

THE MEDIA FRAMING OF A TOXIC CELEBRITY. HOW THE SLOVAK PRESS PORTRAYED THE BUSINESSMAN ACCUSED OF JOURNALIST'S MURDER

Terézia RONČÁKOVÁ – Lucia VIROSTKOVÁ –
Petra POLIEVKOVÁ – Peter KRAVČÁK

ABSTRACT:

The term “celebrity” is neutral and designates people with both admirable and intimidating histories. The media tend to overlook the moral dimension of celebrities and frame them by their own rules. This study describes the media framing of a toxic celebrity in Slovakia: the controversial businessman Marián Kočner, currently on trial for ordering the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018. Long before the killing, Kočner had become well-known to the broader public and appeared as exerting influence on political events. The authors have analysed media texts related to Kočner from 1998 to 2017 and identified 12 generalising frames which could be applied to frame any toxic celebrity. These frames have been aptly titled (Chichikov, mafioso, key player, toxic person, tycoon, Black Peter, Richman, spin doctor, Robin Hood, narcissist, showman, innovator), defined and related to the tonality of the texts (positive, negative, neutral) and to the timeline of Kočner's media image. The study refers to the only gradually increasing negativity of his media framing along with the overall weak sensitivity of the media to his moral character and highlights the difference between serious and tabloid media, with the framing in the latter focused on luxury and gossip reporting.

KEY WORDS:

celebritisation, Marián Kočner, media framing, Slovak press, toxic celebrity

<https://doi.org/10.34135/communicationtoday.2023.Vol.14.No.2.10>

1 Introduction

An individual becomes the subject of the interest of the media predominantly due to their activities and relationships with other persons or events. Publication of information from public and private lives promotes



Prof. Terézia Rončáková,
PhD.
Faculty of Arts
Catholic University
Hrabovská cesta 1B
034 01 Ružomberok
Slovak Republic
terezia.roncakova@ku.sk

Terézia Rončáková is a Lecturer of media studies and Vice-Dean for science at the Faculty of Arts, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia. She has worked for the *Slovak News Agency* (SITA), *Catholic Newspaper* and *Radio Vatican* in Rome. As an academician, she focuses on journalism, religious matters presented in the media and journalistic genres. She is the author of the monographs *The Intersection between Religious and Journalistic Style I, II, III, Religious Messages in the Media: Mission Impossible?* and *Contemporary Journalistic Genres*.



Mgr. Petra Polievková,
PhD.
Faculty of Arts
Catholic University
Hrabovská cesta 1B
034 01 Ružomberok
Slovak Republic
petra.polievkova@ku.sk

Petra Polievková is a Lecturer at the Department of Journalism of the Faculty of Arts, Catholic University in Ružomberok, focusing on media language and media education within the context of formal and informal system of education. Drawing on her extensive experience in media education at the regional level, she is the co-author of the textbook *Media Education at Elementary Schools for Grades 5–9* (2014), and the author of several academic papers on the same subject.



Mgr. M. A. Lucia
Virostková, PhD.
Faculty of Arts
Comenius University
Gondova ul. 2
811 02 Bratislava
Slovak Republic
lucia.virostkova@uniba.sk

Lucia Virostková is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Journalism of the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia. She joined the department after 20 years of journalist practice: she worked for Euobserver.com in Brussels and reported on EU affairs for several Slovak media. After 2009, she worked as a radio news reporter, live political debates moderator, and editor. In 2018, she joined the investigative team at Slovak public TV and received the Journalism Award for investigative reporting in 2022. As a scholar, she specialises in investigative journalism, foreign affairs and EU reporting. She is a member of research projects on investigative journalism and on the celebritisation of Marián Kočner.



Mgr. Peter Kravčák, PhD.
Faculty of Arts
Catholic University
Hrabovská cesta 1B
034 01 Ružomberok
Slovak Republic
peter.kravcak@ku.sk

Peter Kravčák is a Lecturer in Journalism at the Faculty of Arts at the Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia. His research centres on television studies, media history, regional journalism and ethics of media. He is the co-editor of *Communication Paradigms in Linguistics and Journalism* (2020) and co-author of *How to Make School Television* (a handbook for primary and secondary schools, 2022).

popularity, or rather ‘knowability’ of persons and may even lead to their celebritisation. The conditions for the rise and the attributes of a celebrity differ throughout ages as well as the media context in which celebrities present themselves to the public and how they are presented by the media. Therefore, examination of media content may identify several frames of informing about particular persons, observe their development and changes in the determined timeframe as well as in relation to the topics and events associated with the celebrity.

Our research focuses on the specific phenomenon of “toxic” or “dark celebrity” on the example of a well-known Slovak personality of this kind, the businessman Marián Kočner. His life offers perfect material for the examination of the birth, rise and fall of a negative celebrity: from a common petty speculator on the market with second-hand clothes, through an increasingly well-known and influential businessman with political connections, to a nearly untouchable friend of important people – to, eventually, a prisoner sentenced for the forgery of promissory notes and charged of ordering murders. Over this time span of 20 years (1998 – 2018), it is interesting to follow the media coverage of the activities and person of Kočner. On his fate, one may see celebrity-making performed by media, the activism of journalists as well as the influence of the media on social discourse and public policy. It is in the latter that the framing principle is employed, which is the subject of our research.

On this particular, but very typical example of a petty Slovak celebrity we show media frames related to a toxic celebrity. Our aim is first to name and characterise these frames and to examine their development (both qualitative and quantitative) in time. Subsequently, our ambition is to offer the professional public a set of usable general frames associated with a “dark celebrity”, applicable also to other persons of this type and allowing further extended examination (e.g., the relation of the frames to specific media, genres, topics, authors).

2 Theoretical and Social Context

The origin of the word “celebrity” is in the Latin female-gender noun *celebritas* – which means frequent repetition, celebration, noisy audience.¹ The contemporary English verb *celebrate* means to perform (a sacrament or solemn ceremony), to mark (something, such as an anniversary) by festivities or to hold up or play up for public notice. The noun *celebrity* means the state of being celebrated (fame) or a famous or celebrated person.²

Although well-known and socially prominent persons have been associated with our society since time immemorial, the actual condition for the rise of the term celebrity and its viability was only the development of mass media.³ Theatre, press, film, radio, television, and later the Internet, have brought about rapid development of popular culture and, according to Tolston, culture itself began to be fascinated by such forms of public demeanour that bear signs of “genuine emotion”.⁴ Celebrities and their cult have become a ‘religion’; they began to be worshipped, not for their knowledge and deeds, but based on emotions. People began to turn to them as to those who “were in the know”.⁵ One would add, however, that not only do celebrities know more, but also that the emotion was – and still is in the contemporary celebritisation – aroused predominantly by their appearance; i.e., they look good or at least better, extraordinary, they are interesting and popular for their opinions, attitudes or behaviour. A very good example and, in a way, a breakthrough in the understanding of a celebrity in the present context, are the 1950s when television saw mass development following the cinema in the USA as in one of the first countries in the world and along with it came the cult of famous actors who suddenly became celebrities, such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Marlon Brando, Audrey Hepburn or Elvis Presley.

With the increasing numbers of both media and recipients, an increase in the phenomenon of celebritisation also occurs, but, simultaneously, also its devaluation, since what was interesting for media and the audience today, will not be so tomorrow. Therefore, ‘old’ celebrities need to find ever new manners of capturing attention, facing the competition of ‘new’ celebrities longing for this famed ‘social status’. This type

of overly visible persons is described as ephemeral celebrities by Rojek who coined the term “celetoid”. Those are the people who have not won recognition by having done something exceptional, for instance in science, politics, art, sport, business, but they require the status of celebrity which they strive to achieve by artificially drawing attention to themselves.⁶ He calls it a “fame attack”.

The fame culture is now as fundamental to the wellbeing of capitalism, as is oil and nuclear energy. Fame culture produces a fame attack in which the desire for celebrity results in obsessional personalities and dangerously skewed types of behaviour.⁷ Naturally, not only on the part of the celebrities, but also on that of their admirers or fans. Rojek draws attention to an opinion acknowledged in sociology that celebrity culture is pathological. His description of “narcissistic personality disorder” may be compared to the behaviour of Marián Kočner in the media: when celebrities believe that they are essentially superior, their behaviour becomes indifferent towards others in the society.⁸ Due to his contacts with the office of the Attorney General and several judges and due to paid surveillance of journalists, Kočner also experienced the impression of his social superiority. To a great extent, this was discovered only after 2018 and the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. Before that, this kind of behaviour may have been perceived by journalists and society only from his public activities and confident media demeanour, even during his several conflicts with politicians and state authorities as well as from his questionable business activities and contacts.

These revelations – in contrast with the previously more dominant media status of a successful and influential businessman with political connections who is capable of enjoying life – made him a so-called toxic celebrity: a person who desecrates politics and the political scene, public values, tainting social issues and the discourse about them. Exactly this influence has been described by Biressi with the example of Donald Trump who, as a president, himself assumed the role of the celebrity-in-chief and, in so doing, sought to act in politics in a “non-political” manner.⁹

To be a celebrity is unambiguously a matter of a story created by the media about the person. Media and social networking sites play a role not only in the birth of a celebrity but also in their fall or desecration, when it is already spoken of a toxic celebrity. An example of the power of the media which, by the coverage of persons, make even a toxic influence of a fabricated celebrity possible, are Jan-Erik Olsson and Clark Oderth Olofsson who attempted to rob a bank in Stockholm in 1973. Being unsuccessful, they apprehended four hostages for six days in an attempt to invent something to survive the drama. This criminal act gave rise to the currently well-known term Stockholm Syndrome when the victims developed a positive relationship to their captors. As a result of the medialisation of this attitude of the hostages, their detailed descriptions of the course of events in the bank as “safe” and the subsequent public accusations against the police whose intervention in an attempt to liberate them they feared more than the acts of the robbers and abductors, two armed Swedes attempting to rob a bank and apprehending people in an effort to exchange them for their own lives became celebrities – toxic celebrities.¹⁰

On the contrary, an example of how the media are capable of making a false celebrity, but also in the hope that it is media who corrects this false image, is Jimmy Savile, an English TV and radio host. After the disclosure of his sexual deviations, an untouchable celebrity watched by millions of viewers became a *persona non grata* and a criminal. According to Bainbridge, it is the media who are capable of ‘fixing’ one’s media image and, by repeatedly covering the actual reality of a person’s behaviour, produce a so-called therapeutic effect. Therefore, the dominant emotional experience related to a person – a celebrity – formed until that time may be eventually changed and the distorted image of a celebrity repaired.¹¹ With clapsing time and by the number of negative mentions, this trend was also detected in the Slovak media in the case of Marián Kočner.

1 PRAŽÁK, J. M., NOVOTNÝ, F., SEDLÁČEK, J.: *Latinsko-český slovník*. Prague: Česká grafická unie, 1948, p. 198-199.

2 MERRIAM-WEBSTER: *Celebrity*. [online]. [2023-10-02]. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/celebrity>>.

3 RONČÁKOVÁ, T.: Osoba Mariána Kočnera v kontexte mediálnej celebritotvorby. Teoretické zaradovanie problematiky. In KRAVIAROVÁ, M., PEKNUŠIAKOVÁ, E. (eds.): *Média a text 7 (Vol. II)*. Prešov: University of Prešov, 2021, p. 68.

4 TOLSTON, A.: ‘Being Yourself’: The Pursuit of Authentic Celebrity. In *Discourse Studies*, 2001, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 446.

5 ROJEK, C.: *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 121.

6 ROJEK, C.: *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books, 2001, p. 20.

7 ROJEK, C.: *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 148.

8 ROJEK, C.: *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences*. London: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. 4-5.

9 BIRESSI, A.: President Trump: Celebrity-in-Chief and the Desecration of Political Authority. In *Celebrity Studies*, 2020, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 125-139.

10 WESTCOTT, K.: *What Is Stockholm Syndrome?* Released on 22nd August 2013. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22447726>>.

11 BAINBRIDGE, C.: Who Will Fix It for Us? Toxic Celebrity and the Therapeutic Dynamics of Media Culture. In *Celebrity Studies*, 2020, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 75-88.

3 Kočner in the Slovak Media: Bad PR Guru

Marián Kočner is a graduate of journalism and a self-made businessman who has become a ‘villain celebrity’ phenomenon in Slovakia. After years of intensive coverage by the national media, his name has hit international headlines for allegedly ordering the murder of the Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak in 2018. The young investigative reporter used open-source data to reveal Kočner’s involvement in several criminal activities and the shocking reluctance of state institutions to prosecute him. The investigation of the murder in 2018 – 2019 exposed a complex web of corrupted relations and commercially exploited services between Slovak judges, state security forces, and politicians in place with the objective of manipulating law enforcement. Although the media coverage of Kočner dated close to Kuciak’s killing and its police investigation was already predominantly negative, the long-term press review paints a more diverse picture of the frequency and nature of his portrayal by journalists.

Kočner was involved in and reported on three main types of events: celebrity news, business and politics-related developments. As a ‘dark celebrity’, the tabloid press and commercial television outlets presented him as a noticeable participant in grand charity happenings, VIP parties, golf tournaments, and other similar events. His wealth provided for his acceptance into the club of the rich and influential, although his companies, which he owned openly or in secret, did not perform traditional economic activities with concrete production output. Instead, his firms primarily pursued speculative financial operations. In 1992, Kočner’s name was introduced to the media as one of the participants in the Technopol tax fraud, along with the then president’s son Michal Kováč Jr. who was consequently abducted by the state intelligence controlled by allies of Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar and delivered to Austria.¹² The next scheme of Kočner’s Gamatex company involved the speculative purchase of shares in the private *TV Markíza* and resulted in August 1998 with the controversial businessman attempting to take control of the television station with the assistance of a security service with a mafia-connected background.¹³ In fact, Kočner himself became linked to organised crime as his name was included in the police’s unofficial checklist of mafia associates that was leaked to the media in 2005 and 2011.¹⁴

Most often, Kočner appeared in business-related stories on behalf of one side of a conflict. When the Slovak government in 2005 announced the plan to buy off properties from small landowners to support a new Kia plant investment in the Žilina Region, Kočner emerged as their representative and negotiator with the government, and only after the case was resolved did his true benefits from the sale come revealed.¹⁵ In the dispute regarding a waste dump in Pezinok in Western Slovakia, Kočner appeared in 2008 as a deputy of a US-based company that had acquired legal rights to proceed with the dumping ground despite strong public protests against the enterprise.¹⁶ Other activities reported on by the media included his real estate purchases via complicated transactions and financial schemes, joint ventures with off-shore companies of unclear ownership, and fraudulent VAT refund filings.¹⁷

However, until the mid-2010s, police and the judiciary turned a blind eye to most suspicions presented by the media. As a result, Kočner became acknowledged as a powerful actor with influential acquaintances who could not be threatened by state prosecutors or by negative PR. Quite the contrary, he made attempts to exploit his image and high publicity for political purposes. In 2012, a series of SMS messages and videos were leaked that showed the businessman’s past conversation with Richard Sulík, the leader of the then ruling coalition party Freedom and Solidarity (in Slovak *Sloboda a Solidarita*, SaS), over the politically sensitive

process of appointing a new Attorney General and other behind-the-scenes issues at the top state level.¹⁸ Media referred to the scandal as the Sasanka (anemone) files and covered it widely just over a month before the early parliamentary election, which resulted in a landslide victory of the Smer-SD Social Democratic Party and its shift from opposition to the one-party government. Although Sulík apologised to the public and to his party for what he interpreted as ‘a beginner politician’s mistake’, his potential ties with Kočner became a recurring subject of criticism in both the media and Smer-SD’s rhetoric.

Still, as part of the investigation of Kuciak’s murder, Kočner’s private text messages were exposed and signalled that he had invested some 200,000 Euros to finance the journalists’ illegal surveillance. Moreover, he had cooperated with a number of police and intelligence service officials under the Smer-SD administration to obtain the private data of journalists he had intended to use in a bid to counter authors of articles exposing his own dubious financial transactions.¹⁹ The revelations were published while Kočner himself was imprisoned on charges of forging promissory notes worth 69 million Euros on behalf of *TV Markíza* and obstructing justice; in 2020, he was found guilty in the case and sentenced to 19 years in prison.²⁰ In contrast, Kočner was found not guilty on charges of ordering Kuciak’s murder but in 2020 the Supreme Court rejected the verdict and initiated a re-trial.

4 Materials and Methods

The subject under investigation is examined by the *framing* method which is based on the sorting of collected (research) material and the subsequent naming of frames. Frames themselves may be perceived as a stereotypical structure associated with a whole range of linguistic (as well as visual) means, i.e., the knowledge of a frame allows the manner of the portrayal of an individual, a group or a situation to be predicted; and *vice versa*, the awareness of the idea of how a ‘subject should go through’ is related to a particular frame as a repertoire of the means suitable for that. When consulting theory, the first choice is one of the key *framing* theorists Entman, according to whom “[i]f a frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient (...) to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”.²¹ Therefore, it is also the case that frames represent models of interpretation allowing a change of perspective and representing universal knowledge,²² although one may also agree with the statement that frames as such are anchored in the cognitive system of each individual,²³ while significantly affected by super-individual social processes, i.e., individual cognitive experience confronted with the common cognitive experience. All the above finds its application in Cappello and Jamieson’s work. The authors perceive framing as more than just setting an agenda, as it not only brings events to the foreground (while omitting others), but also provides a manner of “thinking about them”.²⁴

The media framing of the person of Marián Kočner is motivated by the conviction that it is his story on which the process of *celebritisation* may be convincingly captured in the environment of the Slovak media. As stated by Gaffney and Holmes, framing can reveal what is becoming important and what is being left behind; what is being

12 KOVANIC, M., COUFALOVA, A.: The Legitimacy of Intelligence Surveillance: The Fight against Terrorism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In *Intelligence and National Security*, 2020, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 115-130.

13 SPARKS, C.: CME and Broadcasting in the Former Communist Countries. In *Javnost – The Public*, 1999, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 25-44.

14 SLIEPKOVÁ, P., PINKOVÁ, A.: Kočner’s Judges: Case Study of State Capture. In *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2021, Vol. 55, No. 3, p. 69-90.

15 TASR: *Gamatex zarobil na pozemkoch pre závod Hyundai/Kia skoro 300 000 Sk*. Released on 9th September 2005. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://index.sme.sk/c/2374171/gamatex-zarobil-na-pozemkoch-pre-zavod-hyundai-kia-skoro-300-000-sk.html>>.

16 PIŠKO, M.: *Kočner a Američania za skládkou nikdy nebolí*. Released on 4th December 2008. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.sme.sk/c/4207146/kocner-a-americiania-za-skladkou-nikdy-neboli.html>>.

17 HOLCOVÁ, P., ŠOLTĚSZ, A.: *Kočner’s World*. Released on 21st February 2020. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.occrp.org/en/a-journalists-undying-legacy/kocners-world>>.

18 BALOGOVÁ, B.: *Sasanka Is the Latest File*. Released on 6th February 2012. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20042353/sasanka-is-the-latest-file.html>>.

19 TÓDOVÁ, M.: *Kočnerovo stádo: Z Glváča chcel ministra vnútra, chystal si aj nového námestníka prokuratúry*. Released on 22nd March 2019. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/1419458/kocnerovo-stado-z-glvaca-chcel-ministra-vnutra-chystal-si-aj-noveho-namestnika-prokuratury/>>.

20 LOPATKA, J.: *Slovak Businessman Tried for Reporter’s Murder, Jailed for 19 Years in TV Station Scam*. Released on 27th February 2020. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-crime-idUSKCN20LIRF>>.

21 ENTMAN, R.: Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. In *Journal of Communication*, 1993, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 52.

22 KANN, C., INDERELST, L.: Gibt es eine einheitliche FrameKonzeption? Historisch-systematische Perspektiven. In ZIEM, A., INDERELST, L., WULF, D. (eds.): *Frames interdisziplinär: Modelle, Anwendungsfelder, Methoden*. Berlin, Boston : Düsseldorf University Press, 2018, p. 36.

23 ZIEM, A., PENTZOLD, CH., FRAAS, C.: Medien-Frames als semantische Frames: Aspekte ihrer methodischen und analytischen Verschränkung am Beispiel der ‘Snowden-Affäre’. In ZIEM, A., INDERELST, L., WULF, D. (eds.): *Frames interdisziplinär: Modelle, Anwendungsfelder, Methoden*. Berlin, Boston : Düsseldorf University Press, 2018, p. 156.

24 CAPPELLA, J. N., JAMIESON, K. H.: *Spiral of Cynicism. The Press and the Public Good*. New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 39.

aspired to and what is being forgotten.²⁵ Simultaneously, in this context, we have the opportunity to shed light on the phenomenon of a celebrity created by media who have legitimised their acting (and often also 'redeemed' themselves) and whom media have elevated to 'high society', only to contribute to the decline of his cult afterwards.

The initial work with the research sample consisted in extensive research of both printed and online texts from 1998 – 2016. As the number of texts dedicated to Marián Kočner has increased disproportionately since 2017, in following the successive development of the media image of this particular toxic celebrity, this year would overwhelm the sample. That is all the more the case with the following year, as on 21st February 2018 Slovakia was shaken by the murder of Ján Kuciak, an investigative reporter, and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, with Kočner being suspicious and subsequently charged of ordering the murder.

In the sample, all print and online periodicals with nationwide coverage were included – a total of 38 titles. The most important of them were the dailies *SME*, *Pravda*, *Hospodárske noviny*, *Denník N* and *Nový Čas*, the weeklies *Plus 7 dní*, *tyždeň* and *Trend*, and the online daily *Aktuálne.sk*. From these nine media, came 404 of the 484 sample items (83%). For the selection of texts, we used the paid Newton Media database service. We have selected texts containing at least one mention of Marián Kočner (including various variants of his name). Subsequently, we (personally) selected opinion pieces, with their identification drawing on the approach to genres developed by Rončáková and motivated by the appearance or occurrence of new genre forms in the sphere of longform journalistic materials.²⁶ In addition to the traditional commentary, column, editorial or feuilleton, numerous instances of such texts that allow for Rončáková's categorisation of hard longform text, soft longform text or analysis may be found. As a rule, those genres are concerned which have a stable place in Anglo-Saxon genre terminology. Opinion texts were more suitable for our research goal than news, because they explicitly express an opinion and therefore carry more clearly formulated frames.

From the entire group of 4,822 journalistic texts about Marián Kočner, a sample of 484 opinion texts has been extracted. It is significant that the number of texts mentioning Kočner has an increasing trend (Figure 1). All Slovak printed media with national coverage are represented (daily newspapers, magazines, online news media).

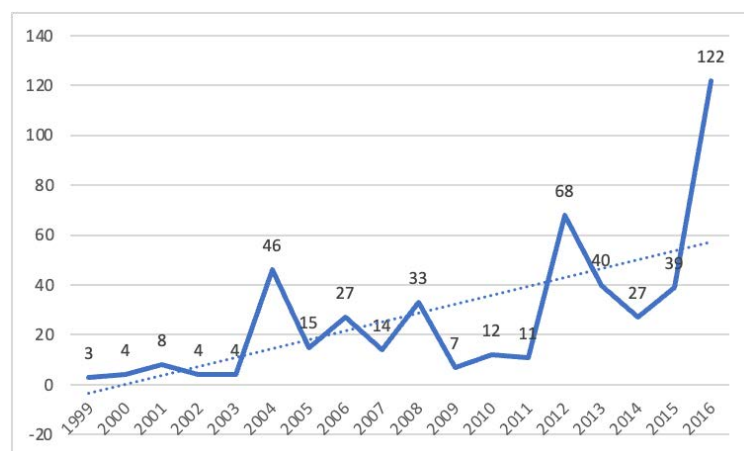


Figure 1: The development of the number of texts over time
Source: Own processing with data from the Newton Media service MediaSearch

For each examined text, in addition to the identification variables (date, medium, author), we recorded two analytical variables:

- tonality,
- frame.

²⁵ GAFFNEY, J., HOLMES, D.: *Stardom in Postwar France*. Oxford : Berghahn Books, 2007, p. 1.
²⁶ RONČÁKOVÁ, T.: *Súčasné žurnalistické žánre. Nové i staré modely v slovenských spoločenských týždenníkoch*. Ružomberok : Vebum, 2016, p. 10.

In one text, several frames may have been present. The average number of frames determined in one text was 1.5. A qualitative approach was adopted with the researcher performing "close (or ethnographic) reading of mass-media texts" with the emphasis on in-depth examination, even on the impressions and internal reactions of the researcher who is considered a relevant representative of norms, principles and customs of their culture.²⁷ Tonality was examined individually, and the findings subsequently objectified in a collective discussion. In the category of frames, each member of the research team made detailed notes which were subsequently categorised, named and in problematic cases verified in a discussion.

5 Results

The tonality of the text was examined in relation to the person of Marián Kočner (regardless of the dominant subject of the article). We determined one of the following options: positive, negative or neutral tonality (Figure 2). In nearly two thirds of the commentaries the tonality was negative, one third of them consisted of neutral articles.

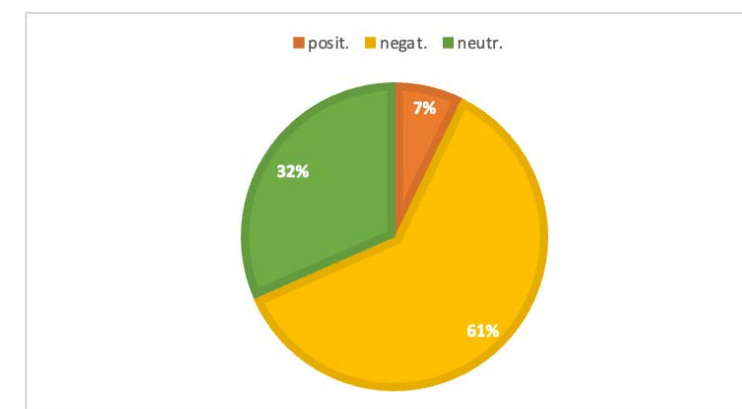


Figure 2: Tonality of the texts
Source: Own processing

From the viewpoint of development in time (Figure 3), the share of negative texts was increasing significantly, depending on the particular piece of news that attracted the attention of the media. The peaks of media attention may be placed to years 2004 (the KIA case), 2006 (running for the office of the mayor of the capital city of Bratislava), 2008 (the waste dump in Pezinok scandal), 2012 (the Sasanka and Glance House scandals) and 2016 (conflicts between Marián Kočner and several representatives of socio-political life, full of mutual accusations of questionable contacts, contradictory information and dubious economic practices). Only in the beginnings of the media interest in Kočner (*TV Markíza*, KIA, the mayor of Bratislava), were the neutral and negative assessments in balance; in all the following cases the negative assessment was predominant.

²⁷ HORNIC PRIEST, S.: *Doing Media Research. An Introduction*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi : Sage, 1996, p. 114.

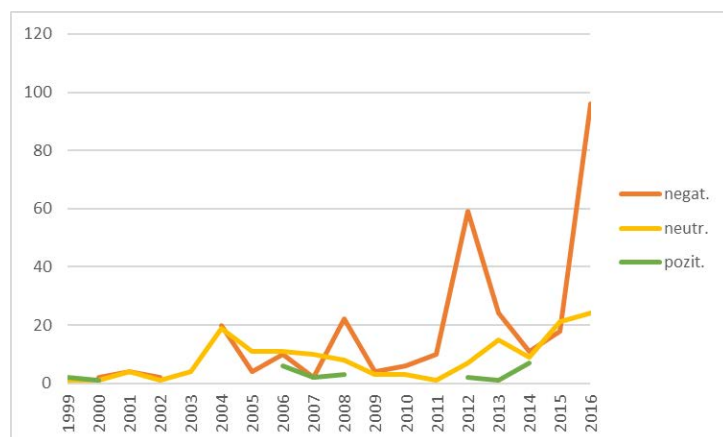


Figure 3: The development of tonality over time

Source: Own processing

The qualitative analysis of the frames related to the person of Kočner yielded 12 categories which were named in the following manner:

- Chichikov,
- mafioso,
- major player,
- toxic person,
- supercitizen,
- Black Peter,
- rich man,
- spin doctor,
- Robin Hood,
- narcissus,
- showman,
- innovator.

The order of their occurrence is expressed in Figure 4.

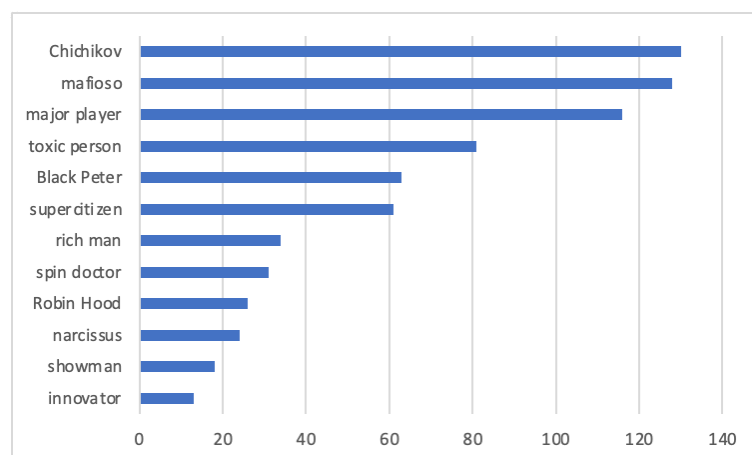


Figure 4: The frequency of the frames

Source: Own processing

By the term “**Chichikov**” we designated a speculator, a fraud and an unprincipled racketeer, a questionable businessperson capable of creatively finding loopholes in laws when it comes to their benefit and profit, unaware that a lie has no legs and sometimes their activities come across as pathetic.

The term “**mafioso**” captures a spectrum of characteristics ranging from a person with contacts – even criminal underworld connections – able to arrange anything, to an actual mafioso, as Kočner began to be perceived by the media in the last years captured in our sample. A typical journalistic phrase to refer to Kočner was ‘a person on the mafia lists’, referring to the information leaked directly from police databases about the businessman’s activities balancing on the edge of the law. In later phases, it was typical to emphasise Kočner’s friendship with various prominent politicians and influential persons. The “mafioso” activities of the examined person linked speculators with the underworld as well as with the representatives of the State.

The phrase “**major player**” designates the frame including the presentation of Kočner as an important and noteworthy person – regardless of a positive, neutral or negative meaning. Journalists have framed him in this manner in various contexts: from showbusiness (a celebrity) to business (a relevant partner) to politics (an influential player). Kočner was presented as a sufficiently interesting, well-known and powerful person. Along with his business and political importance, his standing on the media market (in relation to *TV Markíza*) was also of particular resonance.

A “**toxic person**” is a label for the frame presenting Kočner as a man ‘on the dark side’ – noxious to the country, acting against the public interest and the common good, a sort of dangerous virus infecting anything it comes to contact with. Later, some began to use the Slovak police-jargon term “*závadová*” (in English objectionable, defective) person, i.e., a person who is suspicious and potentially dangerous.

The term “**supercitizen**” denotes the frame for a ruffian, a rude and arrogant fraud who abuses his power and standing to laugh in the face of the law and rules. As if the law could not reach him; at worst he pays a minor fine for its violation.

The designation “**Black Peter**” refers to Kočner as a person with whom nobody wants ‘even to be seen’, because it would cause them problems. This frame is related to that of “toxic person” – friendship or contact with Kočner was mentioned by journalists in order to discredit politicians, and therefore nobody wanted to be associated with him.

As a “**rich man**”, Kočner was presented in relation to his wealth which he proudly avowed and delighted in displaying. Chiefly commentators from tabloid media would point out his participation in events organised by influential and affluent personalities; however, there were also articles about his charitable help to children in a foster institution or about his offer of a high financial prize to those citizens who would come to vote in municipal elections.

The term “**spin doctor**” refers to the image of Kočner as a strategic manipulator and a liar who delights in information games, enjoys the attention of cameras and microphones but is untrustworthy, presenting hoaxes to confuse the public. Especially in the later phases of his career, he would organise press conferences, present his unusual knowledge of the backroom of politics and style himself as a ‘merchant with information’.

The nickname “**Robin Hood**” has been chosen for a protector and avenger of the oppressed who uses his wit, creativity, wealth and influence to serve the weak. He acts as a righteous champion defending common people and opposing the schemes of unjust and dishonest potentates. He makes use of original, untraditional and perhaps questionable methods, but it is all for a good cause. He is celebrated as a generous and magnanimous philanthropist. Kočner was framed by the media in this manner chiefly in relation to the sale of land under the KIA automobile factory, when he himself had bought strategic parcels and led the group of dissatisfied citizens fighting with the government for higher purchase prices.

“**Narcissus**” is a denomination of an ambitious player desiring influence and fame, but their ambition exceeds their actual influence and possibilities, which often makes them appear rather as a pretentious clown, an adventurer and a dubious lightweight.

The term “**showman**” denotes a peculiar, yet clever, creative, witty, and courageous person with original, at times curious ideas, with a sense of eccentric humour and the sources to bring their ideas into effect. A dandy with drive who has no hesitations to bring show and showbusiness to politics. This frame was most often observed in relation to the topic of Kočner’s run for the mayor of Bratislava when he proposed free public transport in the capital.

The term “**innovator**” refers to a reasonable solution seeker capable of viewing a problem outside the box and putting forward an idea, possibly curious, but close to the people and worthy of consideration. This frame was also most frequent in relation to public transport in Bratislava, but it also occurred in relation to Kočner’s ownership of the dilapidated, once famous spa close to his place of birth (Korytnica) or to the waste dump in Pezinok in the context of his project of a modern plasma waste incinerator.

The frames “Robin Hood”, “narcissus”, “showman” and “innovator” appeared at the beginning of Kočner’s media coverage and later waned or gradually disappeared. On the contrary, the frames “Chichikov”, “mafioso”, “toxic person” and “Black Peter” appeared with increasing frequency and culminated in the last years under examination or exactly in the last year (Chichikov and mafioso). The frame “spin doctor” was observed for the first time only in 2012 and since then it constantly increased. The frame “major player” appeared relatively steadily over time, as well as the less frequent frames of rich man and supercitizen. For illustration, the development of the four most frequent frames (more than 80 occurrences) over time is as follows:

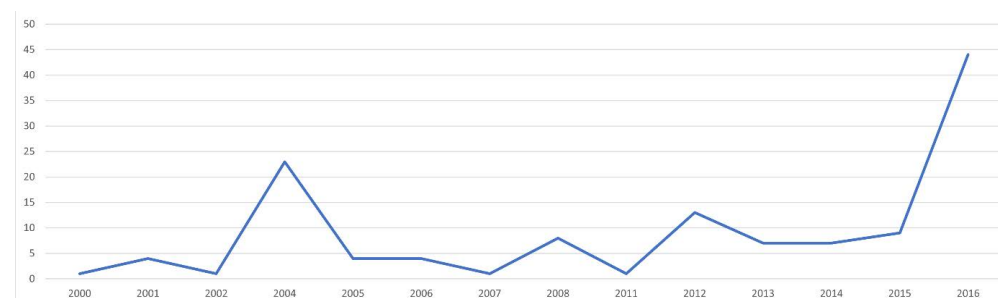


Figure 5: Chichikov over time

Source: Own processing

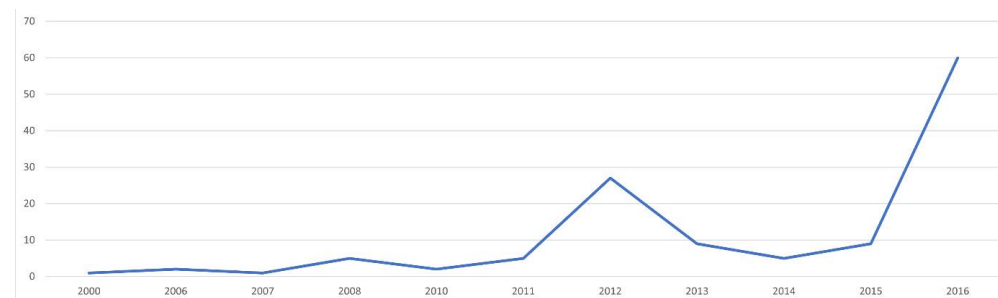


Figure 6: Mafioso over time

Source: Own processing

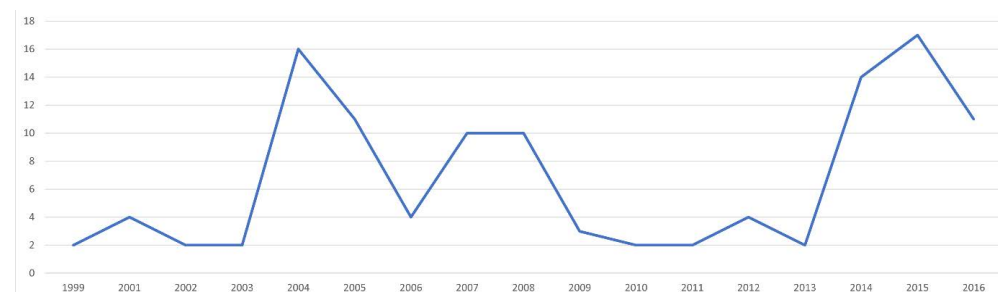


Figure 7: Major player over time

Source: Own processing

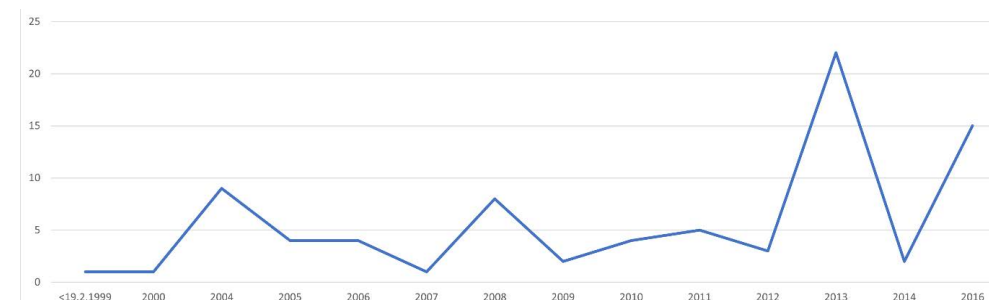


Figure 8: Toxic person over time

Source: Own processing

Frames were obviously related to tonality (Figure 9): some were nearly exclusively negative (Chichikov, mafioso, supercitizen, Black Peter, toxic person, spin doctor), other contained a strong neutral component (major player, showman, rich man), or even a positive component (Robin Hood, innovator).

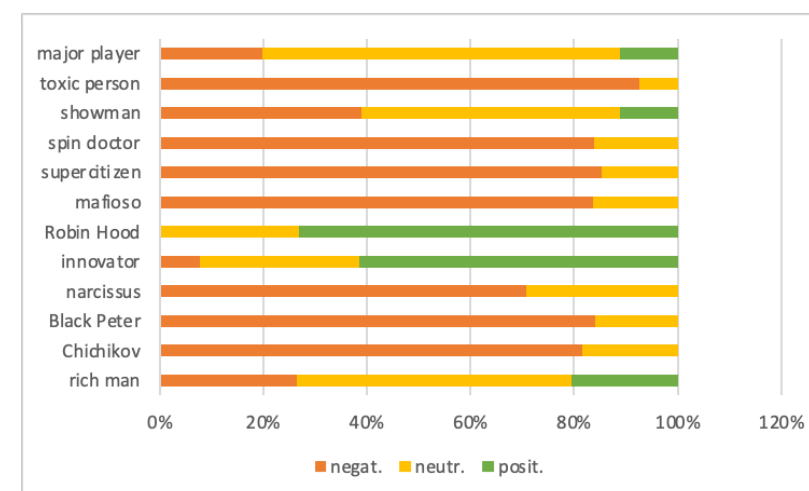


Figure 9: Tonality of frames

Source: Own processing

The interdependence of the variables of frame and tonality was also confirmed by the Chi-squared test with the resulting p-value of 1.44873E-78, i.e., deep under the common significance level of 0.05.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of our research was to name and characterise media frames attached to a toxic celebrity. Researchers in the fields of framing and celebrity studies were offered 12 categories that were defined and described. Simultaneously, the development of such media framing in time was observed on the example of a businessman, a backroom political player and a person charged of property crimes and of ordering a politically motivated murder.

It was shown that the media image of a toxic celebrity became gradually negative: from relatively balanced negative-neutral with elements of positivity to distinctively negative. Journalists seem to be no prophets in society, but only ordinary observers of the developments yielding to sympathies and red herrings. It needs to be observed, however, that some media (and journalists) vigorously defended this prophetic position from the beginning, regardless of the prevalent opinion. Yet, their voices were drowned out.

The positive framing of a toxic celebrity accentuated elements of helping common people in the style of a legendary outlaw or remarkable creativity as opposed to the incompetent public administration. The neutral tones were predominant in the frames of tabloid nature accenting personal wealth, ostentatious lifestyle, egocentricity, amusingness and hard-to-define 'importance'. All the other frames were predominantly negative and focused on the aspects of fraud, manipulation, injustice, clannish behaviour and danger to the community. These aspects grew stronger within their own spectrum of seriousness: e.g., from a semi-significant mafioso who boasted of his good contacts to an actual racketeer; or from a rather ridiculous than actually dangerous petty fraud who overestimates his importance, to a top-level fraud who has no moral boundaries at all.

Initially, this kind of person attracted the attention of media through the frames of Robin Hood, innovator, showman, narcissus which later gradually disappeared. On the contrary, the frames of mafioso, toxic person, Chichikov, Black Peter and spin doctor grew stronger and asserted themselves until they eventually dominated the media discourse. Three frames were continuously active: those of rich man, supercitizen and major player. These proved constantly valid with the first rather related to tabloid content.

Nevertheless, our sample contained only opinion (not news) genres typical for elite press and, as a result, tabloid content was somewhat limited. Therefore, it will be interesting for further research to examine the tabloid framing of Marián Kočner. Possibly also the news framing, although, in this case, the quantitative methodological approach would be more appropriate with regard to the quantity of the texts. It would also be beneficial to apply our frames to similar toxic celebrities in other countries and to compare the findings. The research continues with reflection of the frames and findings in in-depth interviews with direct witnesses of Kočner's activities in the Slovak social, political and media environments (mainly from the ranks of journalists). In this manner, we introduce a new theoretical element to the knowledge in the fields of media and celebrity studies associated with the concept of a toxic celebrity.

Acknowledgment: This work was supported by the VEGA Funding Agency under Grant 1/0203/21.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BAINBRIDGE, C.: Who Will Fix It for Us? Toxic Celebrity and the Therapeutic Dynamics of Media Culture. In *Celebrity Studies*, 2020, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 75-88. ISSN 1939-2400.
- BALOGOVÁ, B.: *Sasanka Is the Latest File*. Released on 6th February 2012. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20042353/sasanka-is-the-latest-file.html>>.
- BIRESSI, A.: President Trump: Celebrity-in-Chief and the Desecration of Political Authority. In *Celebrity Studies*, 2020, Vol. 11, No. 1, p. 125-139. ISSN 1939-2400.
- CAPPELLA, J. N., JAMIESON, K. H.: *Spiral of Cynicism. The Press and the Public Good*. New York, Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1997.
- ENTMAN, R.: Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm. In *Journal of Communication*, 1993, Vol. 43, No. 4, p. 51-58. ISSN 0021-9916.
- GAFFNEY, J., HOLMES, D.: *Stardom in Postwar France*. Oxford : Berghahn Books, 2007.
- HOLCOVÁ, P., ŠOLTÉSZ, A.: *Kočner's World*. Released on 21st February 2020. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.occrp.org/en/a-journalists-undying-legacy/kocners-world>>.
- HORNIG PRIEST, S.: *Doing Media Research. An Introduction*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi : Sage, 1996.
- KANN, C., INDERELST, L.: Gibt es eine einheitliche FrameKonzeption? Historisch-systematische Perspektiven. In ZIEM, A., INDERELST, L., WULF, D. (eds.): *Frames interdisziplinär: Modelle, Anwendungsfelder, Methoden*. Berlin, Boston : Düsseldorf University Press, 2018, p. 25-67.
- KOVANIC, M., COUFALOVA, A.: The Legitimacy of Intelligence Surveillance: The Fight against Terrorism in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In *Intelligence and National Security*, 2020, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 115-130. ISSN 0268-4527.
- LOPATKA, J.: *Slovak Businessman Tried for Reporter's Murder Jailed for 19 Years in TV Station Scam*. Released on 27th February 2020. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-crime-idUSKCN20L1RF>>.

- MERRIAM-WEBSTER: *Celebrity*. [online]. [2023-10-02]. Available at: <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/celebrity>>.
- PIŠKO, M.: *Kočner a Američania za skládkou nikdy nebolí*. Released on 4th December 2008. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.sme.sk/c/4207146/kocner-a-americania-za-skladkou-nikdy-neboli.html>>.
- PRAŽÁK, J. M., NOVOTNÝ, F., SEDLÁČEK, J.: *Latinsko-český slovník*. Prague : Česká grafická unie, 1948.
- ROJEK, C.: *Celebrity*. London : Reaktion Books, 2001.
- ROJEK, C.: *Fame Attack: The Inflation of Celebrity and Its Consequences*. London : Bloomsbury, 2012.
- RONČÁKOVÁ, T.: *Súčasný žurnalistický žáner. Nové i staré modely v slovenských spoločenských týždenníkoch*. Ružomberok : Verbum, 2016.
- RONČÁKOVÁ, T.: Osoba Mariána Kočnera v kontexte mediálnej celebritotvorby. Teoretické zarámovanie problematiky. In KRAVIAROVÁ, M., PEKNUŠIAKOVÁ, E. (eds.): *Média a text 7 (Vol. II)*. Prešov : University of Prešov, 2021, p. 67-75.
- SLIEPKOVÁ, P., PINKOVÁ, A.: Kočner's Judges: Case Study of State Capture. In *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 2021, Vol. 55, No. 3, p. 69-90. ISSN 0967-067X.
- SPARKS, C.: CME and Broadcasting in the Former Communist Countries. In *Javnost – The Public*, 1999, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 25-44. ISSN 1318-3222.
- TASR: *Gamatex zarobil na pozemkoch pre závod Hyundai/Kia skoro 300 000 Sk*. Released on 9th September 2005. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://index.sme.sk/c/2374171/gamatex-zarobil-na-pozemkoch-pre-zavod-hyundai-kia-skoro-300-000-sk.html>>.
- TÓDOVÁ, M.: *Kočnerovo stádo: Z Glváča chcel ministra vnútra, chystal si aj nového námestníka prokuratúry*. Released on 22nd March 2019. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://dennikn.sk/1419458/kocnerovo-stado-z-glvac-a-chcel-ministra-vnutra-chystal-si-aj-noveho-namestnika-prokuratury/>>.
- TOLSTON, A.: 'Being Yourself': The Pursuit of Authentic Celebrity. In *Discourse Studies*, 2001, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 443-457. ISSN 1461-7080.
- WESTCOTT, K.: *What Is Stockholm Syndrome?* Released on 22nd August 2013. [online]. [2023-08-26]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-22447726>>.
- ZIEM, A., PENTZOLD, C., FRAAS, C.: Medien-Frames als semantische Frames: Aspekte ihrer methodischen und analytischen Verschränkung am Beispiel der 'Snowden-Affäre'. In ZIEM, A., INDERELST, L., WULF, D. (eds.): *Frames interdisziplinär: Modelle, Anwendungsfelder, Methoden*. Berlin, Boston : Düsseldorf University Press, 2018, p. 155-182.