of the sources, to make the article sound more credible? I'd like to be informed, if the sources do not want to be named. Because, this leaves the way open for a third option, namely, that the second source asserting the criticism of the first has not been found...Or, that the journalist advocates his/her own opinion without sufficient evidence.

What interests are advocated in reforms and by whom: I should add one more thing to my note from yesterday – making a distinction between private and public interests. It is in the interest of domestic beekeepers to state that foreign honey is of low quality, because it is competition for them. Physicians will not want drug prescription limits, because they may be motivated to prescribe as much as possible by pharmaceutical companies. Domestic bankers are interested in postponing Slovakia's accession to the eurozone, because banks make profits on foreign exchange risk management (and, by coincidence, they are keen to exert pressure on the big capitalisation pension pillar, because banks are oftentimes linked with asset management companies).

Of course, this does not mean that the above groups never support public interest, however, the stronger the private interest, the greater the risk that they are speaking chiefly on their behalf. Therefore, it is not quite fair to have someone with a strong interest comment on a point of dispute. I would either name their interest, or give space to other sources with different and as limited interests as possible (we all have some interests).

In fact one could write a fairly good article on/analysis of the individual reforms: each will have its winners and losers, from the age, professional, or social perspectives. This would be a good service to the readers - to guide them through the labyrinth of opinions.

August 27, 2003

Who is Daniel Pipes?: František Šebej from Domino fórum has written an article on the history of Jerusalem (historically, it says, the city belongs only to the Jews and Christians, and not also Muslims as has been claimed by them) and he refers to Daniel Pipes, "an expert on Middle East", as his main source. However, the description of this gentleman by Šebej is not even-handed. Pipes is a pro-izraeli hard-liner and a conservative, whose idea of a solution of the crisis is a military defeat of Palestinians by the Israeli army. Šebej has the right to cite sources, which he deems relevant, but it is always good to designate them appropriately to the reader.

October 6, 2003

THE MISSING CONTEXT OF THE NEWS

The context is very important for the sake of the usefulness of the information: past developments of the subject, how it relates to other subjects, and based on what facts it is perceived as a problem, etc. Tampering with the context is also a very frequent sight.

Political parties vs criminality: Pravda reports on what the election programmes have to say regarding crime. Surprisingly enough, an article, which is to cover crime, does not contain a single figure on crime statistics and its trends and detention rates in Slovakia (a table next to the text with no citation of the source shows just a figure on the number of convicted persons, the occupancy of prisons, and the cost for the state, which runs them). If the reader is not provided the basic data on the current situation, how can he/she evaluate the solution proposals?

September 14, 2002

Negativism more than anything else: The journalists render a very important service to the general public in that they take a critical view of politicians, entrepreneurs, the NGOs, and the entire society. The Slovak Press Watch has high respect for this role and fosters the journalists in their endeavours. However, criticism should be based on verified facts and also their effort to understand the wider context. Given the fact that negative information sells well, sometimes, the newspapers bring unfounded criticism. An article from Pravda serves a good example. "The State loses on propane-butane tax" („Štát stráca na dani z propán-butánu"), reports the headline. In the article, we learn that the loss on taxes is due to the fact that the taxes are way too low (lower than in the EU). Hence, the State loses money (i.e. all of us), because a certain group of motorists pays little. The journalistic interpretation of tax issues is: low taxes - scandal, the State (meaning the citizen) loses money, which could be otherwise used in schools and hospitals; high taxes - scandal, the economy is impeded, the citizens have little money left after paying taxes, they hardly have any money for bread.

Both views of the taxes are right in a way. A wider perception of the context would help to tell, which taxes are too high and which too low: what the purpose of the tax is, what its ramifications upon the economy are, the social targets, concrete benefits of the expenditure, and so forth. Excise duty on propane-butane is environment-driven, therefore, an optimal tax rate should be in existence (which is almost for sure different from that in the EU). Instead of a populist statement about the losses incurred by the State, a discussion on its optimal rate compared to the taxes on alternative fuels would be more appropriate. The author painstakingly collated the data for the reader, but he was unable to transpose all this interesting information into a meaningful article. An optimal propane-butane tax may be lower, higher, or as it is in Slovakia now. Based on what does the author assume that it is positively higher?

P.S. The journalist computed the tax loss easily: If the tax is about twice as high, the State will collect about twice as much on taxes. This is possible, but by increasing the taxes the State could also collect less than it has so far, or even much more. Why opt for the easiest solution? The journalist may have been influenced by an anonymous source, which is suggesting this to him in the article. In my opinion, such calculations must be based on a more profound study and not on the opinion of one person.

September 17, 2002

Little or much: In his article on the number of livestock in Slovakia, a SME journalist reports that: "the consumption of beef in the country is... low over a long-term". What does it mean? It depends, for whom? Compared to the EU, Czech Republic, or Slovakia in 1948? The headline in TREND "Only a few new cars sold in August", shows a similar problem.

September 25, 2002

Insurance fraud: Pravda published an interesting article on travel insurance fraud. Unfortunately, the basic assertion in the text and the headline ("Insurance fraud on the increase" - „Poistné podvody sa množia"), had no back-up in figures or citations. Is it really on the increase? The article "Apples increasingly sold in hypermarkets" („Za jablkami čoraz viac do hypermarketov"), is faced with a similar problem. Again, no citations, no figures. In addition, the author believes that currently, apples are sold at "rather high prices". Relative to what? Other Pravda headlines are also biased: "Limited funds for the Slovak rural regions" („Na slovenský vidiek ide málo peňazi" - this is an opinion of one civic association) and "Only four independents in Parliament" („Do parlamentu sa dostali len štyria nestrániči" - what does it mean "only?" What has been the situation up until now? Are 100 independents the right figure for such a political institution as the Slovak Parliament?).

September 25, 2002

Self-governing lobby: The introductory part of a Pravda article on the draft of the state budget for the regions reads as follows:

"Next year, the self-governing regions will not have enough money to run secondary schools, residential homes for old people, and theatres. There will not be enough funds for electricity, heat, water. Problems are also envisaged in transport. In the state budget draft, the government has allocated limited funds for self-government and almost every region is deficient of about a half billion crowns. Improvement of the assets is unthinkable. They will have to struggle along."

How can Pravda editors be so sure that the self-governing regions will be deficient of funds and that they will have to "struggle along"? They have been told so by the self-governing regions, of course. And how can we tell that they will have little money? They were just given less than what they had asked for. And how can we tell that what they've asked for is really what they need? Simply, the journalists present a biased opinion of the self-governing regions. The word journalists ought to be in quotes.
November 13, 2002

Duray's impact on SMK: SME writes about an interview given by MP Miklós Duray, member of SMK, to Domino fórum, and about the reactions of other SMK officials to it. In conclusion of the article, it is said that:

"Duray belongs to the radical wing in SMK and he enjoys a big support of the electorate. His leaving could drain off part of the SMK electorate votes."

A big support? According to the election results, Duray had 10.6 per cent of preferential votes (placed as the 5th best party candidate). For instance, Bugár was given preferential votes by 64 per cent of SMK electorate and Csáky almost by 44 per cent of the SMK electorate. It is unclear, what impact his leaving the party would have – it might drain off the radicals, but it might as well attract the moderate electorate, the Slovaks inclusive. One way or other, since this is a news article, the opinion should have been attributed to somebody, or, it should not have been there at all, especially, if it is the journalist's unfounded statement.
December 5, 2002

The price of cars: On Thursday, SME published the following headline:

"Cars will not be cheaper, although VAT has fallen and the crown has strengthened" („Autá nezlacnejú, hoci klesla DPH a koruna zosilnela").

Today, i.e. two days later, a new headline covering the same subject has been published:

"The sellers don't know what the car prices will be" („Koľko budú stáť autá, predajcovia ešte nevedia").

Nothing happened in two days, just two different authors interviewed various car sellers and neither of them did it comprehensively enough. In the latter case, just Skoda car sellers were interviewed, that is, the market leader. Why has that not been mentioned in the headline upfront?
January 4, 2003

Mass lay-offs: The journalists from SME have prepared a more extensive material on the plans of several companies to dismiss redundant manpower; labour offices believe that "almost 20,000 persons will be put out of work in the next few months." In January, there was a mass dismissal of 1,200 people, claim the journalists. What I direly miss is the context:

a) Last year, 250,000 persons were put out of work and, in parallel, a little more Slovaks found new jobs, so that unemployment dropped moderately;

b) This January, 44,000 job seekers were put on files, and about 25,000 found new jobs.

This is just as an example. Those 20,000 dismissed persons do not seem to be such a hefty number, if scattered over the months that follow, don't you think? And while 44,000 persons were put out of work in January, of them, massively dismissed were those 1,200. Fair enough.
February 27, 2003

Prior to the strike on Iraq:

"The adopted text does not assume a second resolution, which the observers take for a clear victory of the USA, which has reserved the right for a unilateral military action."

A news article "The resolution has set new and more stringent conditions for Iraq" („Rezolúcia stanovila Iraku nové, tvrdšie podmienky“), published in Pravda, November 9, 2002 (a day after the adoption of UN resolution No. 1441)

"There will be war in Iraq, Bush bypassed the UN" („Vojna v Iraku bude, Bush obišiel OSN“), Pravda, March 18, 2003

Who was it that Bush bypassed, when, according to Pravda of last November, he did not have to bypass anyone?

Similar controversies are found in the Pravda commentary by Boris Latta. He writes that by its decision, the USA contribute to the disintegration of the UN:

"The emerging disintegration of the only international system under UN umbrella will not let anyone to rest appeased. The Americans, who have assumed the role of the world's policemen, resolutely banged their fists on the table, and what has worked so far, may be history."

What made them bang their fists on the table, if they claimed that Resolution No. 1441 gave them right to a military intervention? Even Latta admitted that in an interview for TA3 television on November 9:

„..this is a resolution, which is very stringent and any diversion from it on the part of Baghdad in complying with it is sanctioned by war“.

and, further

"should, by any chance and in any way, the inspectors...find that the Iraqi do not comply [with the Resolution] and they report that to the Security Council, then the Security Council needn't take any position and it will be deemed one of the grounds, on which war against Iraq will be waged".

And lastly, today's headline in Pravda: "Dzurinda assented to Bush" („Dzurinda pritakal Bushovi“), is to create an impression that Dzurinda does not have an opinion of his own and that he does not advocate Slovak interests. It is possible, but the article does not indicate that in any way. Such a statement would require an analysis or commentary. It is more likely that Pravda smuggles its own opinions in news reporting, which is not fair.

March 18, 2003

Panic spreads: TREND did not avoid writing about SARS virus:

"Some economists compare the impact of SARS virus spreading especially in this region to a financial crisis, which was a blow for the Asian economy between 1997 and 1998. ...Lehman Brothers financial company has cut this year's projection of the GDP growth in Asia, save for Japan, from 5.7 to 5.5. per cent. The economic growth estimates for Singapore and Hong Kong have been cut by a half percentage point. Goldman Sachs has cut Hong Kong's projection figures from 3 to 1.7 per cent. Thirdly, this year, Morgan Stanley expects 4.5 per cent growth in Eastern Asia, Japan excluded, instead of the originally projected 5.1 per cent."

OK, but between 1997 and 1998, Asia's growth dropped by 2-3 percentage points overall, and in several countries (Thailand, Indonesia, Korea) by as much as 10-20 points. No reputable economist would compare these two facts, or he/she would mean it only metaphorically (as The Economist did).

April 22, 2003

The frequent flyer bonuses: SME has published an article on the use of the frequent flyer bonuses by members of Parliament. A great subject (I myself suggested it past August), pity, that it does not cover the entire state administration – it is likely, that one would find many more flyer bonuses there. What are the rules at the ministries?

Besides, the article also jumps into unsupported conclusions:

"Another problem connected with the flights of our MPs is that they're oftentimes overcharged. SME daily has managed to get hold of an air ticket of one MP flying from Vienna to London. Although the trip had been planned well ahead of time, it cost almost twenty thousand [crowns]; had he booked the air ticket early enough, the price could have been more than a half less."

Oftentimes overcharged??? A statement made on the basis of one and only flight ticket?

The fact that the flight ticket of MP Banáš is published by SME (not online), that it is compared with the prices of other similar flight tickets, that SME writes about overcharging at late booking, and eventually, the posing of a rhetorical question, whether Banáš was late with the booking to earn more bonus points for a more expensive flight makes the situation even worse; all this is done without interviewing Banáš or without approaching the travel agency it concerns, to find out about the trip in question.

On the first page of SME, the author also writes:

"It is said behind the scenes that some MPs use these bonuses for private flights. Last year, for such an abuse of the government funds, nine complaints were lodged against MPs in Germany."

But not for "such an abuse", mind you. Our and German MPs cannot be compared, because, as the journalist explains it in a separate article -

"German law, much like Slovak law, does not spell out the use of bonuses; however, the MPs undersign a personal commitment that he, who travels on business or on the basis of his mandate, will give his collected miles at the disposal of Bundestag."

June 30, 2003

The snares of summer: "Wasps and hornets are more dangerous now, they're overpopulated" („Osy a sršne sa premnožili, sú nebezpečnejšie"), announces a Pravda headline. Indeed, the author states that in the first sentence of his article, but no evidence is given:

"Recently, a tragic case has been reported in Karlovy Vary, where a woman died of a bee sting. Dangerous insects have taken a fancy to human dwellings. In Trenčín, hornets have built a nest in a dwelling house in the city centre...Daily, one or two stung patients are treated at Trenčín hospital. Four adults and three children had to be admitted to the hospital...In the pavilion of the internal department of this hospital, wasps have a nest by the window frame in one of the wards. On Saturday, they even stung the head physician of the internal department Marián Kaščák..."

This is all nice, but where is the comparison showing that this year, the insects are overpopulated and more dangerous than before? Nowhere.

August 27, 2003

Here comes another price increase – or is it the same one?: "Pork will be more expensive, bread will follow" („Zdražie bravčové, neskôr aj chlieb"), claims the leading headline in Pravda. The author draws on the affirmations of farmers and producers, the minister of agriculture also expressed this opinion. However, the only cited retailer does not assert anything, he leaves it to the negotiations. The article begins as follows:

"In October, a kilo of pork will go up by six or as much as ten crowns. The prices of poultry, butter and hard cheese will also start moving. Bread will go up, the moment the mills will have used up their old flour inventory, which was estimated to last for three months after the harvest. The envisaged price increase, which has been resisted by retailers so far, is the outcome of a disastrous drought and poor crop, which have afflicted not just Slovakia, but also the whole of Europe."

So, retailers have been resisting the prices increases so far and why shouldn't they carry on doing it?? The author does not suggest an answer, although he should. On July 18, he wrote a similar article in Pravda entitled: "The price of beer is up, bread and pork will follow" („Po pive zdražie chlieb aj bravčové":

"After the beer price has gone up, the Slovaks will have to count with higher prices of bread, pork, and chicken. Pork is the first in line...Bread will also go up by a few crowns...The main reason for the prices of groceries going up is price increase on the Czech market, as a reaction to a disastrous drought..."

And – bread and pork prices didn't go up after all. Two months on, the journalist writes:

"In early October, the consumer may pay 5 or as much as 10 crowns more. This is the estimate made by Edita Ohrablová, director of the Association of Meat Packers. "We're endeavouring to increase the prices of pork purchased from the farmers, however, the retailers have been reluctant to accept higher prices", stated Ohrablová.... [According to the Bakeries' Association], in the past few months, bread should have been sold for 1 or as much as 1,50 crown more per kilo due to more expensive utilities and fuel. However, retailers have not agreed with price increase."

September 23, 2003

ANO vs KDH: The two political parties entered into a dispute over the law on special court and prosecution. A journalist from Pravda interpreted the duel as follows:

Yesterday – “Rusko’s alliance has yielded to Christian democrats” („Ruskova aliancia ustúpila kresťanským demokratom“)

“Rusko’s alliance has yielded to the claims of KDH minister Daniel Lipšic. After tedious disputes, the coalition was able to agree on the law on special court and prosecution...”

Today – “ANO has softened the law on special court” („ANO zmiernila zákon o špeciálnom súde“)

“Special prosecution and court, to be established as of May 1, will not vet politicians for the acts they committed prior to assuming the constitutional position. For instance, Pavol Rusko will be spared the investigation of the special authority in the case of the extortion of entrepreneur František Mojžiš. The proposal to curtail the powers of the special authority in the cases relating to politicians, has been made by ANO. In this fashion, ANO has conditioned its support of the law on special court and prosecutor...”

Who has yielded to whom? What about using the word “compromise” in one, balanced article?
October 23, 2003

BASIC MATH WATCH

Examples of mathematical errors:

How much do you pay for one Euro according to Pravda?: According to the published currency conversion table of the National Bank of Slovakia (NBS) you pay 41.73 Slovak Crowns. In the article about France Telecom one Euro costs 40 SKK ("...loan totalling EUR 9 billion – approximately SKK 360 billion."). In an article about farmers' subsidies one Euro equals 46.3 SKK ("...the amount of subsidies would total EUR 410 million, i.e. approximately SKK 19 billion."). Approximately, well ...
December 6, 2002

How the prices of bread increased according to Pravda: "One kilogram of bread costs four crowns more," reads a Pravda headline. However, the very first sentence of the article tells us something different:

"In the new year bread and milk is more expensive for Slovaks in most shops, while the price increases vary significantly according to the shop systems."

Two articles about the more expensive bread quote several sources: "reader from a village near Piešťany" – bread costs 3-4 SKK more, the Teta shop in Bratislava – bread costs 3-4 SKK more, Tesco in downtown Bratislava – price unchanged, Tesco hypermarket in Bratislava – price unchanged, Jednota in Nitra – price unchanged, Vamex in Košice – bread costs 2 SKK more.

Hence, what can we conclude? All in all, Pravda claims, that "a loaf of bread (one kilogram) costs 3-4 SKK more on average, as compared with December 2002..."

(While the Tesco examples should be the most important ones, since Tesco definitely has a bigger turnover than the other shops mentioned.)

January 3, 2002

Health care mathematics: "Patients will pay more than Minister Zajac expects," reads a headline in Pravda. Proof? According to Pravda Zajac said, that the new fees will increase the expenses of patients "by an average of 53 crowns monthly." By how much on average have the fees for patients really increased? The authors do not provide this information. They only mention two examples, where the increase represents 120 and 80 SKK respectively. However, it is not at all clear how this is related to Zajac's claim. Average is just what it says – average, for some the fees will grow more, for some less, what's the problem?

November 18, 2002

Prices of school lunch: The Pravda daily also announced, that "Pupils have more expensive meals in schools, since schools have increased prices." They have asked 14 people for the entire article, school directors, heads of regional education departments, or heads of school refectories. Out of those, if I'm counting correctly, 2 (that is TWO) have confirmed a price increase, 4 have not increased prices, but plan an increase for February or March and 8 (that is: EIGHT) of those questioned have not excluded the option to increase prices, however have not confirmed it either.

January 15, 2002

Car accident yesterday: According to SME "almost seventy cars," crashed, according to the caption to the main picture in Pravda there were "approximately seventy cars" and according to a headline in Pravda "76 cars crashed." Approximately 70 and even more approximately 80.

January 21, 2003

How time flies: Pravda writes:

"The strike of the railway workers will paralyse traffic for six hours next Wednesday. All trains in Slovakia will stop between three AM and six AM."

January 24, 2003

How many people will lose their jobs: "In the aluminium plant almost five hundred people will lose their jobs" reads a headline in the regional section of Pravda. In the article itself however the author writes that "they plan to dismiss more than 430 staff." The same, however abbreviated news is also in the economic section of Pravda, this time with the headline "Aluminium plant to dismiss more than 400 staff."

January 25, 2003

Basic math watch: Pravda quotes a news item from TASR with the headline "Almost a third of citizens trust Fico." [opposition politician] The relevant survey of MVK mentions 29.0. That is still closer to one fourth than to one third, isn't it?

May 28, 2003

Incomparable figures from EU referenda: are published by SME as well as by Pravda in tables on their front pages. Turnout is OK, however the problem is, that our statistical office has calculated the share of the yes and no votes out of the total votes cast, including the invalid votes, while other countries report yes and no votes out of the total valid votes cast, which is a figure slightly lower (therefore, unlike in Slovakia, their total sum of yes and no votes is 100 %). Either method is legitimate, however they should not be mixed together. And they have to be applied correctly. The allegation of Marek Chorvatovič of SME, that "77.3 per cent of those who voted, voted yes for EU accession" is false, exactly because it applies to people who voted and cast a valid vote. In other words, 75.6 per cent of those who voted, voted "yes".

June 16, 2003

Basic math watch: "The railways debt will cost everybody 10,000 crowns," reads the main headline of Pravda in an article, where the journalist writes:

"The state will pay as much as 48 billion crowns for the debts of both railway companies. Each citizen of Slovakia will have to contribute almost ten thousand crowns to improve the situation of the railways."

Almost, almost ... it's 8,900 SKK per capita. When Pravda wrote on Wednesday, that the minimum wage is to be increased by SKK 380, why didn't they round it up to SKK 500??

February 27, 2003

Basic math watch: The TREND weekly calculates:

...Despite their declarations that standards have been met, Slovnaft pays more and more for the environmental pollution. According to the District Office Bratislava II, in 2003 the oil refinery paid almost double the amount of the previous year. This is documented by payments for the first half of 2003 totalling 40 million crowns, while Slovnaft paid 54 million for the entire last year.

Well, it does not support the claim: $2 \cdot 40 = 80$ and $80/54 = 1.48$. And after considering inflation it's even less.

September 22, 2003

Basic math watch: A Pravda journalist explains inflation development to their readers:

"According to the Statistical Office of the SR, prices grew by a half percentage point in September. That means that an average purchase, which cost one thousand crowns in August, cost 50 SKK more in the next month."

Wasn't it rather five crowns??

October 8, 2003

LACK OF ECONOMIC THINKING

The lack of basic economic understanding, mainly as regards the state financing of services seems to be a big issue. Very often hidden costs or benefits are ignored when a certain project is considered in terms of its economic contribution.

Indebted schools: According to the headline in Pravda "Secondary schools are up to the ears in debt." However, the article provides only the figure for the debt of secondary and primary schools together in the first half of 2002 being 763 million. So what is the situation of the primary schools? And is this amount of debt indeed threatening? What is the relation of the debt to the entire budget of primary and secondary schools for one semester? Is it different from previous years? There are no answers in that article.

August 6, 2002

Flood insurance: is a topic discussed by an article of SME. The authors try to convince the reader that many Czech and Slovak companies are underestimating the risks of the floods and do not take out insurance. However, not to have insurance does not mean underestimate. It's just a different view of the risk and the price of its insurance. Are all the reporters of SME insured against all possible types of risk, offered by insurance companies? Probably not. They just don't think it's worth to have insurance for everything (or they just can't afford it). Everybody has a different view of the risks.

August 23, 2002

Tourism statistics: is a complicated matter. How do you establish the revenues, numbers of visitors? SME claims "statistical data say that for the first six months tourists spent 30.6 per cent more money in Slovakia than in the first six months of the previous year." Money? Crowns, Euros, Forints? And who says it, from which source, and how this data was established?

August 26, 2002

More expensive medical drugs, worse for the patient: claims an article in Pravda. Apart from the biased headline this is obviously not the whole truth, low prices may result in a shortage of the goods, which the patients probably won't appreciate much either. The author actually mentioned this argument put forward by a representative of pharmaceutical companies, however she seems to ignore it.

September 4, 2002

Funding of highway construction: will change after the election, claims a headline in Pravda. Why? Because almost all parties promised so, says the author. It is interesting that journalists, who inform us regularly about how politicians never keep their promises, do not have a problem on the other hand to take their statements for facts. So, who is naive, the electorate? Apart from that, the author is comparing apples and oranges. She informs us that the previous government of Mr. Mečiar invested SKK 26 billion into highway construction. The current government invested more than 34 billion over the past four years." As the prices have grown since 1995 by some 60 %, the expenditure cannot be compared that easily, it has to be converted into the so-called fixed prices of a given year as a basis. For instance, if expenditure for highways is converted into fixed prices of 2002, the expenditure between 1995-98 totalled SKK 37.5 billion, while it totalled approximately SKK 37 billion over the past four years. Now the comparison looks different, doesn't it? At least on the economic pages of the papers, the notions of current and fixed prices should be a matter of course.

September 14, 2002

The right wing rip off: Let's start with the opening paragraph from a main Pravda article titled "Each new government says: "Citizens, you are going to pay!""

"Slovak life will be more expensive after the new government takes office. If the right-wing parties will take office, and the ruling coalition will be composed of KDĽ, SMK, SDKÚ, ANO, they are getting ready to charge you also for things that used to be free of charge. If Robert Fico's Smer party will lead the country, part of the costs for the citizens will be assumed by the state budget, however, they will recover the costs through taxes. However, Smer too points out that in some areas, the citizens will have to pay extra."

Hence, it will be bad in any case, right? What does it mean that something was free of charge? It was paid from tax money. Hence, the citizens were paying anyway. Result? Pravda carries articles about a shortage of funds in education, health care, budget deficits, indebtedness of Slovakia etc. almost daily. However if the parties suggest an increase in funding (or to use the funds available more efficiently, which would be supported by individual fees), the authors shout that it's again the citizens who are

going to pay for it. But who should pay, if these services are used only by the citizens? (Individual fees ensure better justice, because only those pay, who really use the services.) If people don't pay, they will have poor schools, high corruption and queues in hospitals. Not a word about that.

The documents of Pravda are also quite successful at contradicting themselves. First they say that if the right-wing parties are in power, Slovak life will be more expensive, then they quote macro-analysts: "According to several economists the citizens don't face a decrease in real wages – only a temporary slowdown in its growth to an economically sustainable level." The growth of real wages means cheaper not more expensive life, according to my knowledge. Hence, the only experts, contacted by the authors of the article are contradicting the main assertion of the article. Well, that's an option too.
September 17, 2002

Sale below market price: Pravda also carries articles about the privatisation of health care facilities, in which authors inform about sales "below market price" hinting to a scandal. In the first case, indeed the facility was sold below the set "book value". Since the book value and market value do not have anything in common, this is false alarm started by the authors. In the second case the selling price allegedly was much lower than the estimated market price. However, the suspicion is not quite justified either, because the sale was performed on certain conditions (i.e. continue in running the policlinics). The estimated market price however considers strictly commercial use only. Again, no reason for worries, at least not on the basis of the argument that the sales were "below market price".
September 21, 2002

Job agencies: Are "questionable" according to a journalist from Pravda because they arrange jobs with lower wages for job seekers from regions with above-average unemployment rate, than the wage that would be paid to e.g. a Bratislava resident. Why they should receive the same wage however is not quite clear. Costs of living are lower at their place of residence. If the wages were the same, less of these commuting workers would find a job. In any case, it's a free contract nobody forced anybody to sign a contract with an agency, do they? Moreover, the news article covering half a page in the paper, does not give any space to the agencies, with the exception of one sentence.
September 27, 2002

Self-sufficiency above all: "Slovaks consume more wine than they are able to produce ... despite the fact that conditions for wine growing and wine making are good in Slovakia," informs SME. First of all, it's quite subjective to judge if the conditions are good or not, however the reporter does not support this claim with no relevant quotes. So, how does he know? Secondly, what if the conditions are even better than good elsewhere? So, why shouldn't we import that wine? The God of Autarchy is still haunting us. Why not import, if someone is making it better or cheaper? Or is it ideal not to have any foreign trade? The author also claims, that "Slovakia...is generously subsidising wine growing." It's some 140 million Slovak Crowns. What is generous? Is 86 million SKK generous, or not anymore? Again, own opinions are mixed with news reporting. Also the source of the data in the chart is missing.
October 10, 2002.

Who will lose their advantages: "Slovaks will have to depend more on themselves, they will lose their advantages" reads a headline of a Pravda article. Among the examples of these "advantages" the author mentions substitute alimony paid by the state, statutory protection of employees according to the Labour code, and general (not means-tested) social benefits. But, Slovaks as a whole won't lose anything, they pay for these "advantages" from their own pockets. Yes, some will lose due to the reforms, some will win. The authors of the reform promise, that Slovakia at large will gain from those reforms. We'll see, let's wait and see. However, if the author says, that Slovaks will lose their advantages, she probably already knows, that the reforms won't be any good. I will be happy to read her opinions in the comments section, not in a news article though.
October 10, 2002

What is damaging our trade balance: A small report of the SITA agency, published in SME mentions trade balance in agricultural goods. Deficit is mentioned as a negative factor, which is indicated directly in the headline "Ice-cream and tobacco damage the foreign trade balance." However, negative (in macroeconomic or political terms) may be an extremely high total deficit, or even a surplus in trade (let's say above 7-8 % of GDP), but not in partial sectors, as many deficits are offset against many surpluses. I am not aware of studies, demonstrating that a trade deficit in ice-cream or tobacco would lead to a lower living standard in a given economy.
November 9, 2002

Election and prices of flats: According to an author in Pravda they are somehow related. Unfortunately, her article, does not confirm the claim of the headline "After the election prices of flats

grew, ..." . Today's prices are compared with prices of spring of this year, and the quoted estate agents have not mentioned the influence of the election once. Even very strange and non-economic terms found their way into the article:

"...there are twenty or even thirty potential buyers per one flat at a **real** price." or "immediately after publishing the advert for a sale of flats at a "**reasonable** price" a list of potential buyers is put together."

Real price?? Reasonable price?? How much is that, for God's sakes? If there is a list of potential buyers, the price is lower than the usual market price. The chart of average flat prices (probably market prices, not the reasonable ones) does not quote a source.

November 20, 2002

Our inflation v living standards: We have a year-on-year inflation of 2.9 %. "As compared with November 2001 life was 2.9 per cent more expensive in Slovakia", writes SME in an article about inflation. However, it's not the inflation rate that tells you if life is more or less expensive, it's the real income. The closest comparable figure to this data is the estimate of real wages for the entire year 2002. According to ING Bank it is +6.3 %. Hence, workers live this much **cheaper** on average than a year ago.

December 10, 2002

Have savings or not?: "Last year it was more favourable to take out a loan than to save money" writes Pravda. As they explain, since interest rates went down last year, loans were cheaper, but returns on deposits fell, hence saving was not the best option. Yet, this is quite an erroneous thought. In order to see, whether savings or loans are the better option, you have to compare the nominal interest rates (those in the price list) with inflation. Last year inflation rate fell, so did nominal interest rates. Only the real interest rates (cleared of inflation) could tell us, if it's better to make savings or to take out loans.

January 11, 2003

Flats v detached houses: In SME's main article, we read the following conclusion: "According to the Statistical Office, new construction in 2000 totalled almost SKK 69 billion, in 2001 it totalled as much as 74 billion."

As much as? After deducting inflation, it's an almost identical amount.

April 4, 2003

Opinions of entrepreneurs regarding corruption: Are the topic of an article in SME. Based on a survey of colleagues from Transparency International Slovensko, which was ... the article does not provide us with this basic information. By the way, the tables on the CPI corruption index lack the scale and titles, what figures represent least corruption and which maximum corruption.

In the second paragraph the article reads:

"The International Monetary Fund claims, that an increase in corruption by one per cent, may reduce the performance of the economy by 0.3 to 1.8 per cent, because the price of goods reflects bribes."

This sounds interesting – but how is corruption according to IMF measured, i.e. what will grow by one per cent? How am I to picture that?

The author further writes:

"The survey has shown that entrepreneurs give money to political parties out of self-interest. Out of a hundred randomly selected top managers as many as 55 believe that the most frequent motive for financial support provided to a political party is the ambition to win a public bid and other advantages for the company."

Again: the first sentence is not supported by the second. Since the second sentence tells us, how entrepreneurs perceive things, which does not have to mean that it is the case, as affirmed by the first sentence (and the sub-headline of the entire article).

August 1, 2003

State aid to entrepreneurs: The journalist from Pravda writes about a state project of state aid to small enterprises in regions with high unemployment. It's 100 million for 653 jobs (rounded down in the headline to 600...) created for 5 years, which according to my calculation represents a subsidy of SKK

153,000 per job created. Well, what is then the return on this project? What is the experience with similar projects so far? Those should be the basic questions with such projects, however the article doesn't mention them at all.

September 19, 2003

How to build roads in Slovakia?: The reporter of TREND criticises the predominance of asphalt road construction over concrete-cement roads in Slovakia, unlike in other countries:

The Czech Republic has used modern concrete-cement road surfaces for almost thirty years and now they can start to compare. The conclusion is unequivocal. The initial investment is higher by maybe as much as ten per cent, however the operating costs for finished infrastructure are lower by half.

Representatives of the transport ministry and the state investor – Slovak Road Administration however claim that they have to focus on the highway programme, which does not have sufficient funding ... This way of thinking on the part of the state investor reminds us of purchasing cheap goods, which break soon and are not elegant...

So? It may be quite a legitimate decision, if we cannot afford more (market limits of the state for loans), we have to settle for the cheaper product. Cheaper in construction, more expensive in maintenance, as the author says. Fine, but she doesn't state anywhere, how much one kilometre of such road costs and how much is the maintenance. Without these figures, the conclusion is not so unequivocal at all, be the maintenance of one type of road even ten times cheaper.

October 1, 2003

What should be done with the unfinished theatre: Pravda writes:

The Government of Mikuláš Dzurinda will offer the new Slovak National Theatre building for sale. Yet, the state has already invested 3.3 billion crowns in that.

Yet, already invested? The journalist puts these two sentences into opposition. It seems to be strange to sell, while we have invested that much already. I have written about that on several occasions: Past costs are quite irrelevant to decide if an investment is worthwhile or not. The correct question would be about the future benefits versus future costs (completion of the building, plus maintenance). If the overall benefit is lower we may even give it away for free and still be better off, than if we continued to pay on and on.

And as far as the invested money is concerned, this has to be compared with the selling price and if that's lower request the politicians to assume responsibility.

October 9, 2003

Deposits on PET bottles: The journalist from Pravda wrote a more comprehensive document about the plan of the Ministry of Environment to introduce deposits on bottles. The shops are against it, the greens and the ministry in favour. Ms. Kaliská doesn't give any space for comments to the former (only repeats some of their arguments), she gives space to the latter though. Why's that? Nowhere in the article will you find a mention of the costs for consumers and shop owners. The journalist mentions a study of the shop owners about the impact of bottle deposits, however she only gives space for comments to the critics of the study. Apart from that she writes that the retail association received "more than 840 million crowns" from the Recycling Fund for that study. Who's joking here, the Fund, the Association or the journalist?

She also wrote a commentary to this topic, supporting the deposit system:

"...Charging deposits on PET bottles certainly is not easy.... However, our environment is worth it. We find plastic bottles in forests, protected areas, streams and streets. Unless people are not financially motivated, they would often get rid of these bottles anywhere. Some people are more environmentally conscious and dispose of their used PET bottles in the waste bins or special containers. However, their collection and following discharge at landfills or incineration in plants is charged for. Thus, by introducing deposit fees, double payments for the citizens would disappear. Since, according to the new system they would only pay a deposit that would be returned. They will produce less waste, which will help the local authorities to reduce costs for waste disposal. However, the economic benefit must not be the only motivation..."

The author totally ignores the costs of shops for collecting and storing empty bottles as well as the costs of consumers (interest-free loan to the shop, storing). Thus, no double payments may disappear you

have to pay for a clean environment, this way or another. Be it through more expensive goods or worse services, in exchange for a cleaner environment. Nothing is for free, everybody should know that by now.

P.S. I have a suggestion for the journalist: A commentary suggesting deposit fees for newspapers. Newspapers can be recycled too, they are a burden to the environment too and most of them are thrown away too. Let people pay 2 crowns more and return their old papers to the newsagents'. If this logic applies to bottles, it applies to newspapers too.

October 17, 2003

How to collect parking fees?: "A friend of Jan Slota [opposition politician] does good business with the city of Žilina" reads a headline in SME. Slota is the mayor of Žilina hence the journalists sense fraud:

"Even more interesting though is the structure of the company itself [ŽPS, which is collecting the parking fees in the city]. The city of Žilina holds only 25 per cent, while the company SIRS holds 75 per cent. Chairman of the Board of SIRS is the above mentioned friend of Mr Slota ... Fifty per cent of the collected parking fees will be designed for the construction of a parking house, i.e. the parking fees will be used to build a profit-making facility, belonging to ŽPS. Its 75 per cent will thus generate ... net profit to the people around Mr Slota's friend. All this thanks to an ordinance of the city of Žilina. The spokesperson of the company Ms Strelcová gave an evasive reply to the question, as to how profits will be distributed: "The assumed return on investment is twenty years."

I don't know, what's the problem and who's got a problem with the fact that the parking fees are collected by a private company, where the city holds "only" 25 %. What only? It may be even better, if the city had a contract with a fully private company. The fact that Žilina has such a complicated contract with unclear costs and benefits is interesting, maybe even suspicious, but unless we know more, there is nothing wrong with that. Thus ŽPS receives half of the collected parking fees, but who can say if it's too much or too little? How much does the management and collection of the parking fees cost elsewhere? SIRS will also receive a 75 % share in the new parking lot (no net profit, as SME claims). It also depends on the contract and the circumstances, for whom it's beneficial. What about asking other operators of parking lots? Did the new company win in a tender procedure? What were the other bids? Those are significant questions, not automatically casting a shadow of doubt over Slota. The authors have nothing in their article to support the claim of the "good deal" of Mr Slota's friend, mentioned in the headline.

In conclusion they write:

"The fact that parking fees will be collected by a private company, where the city only holds a minority share is a real problem. As Marian Ukrop, the deputy of the Žilina prosecutor, told us, the citizens have filed a motion with the district prosecution to investigate the legitimacy to collect fees."

What real problem? Only because some citizens want to have it investigated? And the prosecution will always agree with the citizens or what?

October 20, 2003

Mr Zajac's reform: SME writes about a proposal to reduce free of charge medical care. I miss a better explanation of the categorisation of treatment types. Isn't it also that, the more the patient is responsible for his condition or accident (and the less the condition is a congenital one) the more he or she will be paying? The author calculates, how many categorised treatment types from the lists of the ministry of health will be paid how – which is not relevant at all, because the treatment types are not equal in terms of their incidence and costs. A better comparison would be that Zajac speaks of deductibles totalling SKK 5 billion, while the total public budget for health care is 60 billion (or more precisely over SKK 70 billion with capital expenditure etc.) – hence deductibles on average totalling 8.3 %, or around 7 %.

What, according to the SME editor is a lot – judging by her biased and not supported headline "We will have to pay a lot extra when seeing a doctor". So – what are the arguments that it's a lot or not?

October 28, 2003

LOGIC

Basic logical errors in thinking

Well, what about our productivity: "Productivity in the US is declining" says SME and continues: "The labour productivity growth ... in the US has slowed down in the second quarter." Has slowed down, but still there is growth, isn't there?

August 11, 2002

Corruption in graphs: SME published a graph of the TASR concerning the index of perceived corruption in the V4 countries. Apart from a spelling mistake in the quoted source of data (Transparency turned into Transparenci) there is only one thing wrong about that graph – it is not at all clear, what it means. Just because it doesn't show a scale and titles, whether a higher figure means more or less corruption.

September 3, 2002

Ms Malíková in Russia: The journalist in Pravda writes in the first paragraph of her article "Malíková [party leader] left to Russia, her party is preparing her fall", that Ms Malíková "travelled to Russia to see the family of her husband..." Four sentences later however the journalist writes that Ms Malíková "is allegedly in Russia." Last but not least, the reader learns, that "Ms Malíková's exact whereabouts are unknown even to her party colleagues." So what did the reporter of Pravda find out?

September 27, 2002

Mr Serbin's body guards: "Bodyguards follow prosecutor Serbin everywhere. To shops, movies, restaurants", reads the caption to a picture, accompanying the article in SME about the security guards for prosecutor Serbin. However, the article itself tells us, that Mr Serbin "was never a big fan" of the movies and that "he almost never goes shopping."

November 6, 2002

Saturday: SME writes: "...[the panel of HZDS] shall deliberate the agenda of the long-awaited Saturday meeting of the national party leadership. This will take place on Saturday."

Well, wouldn't it be a big con game, if the Saturday meeting were held on a Sunday.

January 8, 2002

Retirement at 65: In Pravda's Saturday article we read that "today's **forty year olds** will only retire at 65 most of the people refuse such a radical prolongation of working age." A proof to support that claim – an opinion poll – nowhere to be found. There is a small survey accompanying the article "Are you willing to work until the age of 65?", where all three respondents are against such idea. A small problem is that two of them are not even concerned by the prolongation of the working age to 65, as one is 55 the other 51 (the third is 48).

January 13, 2002

Plus, minus and zero: In an interview with Mr Kozlík, the deputy chairman of HZDS, SME asks him, what he thinks about the claims, that among other things, HZDS has "negative coalition potential". Negative?? If nobody wants to build a coalition with me, my potential is zero, if everybody that would be 100 %, otherwise it's something in between. But, how can I have a negative potential??

February 8, 2003

Inspection of the ministry of finance concerning the customs authorities: In 2001 shortcomings totalling almost one billion crowns were established, as the article in Pravda tells us. One year later (when Mr. Hajnovič was minister) the ministry calculated the shortcomings at approximately 10 million crowns. Pravda reporters immediately call this turning a blind eye to customs officers, or "sweeping the matter under the carpet". That is possible, however only on condition that the first inspection was correct and the second evaluation wrong. If it was the other way round, then the ministry is right. Since the article does not tell us, why the first option is more probable, the conclusions are not supported by anything and not creditable.

March 8, 2003

Super-long earthquake: A journalist of SME confused minutes with seconds, he keeps writing about yesterday's 17 minute earth-quake in Turkey. This looks like a world record ... in reality, the earthquake lasted 17 seconds, Pravda got it right.

May 2, 2003

Possibilities of infection: Pravda writes: "The breeding of the tsetse fly on the premises of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava cannot pose a threat to people or livestock. Confirmed for Pravda Milan Kozánek, head of the entomology department of the Zoology Institute of the SAS ... According to him, the possibility of infection is lower than zero."

Well, the interval of possibilities/probability lies between 0 and 100, what then could be a possibility "lower than zero". I would accept that for a writer, but a scientist?? I guess, I really will have to be careful about those flies.

May 13, 2003

Logical conclusion of the day: A journalist from Pravda wrote an analysis "What happens to the coalition after the abortions". Well, who knows what she actually wanted to say, when she wrote in the introduction, before her own appreciation of the development of the situation:

"Hence, the coalition is facing a conflict in a few days, when the parliamentary session begins and nobody dares to foresee the consequences of that conflict."

June 10, 2003

Bus tragedy near Úhorná: SME writes: "The bus driver who had an accident near Úhorná on Sunday morning, while 11 people were killed, was indicted of posing a general threat ... The reason for the accident near Úhorná has not yet been established, according to the police the driver broke the law, when he left the bus without securing it with a fork rod preventing movement. The bus started to roll backwards down a steep slope and rolled over. There is a road sign on the road to Úhorná prohibiting the entry to lorries longer than ten metres. Mr Milan Vaverčák, the director of the traffic inspectorate of Spišská Nová Ves thinks, that "the driver should not have risked and entered this road." The police director in Spišská Nová Ves, Mr Vladimír Profant said that "no technical deficiencies were found on the vehicle, even the brakes were functioning." Experts and drivers agree, that the state of Slovak roads and busses is rather poor ..."

So the police accuses the driver, technical problems were not established and the journalists all of a sudden talk about poor roads and buses. Somehow, the thread of the article disappeared. Other than that, Pravda is reporting similar facts, is able to focus on the human factor a little longer than SME (they quote various sources regarding the quality of drivers), but still, ends up talking about the state of roads and busses, even looking for those responsible for that situation in the commentary ...

Well, the engine failed the driver, but no journalist asked if it was because of the road or the old bus, or what – and the police are saying that the bus was OK. Why suddenly matters not concerning Úhorná are being discussed is a mystery to me.

But as we are there – the authors in SME continue:

"Slovak roads are also poor ... "The state of the road network in Slovakia is horrendous," confirmed Mr Ľubomír Gerši, the director of SAD Košice. According to him, the biggest problems are in the East. Poor roads with many holes damage the cars and thus also the transport companies."

Fine, but that gentleman is the director of the company, whose bus crashed near Úhorná. So he's quite obviously a biased source to speak about road quality at this particular moment in time, however, if the journalist decided to quote him, he could have at least told us, who that gentleman was.

P.S. Pravda writes about the investigation of the accident:

"There are different opinions, if the road should also be open to busses. According to Mr Vladislav Chroust, the district police director of Spišská Nová Ves the road sign is there for lorries. Mr Milan Vaverčák, director of the Spišská Nová Ves Road Police on the other hand says that the no entry sign applies to busses too."

What opinion did Pravda chose? "There was a no entry sign for busses."

August 5, 2003

Bono and UK's entry to the EU: SME writes about the celebrations of EU accession: According to tradition, a famous person from Slovakia should represent the country during the welcome ceremony in the Union. When UK was joining it was represented by Bono from the rock band U 2.

The UK joined the EU in 1973. Bono was born in Dublin (Republic of Ireland) in 1960.
October 6, 2003

What happens to the debt of the health care sector?: All reports I have seen about the state of indebtedness of the health care sector in the first six months of this year repeat the same – as we can read in the TREND headline: “The growth rate of the health care debt has slowed down.” No journalist has provided a proof, neither has the article:

“The growth of the indebtedness of the Slovak health care sector has slowed down in the first six months of the year. At the end of June, the liabilities after due date totalled 27.9 billion crowns, while they grew by 3.2 billion since January. The growth is by almost a third smaller than the health ministry expected.”

Aha, so the growth of the debt is smaller than expected by the ministry. However, we don't learn if the expectations concerned increased or decreased growth rates. But this is key information to know, what is actually happening to the debt. If I expect that the debt would suddenly multiply by ten, there is no problem to announce success – growth is smaller than expected ... Other than that, the document of the ministry of health is similarly questionable – the growth rates so far are not to be found in this document (the growth rates for the first and second six months of 2002 are missing).

October 13, 2003

STATISTICS, SURVEYS, CHARTS

Very often we encounter disinformation regarding the results of statistical surveys. It is certainly not by chance, that many times the journalists interpret or conveniently round up the statistics, to fit their article ...

Anniversary of August 1968: "August '68 doesn't mean a lot to the young ones, Dubček does," informs a SME headline. Unfortunately, the articles related to this topic do not confirm anything like this. A survey is mentioned (without indicating who asked for the survey) among 14 - 18 year olds, according to which, August 1968 doesn't mean anything to 43 % of the respondents. However, we do not learn, what it means for the entire Slovak population, hence it is not clear, if the young ones are in any respect particular or not. On the other hand, Dubček's popularity is supported only by a general representative survey, not a word about the young is mentioned.
August 21, 2002

People v HZDS: If 54 % of the people think, that a participation of HZDS in the next government would jeopardise Slovakia's accession to NATO and EU, but 46 % do not think so, or don't know, can you claim about Slovaks in general, that "People are afraid of HZDS participation in government" as a Pravda headline claims? The problem of the article itself is the improper use of the term "per cent". While 51 % of the respondents feared HZDS participation in July, in August it was 54 %, this is not an increase by three per cent, but by three percentage points. An increase by three per cent would be 52.5 %, however this is probably not what the article meant.
August 22, 2002

Corruption in courts: Based on Documents of Transparency International Slovensko (TIS) SME refers, that "the perception of corruption ... in courts, prosecution and police by people has significantly deteriorated." This is based on the survey of Focus for TIS. However, the results show, that as compared with 1999 the perception of corruption at courts and prosecution has been quite identical in 2002, given for a statistical fluctuation (bribes are considered very common by 60 % of the people, as compared with 58 % three years ago). For the police, the growth is by 5 percentage points (from 50 % to 55 %). One way or another, it is certainly not a „significant“ increase.
August 30, 2002

Conservative Slovaks: "The opinion that the wife should be younger than her husband still prevails in Slovakia," SME tells us. First of all the term "still" is biased, hence unacceptable in news (and there are several similar "only" and "as much as"). Secondly, the figures in the chart show that this information is not true: according to a survey 50 % of Slovaks do not mind, if the woman is older than the man. How many do mind is hard to say (the rest are probably answers such as I don't know, or I don't care) – but it probably is not the prevailing opinion.
September 17, 2002

Housing more expensive: SME informs that next year housing will cost an average Slovak family "13.3 per cent more than this year," while household income should grow by only some 7 %. It's nice to see such a comparison, not only automatic figures about cost increases. The problem however is, that the above-mentioned 13.3 % is an increase as compared with the previous, not this year (i.e. 2003/2001), as shown in the attached table. I don't quite understand, why the study didn't calculate year 2002, this way the presentation is chaotic.
October 16, 2002

Do homosexuals want to leave Slovakia?: An article in SME begins with the following sentence: "As many as 76 % of homosexuals and bisexuals would prefer emigrating from Slovakia." Details of the survey are only provided in a chart accompanying the main article. Among other details, also the detail that the survey is not representative, moreover it was carried out by the interest group of non-heterosexuals. If the journalist takes up such a survey, he should mention it right away in the sentence with the figures, otherwise the reader is cheated, unless he or she cares to read the chart, if it catches his or her attention at all.
October 18, 2002

Doubling up the rent: sounds horrible. The SITA report in SME just doesn't mention that it concerns 0.3 % of flats in Slovakia, as the more comprehensive report of TASR says in Pravda. The headline in SME "Rents will double" thus does not concern 97 % of flats ... The same applies to a headline in Pravda, which is even logically wrong: "They suggest a double growth of the rent." Not double growth but doubling up. Nobody was suggesting a 50 % increase before, were they?

October 26, 2002

A broken lie detector: A journalist from Pravda made a false statement in the very first sentence of the main article in the issue. The sentence reads:

"Unlike common people, the MPs will again be better off financially next year."

According to the draft state budget, the pay of MPs should allegedly grow by 5 %. But, common people should, according to economic analysts see a growth in their pay by 6-8 % (in both cases we speak of the so-called nominal growth, i.e. simple ratio of the pay in next year to the pay in this year).

And, the pay of MPs has grown more slowly than the average pay of Slovaks since last year, i.e. next year will be the third consecutive year. On the contrary, between 1998-2000 the pay of MPs grew slightly more quickly than the average wages in the economy.

Salaries: MPs v Citizens (nominal growth in %)

1998:	13.1	- 9.6	
1999:	8.7	- 7.2	
2000:	7.0	- 6.4	
2001:	6.5	- 8.3	
2002:	8.2	- 9.8	
2003:	5.0	-	6.0 to 8.5

Source: Slovak Press Watch, Pravda, ING Bank www.ingfn.sk 2002 – estimate, 2003 – forecast
November 15, 2002

Slovaks about NATO: Pravda once again carries an interesting headline about the opinion poll (from a TASR report): "The people believe that NATO membership will bring us advantages." Seriously? This opinion share only 40 % of the people. But a total of 56 % think that either the benefits will equal the disadvantages, or even the disadvantages will prevail. So what do the people believe? The article won't tell us, when that opinion poll was made (according to SME it was last weekend).
November 27, 2002

Tax evasion: "Mainly companies in Bratislava don't pay taxes," reads a headline to a ČTK report in SME. This report says that as regards tax evasion "worst damage was caused by taxable persons in the competence of the authority in Bratislava, while the damage totalled 855 million." First, that authority in Bratislava is responsible for the entire Western Slovak Region, not only Bratislava (further two authorities are in Banská Bystrica and in Prešov). Secondly, as far as I know, Western Slovak companies also pay the most taxes in relation to the whole, so it's not at all clear, whether they are also most skilled in evading taxes, as the headline suggests.
December 3, 2002

Confidence in politicians: According to a headline in Pravda in a TASR report "People lose confidence in party leaders, with the exception of Fico." However, the attached graph (not online) suggests something else. Firstly, apart from a decline in confidence in Dzurinda and a growth in confidence in Kukan the changes are within statistical fluctuation. Secondly, among party leaders, the biggest increase – if you care to call it increase – was recorded by Vladimír Mečiar (from 18.1 to 19.5 %), not Róbert Fico (from 25.7 to 26.7 %). Hence Fico is not an exception. And the confidence in Béla Bugár has not decreased either – the change from 12.9 to 12.7 % is negligible.
February 4, 2002

Comparison of schools: Martina Kubánová, who is concentrating on education, drew my attention to another poor headline in SME's yesterday's inset about schools: "Eight-year grammar schools worse than primary schools." Proof? The author writes about the results of tests, and quotes chief school inspector Rosa:

"Inspectors carry out parallel measurements among pupils in ninth grade of primary schools and the forth of eight year grammar schools, and these data are then compared. We wanted to know, whether the selection of children for grammar schools objectively results in an increase in knowledge levels," Rosa explains. And the result? "It appears that approximately one third of the grammar schools are worse than a half of the best primary schools."

So, one third is worse than one half, i.e. two thirds are better or equal to one half – so who's better, grammar schools or primary schools?? Not speaking of the fact, that they compared ninth grade of

primary schools with eighth (forth) grade of grammar schools. And the journalist buys such "proof" without critical thinking and sells it to her readers with a big headline.
February 12, 2003

Where we are lagging behind again: SME (inset Computers) writes about Slovakia's position in a list of countries, according to the use of new technologies, with the headline "Slovakia lagging behind more and more":

"In the list of 82 countries, Slovakia ranked 40th against 33rd last year, hence it recorded a significant decrease. For the past year we have been overtaken in the list by Poland or Latvia, and from among the ten countries preparing to join the European Union, only Lithuania is behind us."

However, the situation is slightly different. This year's report itself warns of comparing last year's chart with this year's as the weighting of indicators has changed (e.g. government services are weighted more, where Slovakia is relatively weak). Moreover, last year's chart included only 75 countries, whereas this year's includes 82, hence the lower charting position doesn't have to mean a greater lagging behind. And the affirmation, that we are second worst among the 10 candidate countries has not been sufficiently supported either, as neither Malta nor Cyprus were included in the evaluation...

Apart from that the author of this article confused South and North Korea, as it was pointed out to him by an online reader:

The use of internet, mainly the broadband internet, is most intensive in North Korea (14.)
March 6, 2003

Geography and crime: In SME's main article of the day "Most people were convicted in the east" the author searches for the reasons for the higher numbers of convicted persons in the regions of Eastern Slovakia, as compared with Central or Western Slovakia. Several experts refer to a different approach of the police or a different type of crime.

One more thing comes to my mind. Crime is quite related to age, i.e. the more people you have in the age group of 18-30 years (mainly men), the higher the crime rates tend to be. And the Eastern regions have the youngest populations.

Anyhow, to jump to conclusions on the basis of the attached table, which compares the numbers of convicted persons according to regions, is not the best of approaches. Regions have different population sizes and Prešov and Košice (in the East) are the largest population-wise, whereas Trnava and Bratislava (in the West) are the smallest. Even if crime were the same everywhere, the East would still turn out to be worst. It is a fact however that even after calculating the number of people convicted per one inhabitant, the Košice region is the worst. However, it is followed by Banská Bystrica (central Slovakia), not Prešov.

April 1, 2003

Competitiveness of Slovakia: has decreased, says a short report of the SITA agency in Pravda, "Slovakia fell in the country chart," reads a headline of a ČTK report in SME. Both reports are misleading. It was a comparison of countries and regions by a Swiss institute. In 2003 Slovakia ranked 27th among the smallest countries and regions, last year it ranked 23rd. Yes, it is a fall in the charts. However, 5 new regions were included into the charts this year (such as Bavaria), which had not been included previously and all of them are now ahead of Slovakia. Without them, SR would rank 22nd, hence the competitiveness among the countries has **improved** over the last year by one rank (Slovakia overtook Slovenia) and there was no decline.

May 15, 2003

Headline of the day: in a SME article: "The Danube experiences the driest July over the last 103 years." The expert however says something else in the article:

The hydrologist Danica Lešková from the Slovak hydro meteorological institute says, that July is usually the month with highest water volumes for the Danube. "A flow as small as e.g. on Tuesday has not been recorded for the month of July over the past 103 years."

Hence, the Tuesday was the driest July day over the past 103 years there are no figures about other days in July in the article.

July 18, 2003

Expectations of Slovaks as regards EU membership: "People expect less from the Union", reads a misleading headline of a short report in Pravda regarding a poll of the Statistical Office:

"More than a third of the people expect less benefits from EU membership than five years ago. On the other hand, 18% of the people expect bigger benefits from the Union than five years ago. Almost a third of the people have not changed their expectations and 12% do not expect anything positive."

Hence, almost a half has the same or bigger expectations, slightly more than a third lower expectations and the rest is unclear. Based on that, you cannot conclude that people expect less try as you might.
August 28, 2003

Public turning away from the politicians: SME writes: "A third of Slovakia's population does not trust any politician. According to the most recent polls, 33 per cent of the people do not sympathise with any political party or movement. The distrust towards politicians and political parties has increased by seven percent since January. The latest September poll does not even reflect the affairs, the ruling coalition has been dealing with over the past few days.

First, not a third, but 28.9 % do not trust any politician – which is rather a quarter, not a third. Second, you cannot say, that the distrust towards politicians (unlike political parties) is growing. In January the figure was 33.3 %, now it's 28.9 %, there were variations over the course of the year, but there is no clear tendency, allowing for statistical discrepancy. Third, the headline of that secondary article "The number of people who don't want to vote in elections is growing" is also disturbing. The article does not offer any proof, just quotes Mr Haulík from the MVK agency. The figures of the Focus agency, which SME is publishing on a regular basis, indicate however, that 16.2 % of the respondents would not vote (in SME on Wednesday, not online) as compared with 16.5 % in March or 15.8 % in January.
September 19, 2003

What is our financial situation like: The Statistical Office published a report from a representative survey last week, where they questioned people about any changes in their financial situation over the past year. Pravda carried a short report of the TASR "People think that their financial situation has deteriorated" (not online), SME published a the report of the TASR under the headline "62 % intend to be more modest." Today, SME writes about that survey also on its front page, under the headline "People have become more modest after price increases." All these headlines however say something different than the survey itself – and it just so happens that they draw a much bleaker picture of the situation, than it is in reality according to the survey.

First, 51 % of the questioned say that their situation has not deteriorated (has not changed or has not improved), 48 % say, there was a deterioration. How can you conclude, based on the above that "people think that their financial situation has deteriorated"?? It's fifty-fifty isn't it?

Secondly, the survey indicates that 62 % intend to be more modest, but it's not 62 % of all the respondents, but only of those 48 %, whose situation has deteriorated: $62 \% * 48 \% = 30 \%$ of all respondents speak of their plans to be more modest. Hence, the third headline is misleading too (the same problem is with the graphics and caption to the picture accompanying the article) – moreover it's in the past tense, which the survey was not about, it was about plans for the future.
September 30, 2003

Teachers v average wage in Slovakia: Pravda writes about the conflict regarding a salary increase for teachers:

"Hence, teachers will not get closer to the average wage in Slovakia – 14,200 crowns in the coming year either. With their salary of 11,602 crowns they lag behind the average by almost three thousands."

The author quotes the averages for the 2nd quarter of 2003 for the entire Slovakia (in reality it's 14,118 crowns ...) and for all the people in the education sector (in reality 11,604 crowns). However, education sector means teachers PLUS many non-teaching jobs, usually with lower wages). The latest figures about the salaries of teachers exclusively are available for 2002 only. The average was 13,407 crowns. The average of the entire economy was 13,511 crowns. Hence, the approaching became real last year already (in 2001 teachers earned on average 800 crowns less than Slovak average). It is not wise and important to debate the adequate salaries for teachers. But why wouldn't you provide concrete figures?

P.S. That debate about salary increase for teachers next year doesn't concern universities. Without them the average salaries of teachers in 2002 would have been approximately 13,000 crowns.
October 11, 2003

Headline of the day: "The number of tortured women is growing in Rimavska Sobota," says a Pravda headline. However, there is no such affirmation in the article:

"More than a half of women in the district of Rimavská Sobota have a first hand experience with domestic violence and torture exercised by their partners. This is based on a questionnaire that was mailed to randomly selected women in the region ..."

The tendency (growth, decline, no change) is one thing, the current state another. The headline speaks of a tendency, the article about current state only. And besides, that questionnaire without signature doesn't look like a representative survey at all, hence I would not take the affirmation regarding half of the women seriously at all.

October 22, 2003

OTHER ETHICAL AND PROFESSIONAL PROBLEMS

Inconsistency of opinions of journalists, unwillingness to admit mistakes or lack of perspective

Iraqi democracy: People, who know their facts say Iraq is a dictatorship. If it is, why would SME report on a decision by the Iraqi puppet parliament on its front page, as if it were a democratic decision? Pravda also dedicates some space to that issue. Both dailies inform that ultimately Saddam Hussein will decide, but then it's not quite clear, why they give any space to this quasi-parliament. More comprehensive reports of the BBC or AP in The New York Times at least mention, that Hussein has his people in the "parliament" and that he uses the declarations of the parliament to cover his deeds. One might expect that journalists from a post-communist country are resistant against totalitarian propaganda, but hey ... Will we see reports on the sessions of the Cuban parliament in Slovak dailies??
November 12, 2002

Attitude towards readers in Domino fórum: I have criticised that on several occasions already. Domino is unable to admit mistakes and apologise (article of Eva Čobejová of last week was a shining exception). It's not that other journalists would rush into apologising, but Domino seems to avoid it as a matter of principle. In its new issue, they carry a reaction of Branislav Líška – member of the Academic Senate of the Comenius University (all paid articles), who – if he's right – basically rebuts the entire article from two weeks ago, accusing František Gahér, the new president of the CU of tolerating corruption. "What will now be the price for entrance exams?", was the concluding sentence of the article. Líška however says, that Gahér was fighting corruption, even though with not much success.

The reader will not find a reaction of Domino. If Líška is not right, then there should be an explanation why. If Líška is right, then a correction and apology would be appropriate. Yet Domino is silent.

Similarly – an economic commentator of Domino reacts in the latest issue to his readers, who did not agree with his article about the salaries of Slovak doctors. I think, he is right, apart from one untrue affirmation:

"The article does not say that the standard salaries of doctors are on average 1.9 times the average wage in the economy..." - i.e. 24,000 crowns.

However, the article last week, included the sentence:

"If the doctor had a standard salary of **24 thousand crowns a month (that was the average)**, according to new regulations ..."

Once again, someone refuses to admit, he was wrong. Why am I, as a reader, supposed to believe such journalists?

December 12, 2002

Sense of humour: was demonstrated by an author of Pravda in her article "The government took almost everything, it promised to the people before election" from an inset about the year 2002 (not online). The article, listing the abolition of several wage increases or allowances by the new government concludes as follows:

"The life of Slovaks has been further disturbed by the floods in the summer, when several families saw their houses being severely damaged."

Ach well, our government, that was horrid indeed, they even poured all the water on us ...

P.S. Consistency of some politicians is one thing, evaluation of their deeds is another. Pravda considers the breaches of the cheap pre-election promises, increasing the indebtedness of the people according to its inset a loss of the people themselves... From whose money should those promises have been paid?

P.P.S. Loans to new teachers were not introduced by the government in the summer, as the author tells you, but by the parliament, approving an opposition party initiative. The government though was against it.

P.P.P.S. And once again about the consistency of opinions, now on the part of the journalists. In the above-mentioned article, criticising the new government, the author writes:

"Instead of advantages, we will see a price increase on food or cigarettes next year." (Isn't that somehow related to our EU accession, by any chance?),

And later "People will face an increase of energy and water prices."

And here is the editor's comment of Pravda of 13 September 2002:

"Leftwing parties, referring to the welfare of the people, have stopped this year's liberalisation of energy prices. They are probably not aware of the fact, that this is a problem, which cannot just be swept under the carpet. Delayed measures will have to be carried out once anyway and maybe it will hurt even more than The pre-election lavishing of money and increases in the purchasing power of the people may damage the economy."

December 21, 2002

Flats of the railway company: SME focuses on investments of the railway company into "social" flats. It is excellent to look into the statements of those responsible, as to what was the entire matter around the flats. However, in the end of his article, the journalist is not being honest towards his readers. He writes:

"By the way, the point to conclude. Even though some media wrote, that Miroslav Dzurinda [Prime Minister's brother] doesn't live at Bazová 2 in Bratislava, the SME daily found out, this is not true. He does live there, but in another flat."

Aha. And which were those "some media" with incorrect information? Well, at the beginning of this month, one unnamed opinion-leading daily, put in a caption to a picture of a certain house:

"The house in Bazová street, where the railway company has reconstructed flats for thousands of crowns. One of them was even fully equipped – for 2.58 million crowns. According to information of SME, Miroslav Dzurinda, the Prime Minister's brother, planned to move into the house, which however did not happen in the end."

February 17, 2002

Civilisation literacy: or mastering modern technologies is a topic for SME. The article begins:

"To purchase a coffee from a vending machine, withdraw money from an ATM, make a phone call, using a mobile phone or send an email? For many a matter of course, for most however, these are things they've never done and they find terrifying."

The respective table with figures from a survey shows however, that most of the Slovaks have already done 4 out of the 5 mentioned activities ... And it's difficult to judge, if they are terrified. The author doesn't provide any proof.

January 16, 2002

When women are not worth mentioning: In a Pravda article about the prepared new legislation concerning judges we read:

...The public should soon know also the property conditions of judges. The government wants them to be publicly accessible. Until now, men in gowns had to submit them only to the ministry of justice and the parliament ...

Well, I think the women in gowns had to do it as well. And besides, you might not expect it, but there are more female than male judges in Slovakia.

March 17, 2003

Mikloš's tax reform: A commentator in Domino fórum basically criticises the reform for not taking any risks and not extending the budget deficit. He criticises Mikloš also because

"For the Minister of Finance, Ivan Mikloš "fiscal neutrality" has turned into a sacred cow ..."

The criticism of this author is not trustworthy, as he himself (until recently) has claimed the same:

"The basic assumption for the management of the state should be the inviolability of a balanced budget. Living on a loan is just as immoral as the grins of "reformers", who ridicule the voice of reason and allow running into debt."

About the national budget of the SR for 2002, DF 50/2001

However, today he mentions exceptions:

"Even if a short-term drop out deteriorated the current state of public finance ... such a deficit would be the only defensible deficit."

Because why? For, the socialists too, pretend that all deficits are short-term. And who's going to say that this one will be a short-term and not a long-term one?

April 3, 2003

Astro-article of the day: A reader drew my attention to an interesting article in SME, which I overlooked on Wednesday:

Amateur astrologists surprised NASA experts

Amateur astrologists knew about the Columbia space shuttle disaster some minutes before the experts from NASA control centre and even before the astronauts aboard Columbia ... The number of members in the American Astronomy League, the world's largest amateur association of astronomers ..."

Too bad, they didn't mention gastrotickets [lunch tickets].

May 23, 2003

Commentary of the day: A commentator of Pravda writes: "Slovak politicians, mainly Prime Minister Mikuláš Dzurinda, have been using ice-hockey metaphors recently, to help them out ... It is undignified and appallingly cheap to shark on the popularity of the bronze-medal winning team and to use this team to defend the incapability of the team of which he is a captain. Even the comparison of the referendum results, when we just made the necessary turnout, with the Canadian golden goal in the finals of the ice-hockey championship is quite lame ... In the struggle of the government for the success of the referendum, the public as the referee should send the entire cabinet out to the penalty bench and Csáky should stay there for the rest of the match."

Indeed those metaphors are so disgustingly cheap. Well, those of the others at least.

May 19, 2003

Stagnation in the Euro-zone: An author of Domino fórum is doing magical tricks with figures, regarding the performance of the Euro-zone:

"According to latest data of Eurostat the Euro-zone has fallen into stagnation. This fact is not quite as surprising, even though the decrease of the Dutch GDP by 0.5 % in the second quarter caught some attention. It is awaited with some tension, whether France will follow the Netherlands, Germany and Italy into recession – current figures from Paris are not yet available. Even though the supporters of the single currency are praising the strength of the Euro against the US dollar and its viability, it's interesting to see, that the fastest growing economies in the EU are Sweden and the UK, which did not introduce the euro. With regard to the short period that passed since the introduction of the euro, this doesn't prove much, however there are many signs that the Euro, with its current exchange rate and interest rates is not suitable equally for all countries."

I do agree, it does indeed prove very little. But even that little is a problem. The figures are the first estimates of GDP growth for the 2nd quarter, official figures were published only for 6 out of 15 EU Member States. And even the 6 show clearly, that it's neither the UK nor Sweden that is growing fastest – it's Greece a member of the Euro-zone. Apart from that, there is an interesting view of two countries that suffer neither from the Euro, not "socialism" of the EU. Norway and Switzerland. Norway has just emerged from recession this year and Switzerland is just dashing to get there...

August 22, 2003

Mojžiš, Dzurinda, Šimko in the press: A few words about my perception of the journalists' work, as regards current hot issues.

1. Too many alleged information

The problem of writing about SIS [Slovak Intelligence Service] and NBÚ [National Security Office] is of course that there might be some non-public matters involved, matters regarding national security, i.e. information not open to the public. This argument is easy to abuse – politicians love it, journalists loathe it. Journalists and opponents are mostly suspicious, which is understandable and right. I rather object the level of some speculations, based too often on anonymous sources – I feel quite helpless with many

alleged information (e.g. the frequently repeated argument, that the NBU is tough towards former state security officials [communist ones] – how do we know?) and it seems, that journalists are not filtering enough. But I admit, with regard to the topic and the behaviour of the Prime Minister, this is a tough job.

2. Too little facts

Maybe I missed something, but there are not enough articles on some topics. How does the organisational structure of the NBU look like, how does it work elsewhere in other countries? To whom is the NBU reporting, what is its organisational link to NATO, what is the potential oversight of NBU against abuse (once they have all the screenings in their hands), what do we know about the work of Ján Mojžiš [the former head of the NBU] (apart from his official CV) and other staff of the office, how can we protect them against corruption (the temptation must be huge)? And how does the relation of the Prime Minister and a minister work abroad in similar political systems, on the basis of what can you recall a minister and when not?

3. Mixing topics

It seems that too many commentators think that Dzurinda wants to recall Mojžiš for undue reasons, hence they automatically disapprove also of Dzurinda's approach in the government and the recalling of Šimko. But those are totally different, even though important topics: The relation of the Prime Minister and the Head of the NBU, relation of a Prime Minister and a minister. They are interesting discussions about the culture and formal status, what we want here, but how do so many people know, what is democratic and what is authoritarian, I don't know, they don't give us any arguments. And it would be good to discuss it, for the coming years and governments. Similarly, those weird arguments about betrayal and friendship. Had Dzurinda not recalled Šimko after such a key voting [in the government] I can imagine the comments about cronyism in government, regardless of values...

September 18, 2003