

PRO-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE PRE-ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN SLOVAKIA

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ABSTRACT

Citizens of the Slovak Republic are exceptionally prone to believing disinformation according to public opinion surveys, and authoritarian leaders enjoy high support among the population. In recent years, security forces have pointed out the direct influence of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia, which has been trying to influence public opinion by means of direct financial support to disinformation media. Additionally, the police are also investigating connections between the Russian Federation and political parties with high popularity. In this study, we analyze the most followed profiles of candidates on the social network *Facebook* in parliamentary elections. Precisely, *Facebook* has undoubtedly contributed to the polarization of society in liberal democracies, the spread of biased content, and the blurring of the boundaries between truth and lies. The goal of the study is to analyze the content of posts with the highest number of interactions and to define the narratives that influence public opinion before the elections.

Keywords: *elections, influence, politics, propaganda, social media*

INTRODUCTION

In addition to billboards, rallies and print advertising, political parties spend a substantial part of their expenditure on sponsoring social media posts prior to elections. The trend can also be confirmed by the transparent accounts that candidate parties were required to set up to record their spending before the early parliamentary elections. On the parties' accounts as well as on the website www.transparentneucty.sk, which disclose every real transaction and do not circumvent the unhappily written law, we can see payments to *Facebook (Meta)* in the region of hundreds of euros as often as twice a day. Candidates and parties running for office can target one-sided content on social networks with extreme precision, with which they influence public opinion. The study maps the communication of political candidates ahead of the parliamentary elections to be held in Slovakia on 30 September 2023. We analyse posts on the social network *Facebook*, which has undoubtedly contributed to the polarisation and fragmentation of opinion in society.

THE IDEAL POLITICIAN IN SLOVAKIA?

A DEMOCRATIC AUTOCRAT, SAVIOUR, AND GUARDIAN OF THE NATION

Even more than 30 years after the fall of the totalitarian regime, the Slovak Republic still enjoys the popularity of strong leaders who seem to have everything under control and who are always ready to save the nation. The slogans "*Only a strong state will help the people*" (the *Smer-SD* party), "*We will make order*" (the *Republika* movement), or "*Stability, order and social security*" (the *Smer-SD* party) also appear in the 2023 election campaign... According to the research of G. Hofstede and G. J. Hofstede, who analysed the situation in fifty countries, Slovakia is among the countries with the absolute greatest tendency to trust masculine alpha males to be combative, competitive and tenacious. [1] According to the psychological profile, Russian President Vladimir Putin also meets these characteristics. On the basis of indirect personality assessment, A. Immelman and J. V. Trenzeluk identified that the primary personality traits of the Russian president are dominance characterized by a degree of aggression and hostility towards others, ambition, by which he easily assumes leadership roles, and conscientiousness, which is supposed to be manifested by a strong work ethic and a declared attention to detail. [2] Moreover, there is a long-standing and growing number of people in Slovakia who would prefer to be ruled by a strong autocratic leader who does not have to bother with a parliament or elections. In a 2022 Globsec poll, as many as 49% of respondents tended to favour an autocratic form of government. Along with Bulgaria, Slovakia is also one of the countries where people are most likely to believe in conspiracy theories. For a long time, the most popular conspiracy theory is the one that expresses doubts about the existence of democracy itself and the belief in the rule of secret elites that govern the world. [3] Today there is no doubt that part of the disinformation campaigns on the territory of the Slovak Republic is and has been supported directly by the Russian Federation. In early 2022, the Slovak Police documented meetings of employees and direct financial payments of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia with representatives of the disinformation scene, the Ministry of Defence and the secret service. [4] B. Nimmo, an expert on disinformation and influence operations, described to the Central European Policy Institute that the Russian propaganda machine uses a sophisticated network of officials, pseudo-journalists and internet trolls, but its messages are extremely simple - trying to advance the narrative that the USA is trying to take over the world and only Russia is brave and strong enough to stop them. [5] Disinformation and propaganda is dealt with by a separate department of the Slovak Police, which identified in its 2022 report that the creators of pro-Kremlin propaganda have set several main goals in relation to the Slovak Republic, including gaining support for the Russian Federation at the expense of support for Ukraine; questioning state authorities and international communities; causing information chaos in the information space; and questioning the democratic establishment in Slovakia. [6] According to I. Smoleňová, the pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in Slovakia and the Czech

Republic are characterised in particular by extensive activity on social networks and the organisation of public events and rallies at which the same arguments are used to create a positive image of the Russian Federation. [7] Pro-Kremlin propaganda has long focused on the dissemination of basic theses. V. Ogrysko speaks about basic ideological clichés for the audience, among which he ranks, for example: that Russian ethnic minorities are suppressed in Ukraine and the EU; the US and the EU have organized colour revolutions in several post-Soviet countries against Russia; Russia is a fortress in the fight against modern fascism; the Russian Orthodox Church is the only correct religion; Europe is becoming Gay Europe; the Russian world is an alternative to Gay Europe and others. [8] We observe similar narratives in the communication of political leaders in Slovakia.

GOALS AND METHODS

The study is pilot research on the pre-election communication of politicians on *Facebook*. We have previously pointed out that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the West's aid to Ukraine have changed the communication strategy of parts of the political spectrum in Slovakia. The narrative of "Slovakia and Slovaks first" has come to the fore. Through content analysis, we will find out whether the contributions of the candidates with the most interactions contain elements of Russian propaganda.

24 political parties and movements and one electoral coalition are standing in the parliamentary elections. The State Commission for Elections and Control of Political Party Financing has registered 2.722 candidates on the lists of candidates. For the sake of comprehensiveness and the available opportunities for researchers, we have selected the candidate lists of political entities of at least minimal potential to reach voters for the research set. We have calculated the arithmetic mean of voter preferences based on the Focus, AKO and Ipsos election models conducted in August 2023 and have included political entities that achieved at least one percent in the research set. The Focus, AKO and Ipsos agencies are well established on the Slovak market and have been working on electoral models for a long time and on a regular basis. The sample consists of thirteen candidate lists.

Table 1. Preferences of political parties by agencies

List of Candidates	Abbreviation	Ipsos	Focus	AKO	Average
<i>SMER – sociálna demokracia</i>	<i>Smer</i>	19,7	20	19,9	19,86666667
<i>Progresívne Slovensko</i>	<i>PS</i>	16,9	15	16,4	16,1
<i>HLAS – sociálna demokracia</i>	<i>Hlas</i>	13,3	14,2	15,2	14,23333333
<i>Republika</i>	<i>Republika</i>	7,9	8,8	6,7	7,8
<i>OLaNO a priatelia...</i>	<i>OLaNO</i>	7,7	6,4	6,7	6,93333333
<i>Sloboda a Solidarita</i>	<i>SaS</i>	5,7	6,1	6,6	6,13333333
<i>Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie</i>	<i>KDH</i>	6,2	6,1	6	6,1
<i>Sme rodina</i>	<i>Sme rodina</i>	5,5	5,1	6,1	5,56666667
<i>Slovenská národná strana</i>	<i>SNS</i>	5,1	5,3	5,8	5,4
<i>SZÖVETSÉG / Aliancia</i>	<i>Aliancia</i>	3,6	3,4	2,2	3,06666667
<i>Demokrati</i>	<i>Demokrati</i>	2,9	3,1	2,2	2,73333333
<i>Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko</i>	<i>ĽSNS</i>	2,9	2,1	1,2	2,06666667
<i>Modrí, Most - Híd</i>	<i>Modrí</i>	1,4	1,8	1,5	1,56666667

Source, own processing, 2023.

In the pilot study, we are narrowing the sample to candidates who have the greatest potential to win a seat in the National Assembly. We have measured the popularity of the first ten and the last four candidates on the candidate lists on *Facebook* based on the number of followers. A specific feature of some of the candidates running in the Slovak parliamentary elections is the placement of prominent candidates, e.g. in the case of the *OLaNO* leader, in last place on the candidate lists. They can win a mandate on the basis of four preference rings, which are awarded by the voters on the candidate lists.

To measure the popularity of candidates on *Facebook*, we used *CrowdTangle*, an analytics tool that collects data from all public fan pages, public groups, and verified profiles. It does not include data from non-public groups and users' private posts. We tabulated the number of followers of fan pages and public profiles as of 12 August 2023 when, at the time of writing the study, the last available indexing of all tracked profiles in the *CrowdTangle* system took place. The final research population for this pilot study consists of candidates who have more than 100.000 followers on *Facebook*.

Table 2. List of candidates and number of followers on Facebook

Candidate	Party of Candidate	Position on list	Public page name	Followers
Peter Pellegrini	<i>Hlas</i>	1	Peter Pellegrini	315.918
Igor Matovič	<i>OLaNO</i>	150	Igor Matovič	272.187
Robert Fico	<i>Smer</i>	1	Robert Fico	220.745
Milan Mazurek	<i>Republika</i>	150	Milan Mazurek - Republika	195.348
Milan Uhrík	<i>Republika</i>	1	Milan Uhrík - Republika	168.359
Richard Sulík	<i>SaS</i>	1	Richard Sulík	141.468
Boris Kollár	<i>Sme rodina</i>	1	Boris Kollár	137.631
Andrej Danko	<i>SNS</i>	1	Andrej Danko - the chairman of SNS	109.617

Source: own processing, 2023.

Based on data from the CrowdTangle tool, we analyze the contributions of the tracked candidates with the most interactions in the month of August 2023.

ANALYSIS OF POSTS WITH THE MOST INTERACTIONS ONE MONTH BEFORE THE GENERAL ELECTION

Public page of Peter Pellegrini

The chairman of the *Hlas* party, Peter Pellegrini, achieved the highest number of interactions with a pre-recorded video interview from 17 August 2023 during the period under review. He was commenting on the internal political scandal in the security forces surrounding the Secret Service and the National Security Office. The former Prime Minister questioned the investigation and detention of top officials from the security forces 6 weeks before the elections. In a speech that is 2 minutes and 11 seconds long, he says that he believes there is a secret group in the leadership of the police and the prosecutor's office that may have acted at the instigation of political opponents. Without evidence, he speaks of a conspiracy in the Ministry of the Interior and in the law enforcement agencies. Pellegrini's message in his publication is that he rejects police influence in the elections. He concludes by mentioning the socio-economic situation of the population, the high prices of food and energy, the state of the health system and the persistence of regional disparities. He addresses the audience with standard messages about the need to create a "strong state" that will address domestic problems. The post received 4.169 reactions, 903 comments and 488 shares. The

video itself has been viewed by 121.403 users. It was sponsored and the *Hlas* party is duly listed as the sponsor of the political advertisement.

Verified personal profile of *Igor Matovič*

The chair of the *OLaNO* movement is the only monitored candidate who does not communicate on *Facebook* via a public page, but through a personal verified profile. For unknown reasons, the CrowdTangle tool does not allow us to analyse activity on his profile and the indexing of his profile ended in February 2023. During the period under review, we analyse the activity on his *Facebook* feed manually. During the month of August 2023, we do not see elements of Russian propaganda. In several posts he spoke out against the *Republika* movement and condemned the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968. He published posts from pre-election rallies and shared contributions by other candidates for the electoral coalition *OLaNO a priatelia...*

Public page of *Robert Fico*

Robert Fico, the chairman of the *Smer* party, achieved the highest number of interactions in the period under review following his speech, which he delivered during his party's alternative celebrations on the anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising in Zvolen on 29 August 2023. He posted a video on *Facebook* that lasts 14 minutes and 25 seconds. The *Smer* election leader criticises the organisation of the official celebrations in Banská Bystrica, where he says top constitutional officials were afraid to meet citizens. The *Smer* leader criticises the actions of Ukraine, which, in his view, oppresses Russians on its territory. He thanked the Soviet Union for the liberation of Czechoslovakia and praised the totalitarian leader of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and former President Gustav Husák, who, in his opinion, was the most important person in modern Slovak history. Fico argues that the official commemoration of the uprising saw the acceptance of the symptoms of modern Nazism, as evidenced by the support of the Azov Club or Bandera in Ukraine, which Fico says is being defended by fascists. He announces that if he gets enough electoral support, a Slovak sovereign government will be formed after the elections, which will be composed of Slovak sovereign politicians and not representatives of NGOs or the media. He announced a fight against anti-Russian economic sanctions. Misinformation that the economy of the Russian Federation is growing thanks to them is spread, while the EU is slipping into recession. *Smer* party representatives regularly spread Russian propaganda and have long claimed that support for Ukraine is prolonging the war. On the one hand, they reject the war, but at the same time they always understand the Russian Federation's concerns and adopt the narrative of pro-Kremlin propaganda. The post has received 26.444 reactions, 3.784 comments and 4.007 shares. It has been seen by 271.627 users.

Public page of *Milan Mazurek - Republika*

Milan Mazurek, vice-president of the *Republika* movement, achieved the highest number of interactions on his *Facebook* page under a pre-recorded video speech from 8 August 2023. In the description of the speech, he states that the European Union protects paedophiles and at the same time has initiated legal proceedings against Hungary, whose democratically elected parliament has passed a law to protect young people from paedophiles. Mazurek claims that the EU has launched an open war against its own member states that have decided to oppose the radical extremist rainbow agenda. The video ends with a pre-election promise "in the *Republika* movement we are clear about our values, if you put your trust in us, you don't have to worry about your children being exposed to perverse agendas. We are not afraid to stand up to Brussels." Milan Mazurek was legally convicted of a racial defamation offence in 2019. The *Republika* movement has long been among the most prominent purveyors of disinformation about the European Union, sees strategic alliances with the Russian Federation, and regularly adopts a pro-Kremlin narrative about the emergence of a Gay Europe. The post with the most interactions in the period under review received 6.869 reactions, 369 comments and 1.390 shares. The video has been viewed by 81.772 users. It was sponsored and the *Republika* movement is duly listed as a political advertiser.

Public page of *Milan Uhrík - Republika*

Milan Uhrík, the chair of the *Republika* movement, received the largest number of interactions in the period under review for a short status update from 30 August 2023, in which he reacted to the announcement of the presidential candidacy of ex-Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok. "Korčok for president? Slovakia doesn't need another Čaputová in trousers 🤔 It needs a man who will boldly stand up for Slovakia. The opposite of Korčok 😊" There were 12.312 reactions, 2.015 comments and 3.117 shares. For context, it should be noted that the leaders of the *Republika* movement refer to President Zuzana Čaputová as a "progressive puppet" of the European Union and the US who is dragging the country into war. They accuse Ivan Korchok of pushing for a defence deal with the US, criticise him for supporting sanctions after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and military support for Ukraine.

Public page of *Richard Sulík*

Richard Sulík, the chairman of the *SaS* party, records the highest number of interactions in the monitored period on the post from 31 August 2023 from the TV debate summary with a length of 1 minute 24 seconds. In it, he presents the party's economic election programme and criticises populist handouts. He calls for the promotion of right-wing reforms, the reintroduction of a flat 19% tax and higher flat rate spending for sole traders. The post registered 3.284 reactions,

2.200 comments and 164 shares. The video has been viewed by 113.900 users. It was sponsored and the *SaS* party is duly listed as a political advertiser.

Public page of *Boris Kollár*

Boris Kollár, the chairman of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and the *Sme rodina* movement, received the highest number of interactions in the period under review under a post from 14 August 2023. In the video post, which lasts 1 minute and 19 seconds, he shows a celebration of his birthday with a number of children. Boris Kollar is known to have 13 children with 11 wives. In the description of the video, he thanks everyone who remembered his birthday and especially his beloved children who prepared a surprise for him. The post received 6.506 reactions, 1.257 comments and 147 shares. It has been seen by 590.434 users.

Public page of *Andrej Danko*

Andrej Danko, the chairman of *Slovenská národná strana (SNS)*, has the highest number of interactions in the monitored period under a photo from 7 August 2023 with the caption "I had a beer in London with this guy. Do you know him? Danny Kollar. I'll tell you more tomorrow. Have a nice evening. Andrej." The post received 4.493 interactions, 439 comments and 148 shares. Danny Kollar, real name Daniel Bombic, is a prosecuted star of the Slovak disinformation scene. He has a European arrest warrant out for him and must wear an electronic monitoring bracelet in London, where he has lived for a long time. He is under investigation in Slovakia for extremism and cyberbullying. Bombic has already been blocked by *Facebook* and continues to operate on the *Telegram* platform. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he clearly sided with the Putin regime, describing Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky as a Jewish homosexual and a rat installed by a Nazi regime.

CONCLUSION

The pilot study analysed the posts that had the potential to reach the largest number of users on *Facebook* one month before the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia. Elements of pro-Kremlin propaganda were registered in four of the monitored posts. In the posts with the largest number of interactions, the concealed sympathies of candidates Milan Uhrík (*Republika*) and Andrej Danko (*SNS*), who do not directly declare support for the Russian Federation, are interesting. However, after knowing the context and the histories of the candidates under consideration, the attitudes are unambiguous for the audience. In the contribution of Robert Fico (*Smer*) we observe a whole series of elements of Russian propaganda - oppression of the Russian ethnic minority, Russian struggle against Nazism, distortion of history, conspiracy of the media and the third sector.... politicians who spread pro-Russian propaganda are regular guests of the disinformation media. Although the Russian Federation itself blocks internet

portals that do not correspond to its own propaganda, in Western societies, including Slovakia, it uses the free internet to influence public opinion in a multi-channel way. Nor is it a surprise that disinformation websites have spilled over into political activities and that disinformation is linked to various political parties and movements based on the personal backgrounds of the owners of the entities that represent them. [9] Social networks are often an incubator for the dissemination of hate content and disinformation, to which a substantial part of political advertising is redirected. Political parties and movements in Slovakia that are entitled to state contributions are literally investing taxpayers' money to polarise society and destroy the foundations of liberal democracy. If social networks do not change the way they operate and if the behaviour of users on social networks is not transparent, we will be in a situation where, according to B. Oprala, we will continue to see the rise of an idiocratic society that undermines the basic elements of a democratic society. [10] As P. Krajčovič has pointed out, in recent decades we have seen increasingly sophisticated ways of spreading fake news thanks to the technological development of AI. [11]

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