

Transgressing Women: Is There Space for Women in the Slovak Public Sphere?

By

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Author's Declaration

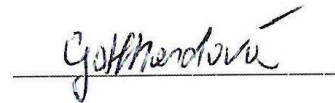
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All sources have been properly credited in the text, notes, and the bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. Furthermore, I declare that no part of this thesis has been generated using artificial intelligence (ChatGPT).

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Date: Vienna, 3. June 2024

Name: Kristína Gotthardová

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gotthardová', is written over a horizontal line.

Signature

Abstract

This master thesis analyzes the experiences of female politicians and journalists with online gender-based violence against the backdrop of current political situation in Slovakia. This research builds upon the existing scholarship in the area of violence against women in politics, but offers a new angle by focusing on political and ideological dimension where certain actors target women from the opposition in gendered attacks. Applying feminist critical discourse analysis and analytical framework of gendered forms, motives, and impacts on data gathered from elite interviews, this research demonstrated the existence of coordinated mechanisms of online attacks on women in opposition with gendered impacts of self-censorship on women on social media or public sphere participation in general. This thesis further draws attention to the need for more outspoken communal acknowledgment of online violence against women as well as the strengths and weaknesses of existing protection mechanisms and the directions for future policy-making in the area of online safety and online violence against women.

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Figure 1**Chyba! Záložka nie je definovaná.**

Introduction

Bullets sent in an envelope, receiving a used condom filled with semen sent in an envelope into the parliament, receiving unsolicited videos of a masturbating man, or being physically attacked in the street are some of the most extreme examples of violence that women active in the public sphere have experienced in recent years in Slovakia. These experiences have been accompanied by increasingly vulgar and heated discussions and exchanges between politicians and journalists and mounting pressures from politicians, business groups and media owners to shape and influence the work of independent media (Mikušovič and Benedikovičová 2024; Bárdy 2024). The violence against women in the public sphere has resulted in several figures leaving the public sphere altogether, such as the President Zuzana Čaputová who disclosed her decision not to run for second term (Balogová 2023) or the journalist Zuzana Kovačič-Hanzelová, who several months ago announced her decision to withdraw and put her career on a break for an unspecified length of time, after being attacked in the street following months and years of intense online hate and threats (Kovačič-Hanzelová 2024). Furthermore, a number of established political reporters and moderators of political discussions, both male and female, have announced leaving their employment in the televisions after pressures from their employers, and online and offline abuse and harassment perpetrated by politicians and general public over period of months. This has been accompanied by a boycott by all coalitional politicians of established political discussions in independent media as well as their refusal to answer questions of selected reporters during press conferences due to their supposed bias (Mikušovič and Osvaldová 2024). These occurrences culminated in an attempted assassination of the Prime Minister Róbert Fico on May 15, 2024, followed by a series of criminal proceedings against people supporting the incident online with the promise of stricter

prosecution of instances of online violence, threats against public figures or incitement to hate by the Minister of Interior (Nicholson 2024a).

While the assassination attempt is an extreme form of violence, verbal attacks, harassment or psychological violence against public figures is a global phenomenon, targeting both men and women. However, in this master thesis I will focus solely on instances of online violence perpetrated against women in the public sphere in Slovakia, specifically politicians and journalists for a number of reasons. According to a research done by the think-tank GLOBSEC in the time three month pre-election period in 2023, female public figures receive hateful comments on 88% of posts compared to 66% of men's (Strauszová, Kazaz, and Klingová 2023, 4), making women the target of online violence more often.

The aim of this thesis is thus to understand and analyze the processes related to online violence against women in the public sphere, determine whether specific patterns are at work and how do these women make sense and deal with these experiences, with what consequences on their representation and presence in the public sphere. To be able to draw conclusions about possible impacts and consequences I have opted for a qualitative and abductive approach, where I collected data from elite interviews with female politicians and journalists about their experiences. A shortcoming of this approach is the lack of quantitative data, which would perhaps allow me to quantify the kinds and frequency of violence women in public sphere receive and compare it to men's experiences or across the political spectrum. However the qualitative and abductive approach, which influenced my data gathering method of interviews and subsequent analysis, allowed me to construct a rich snapshot of not only the most common forms and contents of online violence, but more importantly to understand the discursive and coping mechanisms employed by these women, which is crucial for being able to understand and predict the gendered impacts of online violence and ultimately point the attention of policy makers to the weakness in the legislation, institutional frameworks or even the attitudes of the

society. The contribution of my research is twofold – it expands on the existing scholarship on violence against women in public sphere by positioning this research in the context of increasing illiberalization of discourse where criticism and plurality of media is concerned as well as by deepening our understanding of the gendered impacts of violence against women in the public sphere and women's (un)willingness to cope with it. This is especially relevant in times when violence against women is employed as a tool to discipline, harass and ultimately discourage women from participating in the public life by multiple actors in power, either within the government and its institutions or on social media networks.

In the next chapter, I will position my thesis within the scholarship of violence against women in politics and ground this research into the methodological approaches of critical discourse analysis and the analytical framework of gendered forms, motives and impacts by Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo, followed by a section dedicated to the discussion of gendered forms of online violence as well as persisting relevance of employing the public/private divide to attack women's role as mothers and lastly, I will consider the actual and possible future impacts of gendered violence against women in the light of their coping mechanisms and strategies and emerging forms of resistance.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

1.1. Conceptualizing Violence against Women in Politics

The research area of political gender-based violence has gained traction and scholarly attention in the last decades as the phenomenon was recognized as global and omnipresent, being addressed and recognized in Latin America, South Asia, Africa, Europe and the United States. Women running for election, women in political office or female journalists, human rights defenders, activists or women holding other public office are subjected to different forms of gendered abuse, hostility, harassment, threats, hate speech, or physical and sexual attacks. All of these are recognized as forms of violence against women in politics, a specific subset of violence against women (Krook and Sanín). Two key scholarship strands differentiate between violence in politics and violence against women in politics. Violence in politics targets both men and women, in gendered or non-gendered ways, with the intention to stop them from participating or carrying out their mandate due to the opposition to or disagreement with specific policies, party politics or beliefs. They are attacked not as group members but as representatives of certain political views. Violence against women in politics, on the other hand, specifically targets women with the aim to “exclude members of certain demographic groups as group members from participating in the political process” (Krook 2023, 32), thus attempting to uphold the status quo when it comes to the share of decision-making and political power among individuals and groups and intimidate individuals not belonging to hegemonic groups and discourage them from participating. Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo (2020) make the important distinction between the approach of political violence scholars and gender and politics scholars, where scholarship of political violence is focused on differences between men’s and women’s experiences of elections, political and governmental transitions or conflict situations and gender and politics scholars who focus on gender specific hardships, barriers and

experiences of women in politics or trying to enter the arena because they are women (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020, 917).

For the purposes of this research, the definition of violence must be clarified as well as the scope of activities and actions that fall under it. This thesis will follow an extensive and multidimensional understanding of violence, as defined by feminist scholarship and relevant research organized into four larger categories: physical violence, economic violence, psychological violence and symbolic violence. Feminist conceptualization of gender-based violence in general and violence against women in politics more specifically holds that incidents of violence may overlap and therefore belong to multiple categories of violence at once as well as escalate over time and be culturally specific, which are all aspects that will be considered in this research (Krook and Sanín 2016, 139). The category of physical violence contains incidents of physical attacks, bodily harm as well as all forms of sexualized violence, where the woman is the target. Economic violence in politics or in other forms of public engagement includes withdrawing resources necessary to enable the successful execution of the mandate, which possibly includes financial compensation, access to funding, access to office, equipment of services normally accompanying the execution of the mandate (Krook and Sanín, 2016, 141). Psychological violence affects the wellbeing, stability, and mental state of the victim, often resulting in depression, anxiety and stress. Krook and Sanín include threats of violence, including rape and death threats (2016, 140) and other forms of harassment, including sexual (Krook and Sanín 2016, 141). In the category of psychological violence, the disclosure and spread of personal information, images, videos, claims or other accusations, whether true or fabricated is very common and employed to harass, ridicule, ostracize, shame and discriminate against the victim (Bardall 2013) and often results in character assassination, irreparably harming the reputation of the individual. It is important to note that psychological violence is the most common and one to which women are especially vulnerable, because of

the existence of double standards when it comes to the execution of public functions and women's vulnerability to threats based on morality and sexuality stemming from these (Bardall 2013, 3).

Symbolic violence is closely related to psychological violence and its instances would often not be categorized or described as violence, because of its prevalence and normalization stemming from it, but exactly because of its prevalence and acceptance it is one of the most common and harmful forms of violence. According to Krook and Sanín, symbolic violence functions “at the level of portrayal and representation, seeking to erase or nullify women's presence in political office” (2016, 144) and often employs overly sexualized or dehumanizing images, descriptions or language to punish, discipline, dominate or erase women. Symbolic violence is closely tied to culture, traditions and gender roles or stereotypes in the specific country or region and therefore may be harder to notice, recognize and call out exactly because of its embeddedness in cultural traditions and subsequent normalization and trivialization (Krook and Sanín 2016, 144). Furthermore, even if it is recognized, it might be framed simply as part of politics and something to be suffered and many women might consciously choose not to mention or address it so as not to draw more attention to themselves or not to be labelled as hysterical, frigid, or too serious and unable to recognize humor (Krook and Sanín 2016, 137).

In 2021, Krook expanded her theorization of types of violence against women in politics, by including “semiotic violence”, which conceptualizes and reads acts of violence perpetuated by language, images or body language as signs. These signs are then read, recognized and interpreted not only by the targeted woman, but by society in general. Krook terms this “public signification”, when one incidence against a woman in politics or public life in general is recognized as a message to all women as being unworthy or unsuited for public life, linking it to instances of hate speech, often aimed against entire groups or minorities (2021, 375).

Importantly, most forms of violence against women can be perpetrated or intensified in the online space. Some of the most severe forms of online psychological violence encompass hacking into personal accounts, using spyware to gain access to data, or usage of applications which monitor all activities of the individual on their computers or phones (Bardall 2013, 2). Online psychological and semiotic violence against women active in the public sphere is especially relevant now, in times of unprecedented online attacks and harassment in the cyber space, and it has a number of unique characteristics. Firstly, the ease and speed with which online content is spread results in enlarged scope in the sense that it reaches a very wide audience, amplified by the algorithmic preference for misogynistic and hateful content on social media, as recent study demonstrates (Regehr et al. 2024). Second, internet and online spaces offer a sense of impunity and anonymity for the perpetrator(s), as many social media platforms still allow users to have accounts not tied to their personal identity and the enforcement of community rules is time-consuming and lacking in resources – both human and financial, furthermore, it is not clear what should the legal consequences for committing different acts of harassment and violence be, and how to clearly distinguish between them (Bardall 2013, 4-5). Lastly, the scope and damage of online violence against women can largely be attributed to the way online content is spread and travels – it is shared, liked and reacted to, which means it reaches larger audiences, but at the same time this complicates the attribution of responsibility – is only the creator of the post to be held responsible or also the individuals further sharing it (Bardall 2013, 4-5). Moreover, even if the content spread online is untrue and the targeted individual took some action to stop it, the damage and consequences are impossible to erase, both in the sense of psychological harm, stress, or anxiety inflicted as well as the time, energy and resources used to document and report it but also reputational harm caused (Bardall 2013, 4).

From a methodological perspective it is crucial to recognize that these forms of violence may overlap and occur to the same person. A woman may be targeted both for her political views as well as for being a woman in politics and expressing her opinions and making decisions. To be able to distinguish between these two instances of violence, Krook proposes a “bias event approach”, which requires a careful empirical investigation of the violent incident, analyzing the intentions of the perpetrator, the choice of targets and the intended and unintended impacts and consequences in a broader context to determine whether bias against a certain group was significantly present (2023, 35). Of course, victims of gendered violence are not only women, even though they are the most common victims, members of the LGBTQ+ community are frequently targeted as members of a specific group. Furthermore, the concept of intersectionality provides a useful lens for drawing our attention to individuals occupying multiple marginal identity positions, thus making them more vulnerable to possible attacks. It has been noted that women from marginalized communities, such as indigenous communities in Latin America or Black female politicians in the United States or the United Kingdom experience different and possibly more attacks than white female politicians (Kuperberg 2018, 687).

1.2. Slovakia – Setting the Scene

Slovakia has since 2018 experienced a period of political and social instability, partially caused by the 2018 murder of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancé, which sparked nation-wide anti-government protests resulting in the resignation of prime minister Róbert Fico and subsequent revelation of corruption scandals accompanied by the COVID-19 pandemic (Nicholson 2024b). Therefore, in the period from 2018 to 2024 Slovakia has had six different governments. The return to power of Róbert Fico and his party SMER-SD in the 2023 parliamentary election is a testament of the disillusionment of society and disappointment with the government, which in 2020 won with a strong public mandate, which

was self-professed anti-corruption government, which allowed the law enforcement authorities to pursue processes and charges of corruption against many state officials, politicians and oligarchs, but also passed a number of populist legislative changes with negative impact on public finances (Nicholson 2022). At the same time, several coalitional members of parliament introduced laws with the intention to restrict access to reproductive healthcare, abortions were not provided during the COVID-19 pandemic and a number of organizational changes were made at the Department of Gender Equality under the Ministry for Work, Social Affairs and Family, such as renaming it to the Department of Equal Opportunities of Men and Women and removing the word gender from all its official documents and strategies, causing its director to leave after 9 years in office. These examples already demonstrate a strong presence of anti-gender sentiment among the previous governments, explored by Maďarová and Hardoš (2022) or Vargovčíková (2021).

Currently, the fourth government of Róbert Fico has passed a number of legislative changes, such as an expansive reform of the Criminal Code, which dissolved the Special Prosecution Office, which was tasked with prosecuting the most serious criminal acts and the amendment also reduces penalties and reclassifies criminal damage levels for a wide range of criminal acts, including financial crime and corruption. Furthermore, the parliament passed a law, which separates the public broadcast television and radio, creates an ethical commission to oversee that the services offer a ‘plurality of opinions,’ and gives the ministry and public officials greater control over the media content, accompanied by changing the executive director of the public broadcast television. At the same time, governmental officials and ministers are boycotting established independent media, refusing to answer their questions at press conferences or attend their discussions and debates (Nicholson 2024a). One of the coalitional parties also proposed legislation targeting non-governmental organizations, by requiring NGOs that receive more than 5000 EUR annually from abroad to be labelled as

organizations with foreign support (Spectator 2024). These attacks on the independence of media, civil society and the judicial system are accompanied by vulgar, personalized attacks and harassment of journalists, especially female ones as well as oppositional politicians and the president.

1.3. Case Selection and Sampling Method

This thesis is positioned against the current social and political backdrop of Slovakia and will explore and analyze the experiences and impacts of online gender-based violence on female politicians and journalists and on their presence in the public space. This research thus contributes to the emerging scholarship on patterns of gendered violence against women in the public sphere in order to identify the biggest risks and failures of the current system and contribute to the formulation of public policies and mechanisms to ensure safer online spaces as well as foster diverse representation and participation and thus contribute to the functioning of democracy.

In my research I focus on exploration and analysis of qualitative data, collected through 14 elite interviews with female politicians, journalists, and gender equality experts and some additional statements taken from newspaper interviews and newsletters, and social media posts of female journalists and politicians in Slovakia. For the additional materials I selected a corpus of publicly available and published data written by or about relevant public figures, who openly spoke out about their experience with gendered abuse and harassment both online and offline and its effects on their wellbeing, health, and motivation to actively participate in politics or public discourse. This is largely supplementary data from women I was not able to secure interviews with and who publicly addressed their personal experiences with gender-based violence and the role it played in their decision to retreat from the public sphere indefinitely or put their career on hold.

This research is not representative, but rather is reacting to a number of recent phenomena – vulgarization and personalization of harassment and attacks in the public discourse by politicians and public not only on social media targeted against specific politicians and journalists (Apolitical Foundation 2023) and a number of women leaving politics or the public space because of the gendered violence they experienced (Perraudin and Murphy 2019; Håkansson 2024). The method used for case selection is based on convenience and snowballing, reflecting the current political situation and observed patterns, which means that all respondents who are members of the parliament are from the democratic oppositional parties and journalists are from established independent media. The respondents were contacted by email, where I provided both personal details as well as the aims and purposes of this research. The respondents signed consent forms with detailed information on how will the data be used and anonymity guarantees. The focus on a specific subset of women in the public sphere allowed me to identify and draw conclusions about some processes and patterns related to online violence within the particular context in Slovakia, where currently figures who are critical and outspoken about the current government's actions and policies are a common target of violence. The exclusion of coalitional politicians as well as female politicians of the far-right or nationalist parties and journalists from the increasingly popular disinformation channels in this research is deliberate. When it comes to women active in those areas of public sphere, specific representations and performances of gender are at play, especially because these actors often actively participate in anti-gender movement's discourse and actions. There is considerable scholarship dedicated to the explorations of gender and women's participation within right wing and far-right political parties (Blee and McGee Deutsch 2012; Blee 2018, Orr 2019; Eksi 2021; Weeks et al. 2022), but in this research I focus on women who are active in independent media and oppositional political parties.

1.4. Methodology

The 14 realized elite interviews include 8 members of parliament, some of whom held ministerial posts in the past, 2 candidates running for the European parliament, 3 journalists working for newspapers as well as television and 2 gender equality experts. The interviews were realized over a period of four weeks, between April 17, 2024 and May 14, 2024 and largely cover the period of their presence and activity in the public sphere – when it comes to the politicians either the current parliamentary period and the preceding campaign or the time period after the murder of Jan Kuciak in 2018 as this was major trigger for political changes as well as a new discourse. The interviews with gender equality and gender-based violence experts cover the time period from 2014, which was the year of publication of the first National Strategy for the protection and support of human rights and the subsequent Referendum for the Family, which took place in 2015 and is by my respondents dated as the start of the anti-gender movement in Slovakia and the beginning of increased online abuse targeting gender equality proponents publicly associated with these values (Maďarová and Hardoš 2022).

The interviews were conducted in Slovak and the quotations used have been translated into English by the author. The interview questions were structured into 3 sections: I. Key policy areas in career and experiences with online violence, its forms, frequency, content, and triggers, II. Help seeking and coping mechanisms focusing on consequences on career and personal life, implemented coping strategies and steps taken to prevent or contest the harassment and abuse, and changes to motivation, and III. Current political and social climate and atmosphere and comparison to the past, and satisfaction with existing protection mechanisms and reporting opportunities. The structure of the interviews and specific questions can be found in the Appendix.

The collected data was analyzed applying critical discourse analysis via a feminist lens to identify overarching themes, which would aid in the identification and explanation of the

specific dynamics and processes of online gender-based violence that women in the public sphere experience and its larger consequences and effects on their presence, gender equality and democracy. Critical Discourse Analysis is one of key methodological approaches in social sciences, which came to prominence in the 1990s as part of a wider ‘discursive turn,’ as it allows for a contextual understanding of meaning making processes especially in relation to power and domination and their creation, reproduction or contestation (van Dijk 2005). Critical Discourse Analysis has been especially prominent in political science because of its suitability to analyze practices of domination and subjugation, social problems, inclusion and exclusion as well as empowerment and the uncovering of domination on a social and political level (Fairclough 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2015). Furthermore, critical discourse analysis is relevant both for the analysis of the data from the interviews and media, but also for understanding the wider political and social context related to the attacks on independent media, anti-gender movement, and attacks on the civil society, all of which are reflected also in the form and content of the online violence that the public figures experience, which is tied with the different kinds of violence, especially symbolic and semiotic as defined by Krook.

In this research I have opted for a feminist critical discourse analysis as I am specifically interested in how the women in public sphere make sense and deal with the experiences of online violence and how do they respond to it in the wider social and political context in Slovakia. Lazar defines the practice of feminist critical discourse analysis with the mission of social transformation as showing the “workings of power that sustain oppressive social structures/relations” and contributing to “on-going struggles of contestation and change through what may be termed ‘analytical activism’” (2007, 145). Lazar underscores the importance of not equating the experiences of one woman with all women, the principle of universalism, which has been heavily criticized and dismantled by third wave feminists: “The mechanisms of power not only often work in subtle and complex ways, but the relations of asymmetry are also

produced and experienced in different ways for and by different groups of women” (149). She further draws attention to the relations among women themselves and whether they engage in practices of solidarity building or whether when they function in spaces dominated by men, they perpetuate inequality and domination against other women (Lazar 2007, 150). The goal of feminist critical discourse analysis is to understand how practices of power and domination or resistance to their dominant forms are produced and sustained through various discursive practices.

Next to applying feminist critical discourse analysis on the primary data, I also employ the analytical framework proposed by Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo analyzing the presence of gender in various aspects of violence. Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo bring attention to deepening the understanding of both theorists and practitioners by offering a “new framework for identifying the gendered dimensions of political violence, broadly understood as any violence that impedes the regular unfolding of political processes” (2020, 917). This new analytical framework distinguishes three levels of analysis – looking at the presence of gender in motives, forms, and impacts in instances of political violence, thus allowing for a more nuanced understanding of political violence against (not only) women in terms of whether an attack was intended to ultimately prevent a woman from being politically active because of her gender, which disrupts the hegemonic patriarchal social order, or rather a gendered attack was utilized to discredit the person as a member of opposition or a representative of opposing values or policies but not specifically because of the gender (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020, 924). At the same, even if the motives of the perpetrator are not necessarily gendered but the interpretation by the victim, wider public or the feminist community is, the consequences and impacts are gendered as well. This can result in the message that women are not welcome in public life (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 2020, 927), which might further impede their motivation to participate.

The aim of my research is thus to analyze and examine how the processes of online gender-based violence function in Slovakia, how the women targeted by them make sense of and deal with these experiences and lastly, what are the implications for policy-making and regulation now and for the future. The following analytical section is divided into two main chapters. First, I focused on the exploration of individual experiences of online violence against women in the public sphere in terms of distinguishing its gendered forms and impacts following Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo's methodological approach as well as the typology of different forms of violence, focusing in particular on instances of psychological, semiotic, and symbolic violence based on Krook's definition. I carefully considered, whether specific patterns related to the current political and social context can be identified when it comes to the forms and contents of the instances of violence.

Second, I identified a prominent pattern when it comes to women's awareness and identification of coordinated attacks and instances of violence in the online spaces, which I discuss in the second chapter. These directly respond to events and discourse in the public sphere by other politicians, government officials, or other well-known individuals and create a multi-level dialogue of sort, entangling discourse online with the offline, blurring the border between the two. This chapter therefore examines the structural and coordinated patterns of online violence against female politicians and journalists critical of the government and the involvement of the masses, who are often part of conspiracy and disinformation networks, in its amplification. I also explore the potential and presence of strategies of coordinated resistance and solidarity building by the affected women and wider society to counter the identified processes and the existing protection mechanisms and safety guarantees. In this analysis I am coming largely out of the experiences, opinions and perceptions of the interviewed journalists, politicians, and experts.

My research of close reading and critical discourse analysis of female politicians' and journalists' experiences with online gendered violence revealed coordinated patterns and processes of attacks and harassment directed at the opposition and a subsequent perceived lack of protection and redress mechanisms at the national level, stemming from the involvement of governmental representatives within the networks of online violence. This implicates future importance of EU-level regulation of social media platforms as well as the necessity of platforms to increase their efficiency and speed up the processes of reporting, but even more importantly to become aware of patterns of violence related to democratic backsliding and their ability to react to them in a timely manner. Last but not least, this research draws attention to the prevailing harmful gender stereotypes related to being woman in the public sphere and its impacts on hindering building of a wider solidarity coalition of women but also shows some emerging practices.

Chapter 2. Are They All Prostitutes and American Agents?

2.1. Gendered Online Violence against Women in the Public Sphere in Slovakia

The women I have interviewed regularly receive hundreds of violent and abusive messages and comments on their social media, emails sent into their official work or private accounts, or even hand-written letters to their offices in the parliament, newsrooms, private homes or their parents' homes and most of them consider this an everyday part of their reality and the burden that comes with the job of being a politician or journalist. In this chapter I will offer a close reading and an overview of instances of online violence as experienced by female politicians and journalists along the lines of its gendered forms, motives, and impacts and the distinctions of different types of violence. I pay close attention to specific categorizations and prominent themes in the content of the attacks and instances of violence, which I relate to the wider political and social discourse. I position this discourse within government sponsored attempts at weakening democracy targeting both political opposition, independent media and civil society, who are openly critical of policies and steps taken by the government. This enables a creation of a specific lens for considering instances of violence against women in the public sphere in connection with liberalism and progressive values that they represent. Lastly, this chapter examines the gendered impacts of online violence that specifically target these women as mothers and members of families, restating the continued relevance of the public/private divide for women's participation in the public sphere.

According to a research done by the European Women's Lobby women are 27 times more likely to experience harassment online (2017, 5), and the United Nations estimates that around 95% of all abusive and violent content and harassment online is directed at women. A UNESCO study of prevalence of online violence against journalists found that 73% of female journalists have experience with online violence (Posetti et al. 2020). In 2018, Inter-

parliamentary Union carried out a study among 123 female European parliamentarians, finding that 58,2% of MPs who took part in the study were targets of online sexual harassment and sexist attacks and 85% experiences psychological violence (2018). Women in the public sphere, such as politicians and journalists are therefore more likely to be targets of gender-based violence in the online space than general population. All women whom I interviewed reported having experienced online violence, with majority regularly receiving personal messages, emails or comments under their social media posts with abusive or violent content, which according to them was clearly gendered. Scholars of violence against women in politics identify several prominent themes, which are targeted when it comes to the content of the violence and abuse, such as physical appearance, sexuality, age, private life or family status, most of which were mentioned as common by all the interviewed politicians and journalists. I would like to highlight several prevailing themes in connection with common political and social narratives of the illiberal movement: politicians and journalists are commonly referred to as agents, sellouts or prostitutes serving both sexually and ideologically the enemies ranging from the America, Brussels, which represents the European Union, the financier George Soros or private interest groups. These references thus link these female politicians and journalists with foreign values, which are portrayed in opposition to national values. Such instances of harassment and attacks support Bardall's argument of women being vulnerable to attacks based on morality (2013, 3) on two accounts – being available and providing sexual services as well as ideologically by being the enemies of the Slovak national interests. Furthermore, these incidents further denigrate the women by always using nouns, which render them a sexual object or into somebody serving someone more powerful. When the journalist Zuzana Kovačič-Hanzelová announced her career break in journalism and retrieval from the public sphere due to long-term intense online hate, which culminated in a physical attack, she also revealed a screenshot of a message received from a well-known extremist, whose influence will be discussed in more

detail in subsequent chapter (2024). The message, see Figure 1, reveals the intensity, vulgarity, scope and de-humanizing aspects of gendered attacks. The message targets several aspects – personal life and integrity, her career and competence as well as the liberal and progressive values she represents.

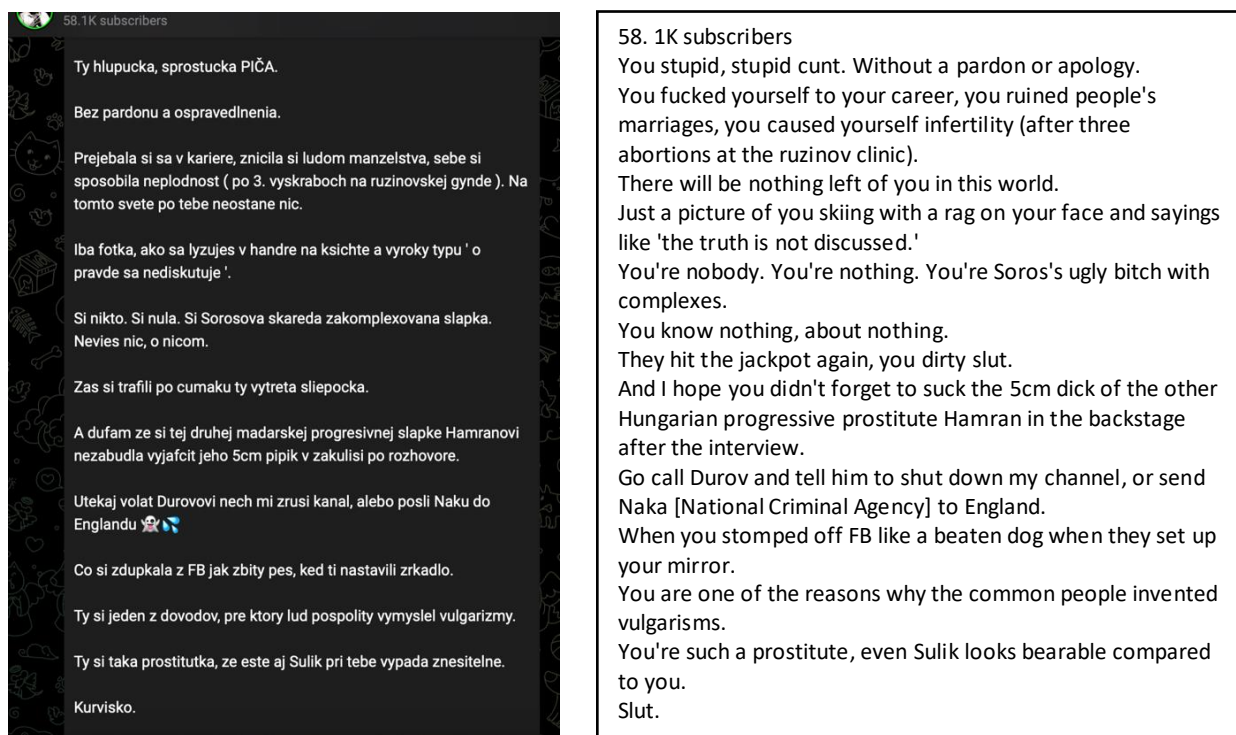


Figure 1: Screenshot of a message sent to Zuzana Kovačič-Hanzelová, on the right English translation.

Source: Kovačič-Hanzelová, Z. (2024), translated by the author.

Another prominent theme in the content of the online comments or messages is sexual orientation and gender identity of the women I interviewed, which is hinted at or questioned. One Member of Parliament said she is regularly described as having manly features or looking like a man, another said she is often accused of being a lesbian or a transgender person and being accused of engaging in various explicitly described sexual activities with her other female colleagues, such accusations are common for female politicians due to the supposed role incongruity between the characteristics of women and characteristics deemed as necessary for being a leader (Eagly and Karau 2002). Another respondent mentioned she is frequently targeted for using her last name without the traditional female-form last name ending –ová typical for most Slavic languages by her gender identity being questioned or suspecting her of

being a transgender man, accusing her of not being knowledgeable in Slovak grammar or correcting her and writing her name with the ending, which can be read as an act of discipline for a perceived transgression.

Gender sensitive language has been mentioned as a trigger for abusive online behavior by two other respondents, who mentioned that older men especially get upset about gender sensitive and inclusive language. In Slovak this usually manifests by adding more forms of nouns or verbs or using gender-neutral nouns. The men respond by “mansplaining” (described as such by respondents) when gender inclusive language is used in articles or on social media. Such reactions can be read as anger at women for becoming visible and wishes to erase them again, since gender inclusive language is seen as something abnormal, something foreign to Slovak culture, much like the other values these women represent, which are associated with western and pro-European values. Inclusive language for those who use it is seen as empowering and political, because it highlights the presence and visibility of women but can also be used to discipline the perceived transgressions of changing the standard and traditional form of language.

All of these examples are connected to progressive and liberal values, either in connection with implementing them, such as in the choice and use of language or representing them via portrayed sexual relationship with their foreign origin. This connects to the focus areas of their policy work, which the respondents alleged resulted in or targeted the most violence, including gender equality, human rights, LGBTQ+ rights, migration, rule of law and protection of democracy, or support of Ukraine in the war, which within the context of rise of nationalism and populism are often portrayed as foreign and threatening to traditional and national values of the country and are seen as direct influence of western forces. The discussed gendered forms of violence attempt to “injure, discipline, and subjugate women” (Krook 2022, 375) by either disciplining their use of language, thus rendering them invisible and unimportant or by accusing

them of serving enemy interests – as prostitutes, agents or sell-outs thus representing them as incompetent and unsuited to their mandate – be it in politics or media. Making invisible and incompetent are the two most common strategies of semiotic violence as theorized by Krook, which via their public signification target not only the individual women, but in this public act they become representative of all women, who share the same values. Especially in the case of discursive practices of naming, the women are equated with their female colleagues, entire newspapers and televisions or political parties.

One of the political party whose members I interviewed openly professes its values of inclusion and acceptance of minorities and two of its female members openly discuss and address their identities of belonging to the queer community and of being Roma in their careers in order to demonstrate the political representation of these groups, but both disclosed that they are often targeted for it. The respondent who is the only openly queer member of the parliament and is bringing up her daughter with her female partner said she frequently receives homophobic and transphobic messages and comments but also fake images with her picture and fabricated transphobic quotes, which she considers very damaging, as she has great following from the queer community. Another respondent who belongs to the Roma community mentioned being subjected to racist comments by people who know of her ethnic background but also that at times she is referred to as “mutant” by those who claim she is too educated and therefore cannot be Roma. These experiences of intersectional violence demonstrate the hardships and double standards those who belong to different minority groups experience. One respondent summarized it as follows: “I have to prove myself twice as much as other women, because I am underestimated both for being a woman and for being Roma.”

While all respondents confirmed being subjected to online violence daily, they consider some experiences as more severe and deserving of certain actions. One Member of Parliament mentioned she received hundreds of abusive and violent messages, email and comments daily

and said that she considers this ‘normal’ and ‘simply part of the job’ but she revealed two experiences, she herself considered extreme. One was receiving a filled and used condom in a sealed envelope into her parliamentary office and the other experience was of having a stalker for a number of years, which she recounted as follows:

But it was like really thousands of emails a day and the guy is living this normal life with you, which includes the daily messages like I'm in the shop and what you're going to have, to the nightly messages like he's going to send you a video of him masturbating and his erection and stuff like that, which is like really annoying.¹

Due to the severity and continuation of the stalking and harassment she filed a criminal complaint, but mentioned that the whole process took more than two years before the man was officially charged and found guilty, despite her knowing his identity. He was also a repeat offender, who stalked other well-known women online and was already convicted. This MP admitted to being scared and concerned for her and her family's physical safety because her address could be found online and her work plans and public appearances are often advertised online as part of her political work and she was not offered any protection during the ongoing process. This experience clearly points to the failures of the criminal justice system, with the lengthy proceedings and lack of protective measures despite the identity of the perpetrator being known the whole time, furthermore, the respondent had to provide physical copies of the entire electronic communication, which is very time consuming.

¹ For the purposes of this master thesis I have decided not to identify the quotes as belonging to different respondents as is often done via the use of unique IDs in order to protect the identities of respondents, ensuring that different quotes and information would not be connected as being related to one individual.

2.2. Women as Mothers

Unlike the vulgar messages and comments, which are by most considered an unpleasant but everyday part of their professions, threats, especially against families and children were considered by most respondents a step too far. One politician commented the following:

Those attacks I don't know if they can get any rougher than I've experienced. The fact that part of the attacks included threats made against my children so it really has nothing to do with my work and they are small children that nobody has ever seen or heard of and yet they were often threatened. I think that's probably the most vulnerable for a politician and I don't want to make a distinction now between women and men but I guess in some ways when they say that to a politician who is a mother against her minor children it's very hurtful. It's very painful. And uh, after these attacks, I don't know if anything has surpassed them. I have to admit, in the online space.

Whereas most respondents have never filed a criminal complaint, two respondents filed two complaints each after receiving death threats aimed at them or their children and a number of interviewed women claimed that if the safety and wellbeing of their families would be threatened they would take legal actions, but also would consider ending their career as a likely consequence. Furthermore, four respondents expressed great concern for the mental health, wellbeing, and safety of their extended families, especially parents who in four cases received hateful letters by mail, but who are oftentimes sent violent messages online or regularly read comment sections or discussions on social media. Attacks on families and their efficiency demonstrate that the division of private versus public is still relevant for women active in the public sphere, as by threatening or targeting their families, the perpetrators remind the women of their place – in the home and taking care of their families, and the threats and violence can be read as a punishment for transgressing the public/private divide and claiming a presence and voice in the public sphere. Similarly, the president Zuzana Čaputová cited attacks against her family members as something unfair, unacceptable and devastating for the entire society (Balogová 2023) and many consider it one of the reasons for her decision not to run for second

presidential term. At the same time, relation to families was also mentioned as an effective counter strategy by some respondents, who in response to offensive sexualized or vulgar comments would respond by asking how would they feel if somebody talked to their daughters, wives, mothers or sisters in the same way and claimed at times it warranted an apology, showing that personalization may work both ways. At the same time, both these strategies, even if effective, are detrimental to the equality and participation of women, as they position women primarily into the private sphere, where they are supposed to take care of children, and under the protection of men, as exemplified by the effectiveness overturning their own offensive comments and harassment against their wives, mothers, daughters or sisters, which implies a sense of ownership as if it women do not merit respect and politeness as individuals, but just when portrayed in personal relation to men. Furthermore, one respondent recounted the following:

I have to say that once it happened to me and it surprised me very much that under one post a man, quite young, probably around my age or under forty, wrote me that who would want such a bitch and I responded that my partner and tagged him there. And actually by that evening the gentleman got back to me saying that he was very sorry and that he had deleted his comment, that he realized how out of place he had reacted and that so once again he was apologizing and that he didn't agree with my opinions but that he shouldn't have done this and he would be sorry if someone had written this to his girlfriend. So I did have one sort of very surprisingly nice experience.

Initially, this could be seen as a positive experience that warranted an apology and a change in discourse, which was abusive in the beginning, the same way that the respondent actually considers is a “surprisingly nice experience”, but at the same time, it proves that some men only come to respect women in relation to other men, from this particular experience it seems that the man regretted offending the respondent only after learning that she was another man’s partner and admitting that he would be upset if somebody offended his girlfriend.

In this chapter I offered a close reading and analysis of various prominent gendered forms of violence that respondents in my research mentioned repeatedly. The interviewed politicians and journalists regularly experience gendered violence and harassment targeting their appearance, sexuality, competences and qualification, and age, but much of this gendered content is connected to these women's ideological and political opposition to the actions of the current government, coalition parties and their supporters. By employing forms of semiotic and symbolic violence, which either turns these women into sexual objects like whores or prostitutes or diminishes their capability and actions by calling them agents or sell-outs, these women are affiliated with different kinds of enemies – the Americans, George Soros, the Brussels and the EU or the liberal values and tolerance they represent. Similarly, inclusive language, which signals the values of gender equality and inclusion in this context also related to liberalism and progressivism, can become the target of violence as well as language itself being used to discipline perceived linguistic transgressions by purposefully misgendering the respondents or calling them by incorrect names. Furthermore, women who embody marginal identities are often subjected to intersectional violence, which makes them especially vulnerable as they are seen both to represent the entire communities which positions them in the middle of mediating for the majority population and the community, thus being often targets of disinformation as well.

The strength and persistence of gender stereotypes related to women's presence and activity in the public sphere was demonstrated by the prevalence of threats against women's children and by their sensitive responses to them, including their admission that the possibility of violence or attacks or the actual harm caused by continuous harassment against their children are often the only reason these women would consider leaving the public sphere and their careers. This both establishes the continued relevance of the public/private divide as an actual barrier to women's equal participation and as an analytical category for analyzing the gendered

motives and impacts of violence against women in the public sphere. The gendered motives of personalized attacks against women and their families could be read as an attempt to discipline them for the transgression into the public space, whereas the gendered impacts could possibly result in women's withdrawal from the public sphere. In the next chapter I will move from the individual level of violence to explore the structural and coordinated processes at work and explore the coping mechanisms and strategies women employ to deal with the violence and combat it.

Chapter 3. There Is a Strength in Unity and the Haters Know It

3.1. Coordinated Processes of Online Violence

In this chapter I will first describe the identified coordinated mechanisms and processes of online violence against women in the public sphere and then move on to the discussion of coping mechanisms on both individual and communal levels. Lastly, I will discuss the existing resistance and possibilities for solidarity building in the wider context of analyzing the gendered impacts of violence. Recently there has been a growing interest in what kind of content is promoted on social media and the internet and what role algorithms play in this amplification. A joint study by University College, London and University of Kent showed how algorithms on social media platform like TikTok normalize and promote hate and misogyny by continuously increasing the exposure of such content to young people (Regehr et al. 2024). Similarly, a research by Anti-Defamation League and Tech Transparency Project revealed that Facebook, Instagram, and X (previously Twitter) all recommend and display extremist, hateful and anti-Semitic content and the most popular extremist accounts when prompted by using the search feature. By liking or sharing such content, even more extremist content was displayed and offered, much of it in direct violation of the community rules (2023). Both of these findings – the amplification of hateful content and misogyny by the social media platforms and the acceptance and promotion of extremist content and its creators are relevant for this research in the context of current political situation in Slovakia.

3.2. Self-Censorship and Withdrawal as Consequences

A large majority of respondents identified the existence of coordinated processes of online violence and heightened exposure to it following certain high-profile appearances of politicians or personalities mentioning them, or politicians and influencers sharing the content of respondents or mentioning them in their own online political content. Almost all respondents

could identify certain specific events or time periods, which were accompanied by waves of online violence – one journalist recounts intense online attacks after a heated discussion with the prime minister during a press conference about corruption charges of one prosecutor, a video of which was posted by the official Facebook profile of the leading political party at the time, with the journalist’s name featured in its title, underscoring the personalization. One Member of Parliament remembers an incident from before she was an MP, when she was a party member and was active in many environmental NGOs, in which her current main political opponent in the area of environment and climate protection (who recently also addressed her as “teen girl from an apartment building”) shared her video, on which she then received more than 500 hateful comments, which led her to change the settings on who is able to comment on her posts. Four respondents, three of them Members of Parliament remember intense periods of online violence and harassment as having a severe impact on their careers. One Member of Parliament was during her function in the area of justice repeatedly accused of being guilty, of being a murderer, called torturer or a prison guard, when a state official charged with corruption committed suicide while in custody. She was first targeted by oppositional politicians, then by general society. She describes the situation as follows:

And I was labeled as the culprit, so people also wrote to me that I was a murderer and that this would catch up with me, and they still write to me, but the harshest was triggered right afterwards. Unfortunately, that misinformation spread incredibly quickly that there was going to be a murder and that the person in question was going to be martyred and I couldn't counter it, counter it or even, like, prevent it from spreading really incredibly quickly.

The severity and intensity of attacks, which according to the respondent were directly encouraged by politicians by writing hateful articles: “They were actually encouraging people and their voters to carry on in this way. So, yes, they got a lot of incentives there for those people to actually do that and they have them even today unfortunately.” These events caused

her to withdraw from social media for almost three years during which she did not read any messages, comment sections or even receive notifications on her phone. The respondent admitted to engaging with social media again only since the pre-election campaign before the September 2023 election.

Another extreme occurrence ending in a complete withdrawal from social media and public life was experienced by one of the gender equality experts, who over a period of few years was receiving online hate and attacks, which intensified as the anti-gender movement progressed. She also had multiple criminal claims filed against her person and had to attend hearings. In the end, due to severe disagreements with management she left her post of gender equality director after nine years and completely withdrew not only from social media and public life but also significantly changed the course of her career after working in the area of gender equality for over 20 years. Withdrawal from social media and public discourse is closely related to self-censorship, which is a common consequence of online violence (Amnesty International, 2018; Beck et al. 2022) and two further cases of self-censorship in the form of completely switching policy areas in which the interviewed politicians specialized before were identified.

Two respondents mentioned their areas of expertise while being active in civil society organizations before joining party politics, were migration and extremism and Roma inclusion respectively, but after being continuously subjected to intense online violence over long time periods they both switched their focus to different topics in their policy work as members of the parliament. Both openly stated that the violence they suffered was the reason for doing so and stressed their unwillingness to experience it again. One of the respondents mentioned she suffered a mental breakdown and burnout as a result, but both women admitted that these experiences fortified them and allowed them to draw strength and not to be so affected by the violence they experience now in their work as politicians. Migration, extremism and Roma

inclusion are related and highly politicized topics, especially in connection with the rise of far-right political parties and the use of anti-immigrant discourse by populist parties and the subsequent targeting and attacks on those who express opposing views. These admissions reveal an interesting discursive practice, where at first, the women reveal the severe negative consequences as a result of violence and as something that could be perceived as a weakness and a pattern of domination, but then they go on and describe how they transformed it into a lesson or an empowering experience, which actually equips them with tools to minimize the negative consequences of online violence now (Lazar 2007, 150). However, even though these practices might be empowering on individual level, they do not manage to transform the practices of online violence nor built any kind of sustained or communal resistance to it among multiple women (Lazar 2007, 150).

Whereas most experiences discussed above were sparked, amplified or encouraged by involvement of political actors, I have identified even more severe and dangerous pattern, highlighting the strength of extremist communities and groups in the online space and their political ties. A majority of respondents as well as other women active in the public sphere spoke about their personal experiences with harassment perpetrated by a well-known extremist² in the online space. This man has a very large following, is very popular in the conspiracy networks and has a popular YouTube channel with over 78 000 followers and is also active on other social media, like Telegram and X, however, his accounts on Facebook or Instagram are repeatedly deleted and blocked because of content that violates community rules and incites hate. This man is facing international criminal charges on four counts: extremism, dangerous stalking, slander and dangerous cyber harassment, but has until now been living in Great Britain in order to avoid the trial and the court ruled only in May 2024 (Filo 2024). At least some of the pending charges were pressed by the journalist Zuzana Kovačič-Hanzelová, who withdrew

² I have decided not to use the real name of this person or his online alias to ensure that this master thesis will not be used by him to harm any of my respondents or other women.

from the public sphere and put her career of political journalist on hold in response to long-term intense violence in the online space that culminated into a physical attack in the street, after her address was shared online by him. Another respondent disclosed a private message she received, threatening her with the disclosure of incriminating pictures from her youth. Other respondent mentioned being targeted by him after posting about Easter holidays and how related traditions normalize violence against women and another respondent shared how shocked she was, when she discovered that this man was commenting on her speech in parliament live on his youtube channel in real time and how within 10 minutes she received hundreds of hateful messages and comments on her social media.

The examples described above underscore the role of online networks and communities in spreading and amplifying violence in the online space and are a testament to the variety of forms – some violence is perpetrated privately and other publicly, where individuals with large following use it to flood social media channels of certain journalists and individuals with abuse and harassment. The most alarming aspect is the failure of prosecution of these offenses or even their public support or a lack of denouncement on behalf of public officials and government representatives, resulting in impunity for perpetrators, which deters other victims to seek justice. A number of Slovak current government officials, including the Minister of Interior, Prime Minister, Defense Minister were guests in the talkshow of this man while in function or before it, but at a time when he was already criminally charged with the offenses of extremism, dangerous stalking, slander, and dangerous cyber harassment (Filo 2024; Sopóci 2024; Šnidl 2023). This attests to the normalization and acceptance, if not support, of violence perpetrated against women in the public sphere by the government officials and their allies against the opposition, both political and ideological. Furthermore, these personal ties and conspiracy networks have consequences for the safety of journalists and politicians because the above mentioned extremist repeatedly encourages his followers to harass public personalities,

including journalists and politicians and reveals their personal information, such as phone numbers or addresses, a practice called doxxing (Filo 2024). A number of my respondents also shared direct experience or fear of screenings by police officers or Slovak information service officials as a favor to politicians, oligarchs or other allies.

Instances of coordinated and intense attacks thus result in a lack of trust in institutions, and possible subsequent withdrawal from social media or public sphere altogether and instances of self-censorship either online or in general career by focusing on areas, which do not result in heightened exposure to online violence. Whereas the gendered aspect of motives of these coordinated attacks could be debated, their form is clearly gendered – targeting women’s personal lives, sexuality, age or accusing them of their career success being the result of sexual favors. Even more importantly, the impacts of experiences of online violence lead women to limit themselves in their careers, self-censor on social media or even forcing them to withdraw from them or their careers in order to protect their mental health and ensure their safety.

3.3. Coping Mechanisms and Resistance

I discussed some of the common negative consequences of experiences of online violence, but many women are not deterred from their careers and presence in the public sphere, but instead use various mechanisms to cope. When it comes to the most common coping strategies to online violence, two prominent themes were identified– minimizing the exposure or creating personal coping mechanisms related to different narratives. Most interviewed members of parliament shoulder much of the responsibility of engaging with online violence on their assistants, where they delegate the primary task of going through the correspondence and online content and deleting, blocking or reporting the most offensive or vulgar ones immediately, before the women even have the chance to read it. Most also make use of the content moderation options by tagging specific words or emoticons, which pre-emptively block the comment from being published. Some respondents leave the entire management of online

communication to their assistants, one called Facebook “hatebook” during our interview and admitted to deleting the app from both her computer and phone, while another said that her assistants respond on all of her social media in her name, in order to protect her peace and mental health. Others feel a sense of responsibility to their supporters and want to offer authentic engagement but at the same time ensure safe and inclusive online space and so their assistants block or delete the violent or offensive content and they respond to the rest personally. The majority of respondents however expressed severe dissatisfaction with the reporting mechanisms on social media platforms and their inability to recognize violent and abusive content and most admitted to not using it anymore because of how inefficient and time consuming it is. One respondent even mentioned that when she created collages of the violent content she receives in order to raise awareness, it was blocked by the platform for breaking the community rules.

On the other hand, journalists usually do not have the resources to outsource the management of their social media to someone else and one journalist shared that experience of online violence made her decrease her activity on Facebook but that she is aware that it is costing her future work opportunities and projects. Some media companies report offering free psychological counselling as well as legal consultations for journalists experiencing violence and also implementing content moderation softwares on their online forums, which preemptively block certain comments from being posted, as one respondent mentioned.

While practical solutions and mechanisms are important, they are usually not available to everyone, nor are they able to minimize the exposure to online violence completely. During the interview process, I identified a prominent narrative of unique personal strength, character or mindset, which enables the respondent to withstand and deal with the online violence seemingly without obvious negative consequences. A number of respondents said “online hate doesn’t affect me, it’s a thing of a conscious decision”, “I steeled myself against it” or “I feel

like I have it under control and it doesn't affect me much." However, closely related to this narrative of control is the unwillingness or inability of some respondents to show vulnerability or weakness by revealing the extent and impact of online violence:

I'm saying, like I accept it all as part of the job. It's just that a lot of times I get so hung up on the fact that actually, I understand that there's a lot of evil in society, but I don't actually want to talk about it [my experiences], I don't even want to put it out there because it doesn't stop the evil it just multiplies it and there's no one to protect you and so we're kind of on our own and at the same time it's like I think that's why a lot of women either don't go into politics or when they do, they just give up and leave. I'm just not that sensitive piece of the puzzle.

From this quote it is clear that the respondent feels like sharing her experiences would result in even more violence directed against her or possibly other women and at the same time, she distinguishes herself from those who might be more affected and underscores the lack of protection mechanisms, leading to possible under-reporting of online violence, constituting the necessity to cope and deal with online violence as a personal responsibility. Similarly, another respondent shared her view on what is appropriate to share on social media from her position as a politician:

. . . sometimes I would like to use those social networks for a practical purpose, for example, if I don't know, I'm looking for a recommendation for something, that I'm looking for a massage at the doctor or something, I've learned not to show weaknesses on those social networks. Like in that sense, although I feel like it is very much part of my belief that we're not supposed to come off as indestructible workaholics. Unfortunately, even that is sort of judged, that we're expected to work here, we're not entitled to go on vacations. We're not entitled to any sort of complain, it's some sort of expectation of us.

This respondent also recognizes the harmfulness of not showing vulnerability and pretending to always be in great condition, which then individualizes both the responsibility to withstand the violence and as an individual failure, when one is unable to do so. Interestingly, all of my 14 respondents mentioned the impact that the exit and accompanying commentary of the

journalist had on them and their perception of the safety and atmosphere of the public discourse in general. Similarly, a number of respondents perceived the decision of the current president Zuzana Čaputová not to run for re-election as a failure on the part of society and politicians to openly speak against and denounce the violence and harassment targeted against the president.

This reveals the presence of collective meaning-making processes, which understand and read the gendered impacts of online violence on individual women but even more importantly on potentially all women in the public sphere and link online violence and its support and acceptance to women leaving it, in a way “reinforcing women’s systematic exclusion from politics,” or public sphere (Bardall, Bjarnegård, and Piscopo 923). But there is a gap between the individual level, where narratives of personal strength prevail, and the communal or societal level of recognition of the harms and need for denouncement of online violence against women. But at the same time this can be seen as a coping strategy, where the admission of harms of violence are made only after the decision to leave the public sphere.

This brings me to a consideration of different kinds of resistance mechanisms other than personal responsibility or individual coping strategies. Certain groups of politicians from the same political party started to engage in communal forms of resistance online, by talking back and calling out the most blatantly sexist harassment coming from governmental officials or people in the online space. They respond to popular social media trends, by making short videos made up of footage of sexist or stereotypical remarks said in the parliament on their behalf against the background of popular video or meme sounds, such as the “Ew brother ew, what’s that brother” (wockyvvs, 2024) meme. Such content clearly ridicules the remarks it responds to and demonstrates the refusal to quietly accept or condone them, especially because of the sounds it uses – such as the ones from described meme, which contain clear sounds of disgust, at the same time, the response is not vulgar nor violent it simply repeats what has been said however, by revealing the presence of stereotypes or sexism. The text corresponding to the post

simply says: “‘Rational arguments’ of our coalitional colleagues are just like,” and the post is co-authored by three politicians, making it a communal activity of sorts.³

Another strategy to counter online violence, incitement of hatred or spread of disinformation is employed by the Facebook group called ‘Dobre.’ which translates as Good. and which currently has over 11.5 thousand members (Dobre., 2021), . The group’s activities include countering violent, offensive or hateful content on Facebook by having as many of its members as possible to like and comment the phrase Dobre. [Good.] on selected posts, to both demonstrate solidarity and strength of community and to counter and drown out the negative and violent responses. The strength of such group activity lies in its size and strategies, which demonstrates the number of supporters as one community as well as manages to counter the negativity by often times bringing the original author of the post to remove it or to block the comment section, stopping further amplification of hate (Daráková 2021). Where the group Dobre. addresses not only violence against women, but online hate, harassment, and disinformation in general, I want to underscore one public activity, which directly addresses violence against women.

There is a new platform We Are Here, founded by the president Zuzana Čaputová. Its founding was announced on March 8, 2024, the International Women’s Day with a special theatre performance of scenic reading called *I will cut off your head!* authored by the collective Haters, in which three men read the actual violent messages received by women active in the public sphere, including politicians, journalists but also doctors or actresses. In the reading they address an actress directly on the stage, thus personalizing both the perpetrators but also the women, from the anonymity and de-personalized online space into face-to-face interaction with facial expressions and words spoken out loud. The mission of the platform and the event is to unite and support women affected by different forms of violence but even more importantly to

³ The post is not referenced directly in the thesis, as it would disclose the identity of some of the respondents.

speak up against it, denounce it and make violence visible and unite and support all those who actively fight against it (DPOH Content 2024).

In this chapter I first identified the coordinated and targeted mechanisms of spreading online violence, linking some politicians with personalities in the conspiracy networks with great following and the subsequent distrust in authorities and institutions in their ability and willingness to guarantee protection and prosecute these crimes. There is a number of prominent coping mechanisms and strategies at play, from the perception of individualized responsibility to cope with violence to certain communal forms of resistance, which openly denounce violence as well as show solidarity. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of possible negative consequences of online violence on women's participation and presence in the public sphere and the need for communal denouncement and rejection of it. Based on the interviews, most women in the public sphere lack sufficient resources to report online violence and follow through, but even more importantly lack societal and institutional support – government sponsored or tolerated violence together with the insufficiency and inefficiency of reporting mechanisms on online platforms and the lengthy processes of criminal prosecution on the national level, which are unable to ensure timely protection.

Conclusion

In this master thesis I explored the experiences of women active in the public sphere with online violence, focusing particularly on politicians and journalists as their work is public-facing and requires them to be active on social media and they are oftentimes the targets of harassment, abuse, and violence. My analysis offered a lens into the specific political and social context of Slovakia in 2024, where a number of crises and events over the last couple of years created considerable social instability and polarization, apparent also in the processes of online violence, which unproportionately target women in public-facing roles. While this master thesis does not contain a representative research, which would enable me to draw conclusions about experiences of online violence by women in public sphere across the entire political spectrum nor compare the experiences of female and male politicians, but my focus is on the women who are critical and outspoken about certain aspects of coalitional politics, allowed me to explore and uncover the processes related to online violence in depth. This analysis was anchored in close reading, analysis, and feminist critical discourse analysis of data acquired from 14 qualitative interviews with politicians, journalists and gender equality experts I carried out over a period of two months – April and May of 2024, as well as some additional information available from interviews with or newsletters written by relevant personalities openly addressing experiences with online violence.

Not only did my research confirm that women who actively participate in public sphere are beyond relevant and objective criticism, often targeted and harassed for their appearance, personal lives, sexuality, age or competence in gendered attacks, but currently in Slovakia there are observable patterns of intense coordinated online violence against women based on their representation of certain values with clearly gendered impacts of silencing, censorship and sometimes even complete exit or withdrawal from the public sphere. Female

journalists and politicians who represent, embody and stand for the values of democracy, gender equality, rule of law and human rights aligned with pro-European and progressive values are oftentimes victims of semiotic violence constituting them visibly and publicly as enemies of the country, as prostitutes and agents in sexual and ideological service to foreign forces.

These instances of online violence stem from and are amplified by individual politicians or personalities with great online following via online networks, which then spill over into the following and flood social media of these women. The support and implication of politicians and their allies in governmental and law enforcement institutions lead to both the normalization and acceptance of this violence but also distrust in institutions and legal mechanisms and impunity for perpetrators, which should prosecute the perpetrators and actively seek to protect public figures from harm. The perceived and/or actual impunity for perpetrators and general acceptance of violence has significant impacts on democracy and women's participation and activity in public sphere.

My research has demonstrated that women commonly engage in practices of self-censorship both online and offline, when it comes to speaking out about violence but also redirect their focus and expertise to minimize their exposure to online violence, which occasions loss of expertise and possibly leads to de-prioritization of certain areas such as migration, gender equality or minority rights and inclusion in public policy. As a result of online violence, women take breaks from social media or even their careers, to deal with the negative consequences of online violence on their well-being, mental health or safety. While the decision to leave social media or the public sphere altogether can and should be read as an act of courage and public denouncement of violence by individual women, at the same time, it also exposes the persisting social stigma around speaking out about violence as showing vulnerability and it is a testament of the failure of institutions and society as a whole to take a stand against violence and offer sufficient protection and redress mechanisms to the victims.

My master thesis research has expanded the scholarship on violence against women in politics, by contextualizing it within the larger patterns of the rise of populist and illiberal forces, which inform the gendered forms of different kinds of violence, but especially semiotic (Krook 2022), linking the gendered forms with the value systems represented by these women in the public sphere. Furthermore, by uncovering the greater links between the values of gender equality, but also democracy, rule of law or minority rights often serving as targets, the analysis of whether gender is present in the motives of the attacks loses importance next to the clearly gendered impacts of these attacks, ultimately negatively impacting democracy, plurality and representation.

Several conclusions can be drawn from these findings – oftentimes national legislation and institutions fail to act in an effective and timely manner when it comes to (online) gender-based violence, which is especially significant in times of global backlash against gender-equality. This research also demonstrated that online violence against women can be used as a targeted political tool to harass, abuse, censor, repress and ultimately drive certain women out from the public space and public discourse, by a variety of governmental or other actors. These results further underscore the need for harmonized mechanisms on the EU-level, such as those stemming from the newly adopted EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence (Bauer-Babef 2024) to account especially for such situations when violence against women is state sponsored or supported by governmental actors as one of mechanisms to stay in power and suppress both political opposition and critical media, as is happening in many countries with rising authoritarian tendencies. Furthermore, there is an outspoken dissatisfaction with reporting mechanisms and the responsibility of online platforms to ensure safety and respect for fundamental and human rights, indicating the need for a more thorough regulation of the online space ensuring freedom of speech, but not at the expense of safety and ability of all to participate in public discourse especially in the context of violence

against women, in line with existing scholarship on the role of intermediaries (Pavan 2017). In times of unprecedented technological development the implementation of EU wide instruments such as the Digital Services Act or the AI Act must reflect these changes and ensure that social media and online platforms do not incite hate against any group and are not used to stifle democracy by illiberal forces and regulation of online space must be informed by actual patterns of online violence, which might be context dependent.

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Appendix

Structure of Interview Questions

I. Warm up and introduction

1. Hello, thank you very much once again for taking the time to do this interview. You are one of the most prominent figures of the Slovak media/political space and you have been active in it for many years. Could you please briefly describe the main areas and topics you are involved in?

II. Experience with online gender-based violence

2. Working in media/politics inherently includes activities in online space and on social networks. However, the use of virtual space also has its negatives and pitfalls. Have you encountered attacks against your person through online space during your work? If so, please describe them in detail.

3. Is there a specific event that triggered or exacerbated these attacks?

4. For what topics/areas that you cover have the attacks been most pronounced?

III. Help seeking and coping mechanisms:

5. Could you briefly describe the consequences of online attacks and harassment on you personally, your life, career or family?

6. How have you usually reacted to these online harassment and attacks? Do you have a strategy to deal with the attacks? Please describe.

IV. Future and career

7. Please describe whether your experience with online attacks has influenced your decision/motivation regarding your future career or work?

8. How do you perceive the current political culture also in the context of the attacks women face in public spaces, including social media? Has it changed in recent years?

9. Has your opinion, attitude or motivation to speak out publicly on the issues of gender equality and women's representation in public life changed during your tenure?

10. Do you think that existing protection or reporting mechanisms are sufficient? Where do you see the biggest gaps? (Who should be responsible for the safety and security of people in public space?) Alternatively, where do you see room for positive change?

Is there anything else you would like to add to the topic that I haven't asked?

Thank you for the interview.