

POPULARITY OF ANTISYSTEM MOVEMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

Liberal democracies have been hit by political populism and, thanks to the almost unlimited penetration of the Internet, narratives that would be stopped by editorial mechanisms in a serious media environment have informational reach. Social networks and so-called alternative media provide recipients with one-sided content and a narrow view of social issues. The plurality of competent opinions, which is the basis of a democratic society, is disappearing from the debate, and part of the population has slipped into having a black and white vision of the world. After the global Covid-19 pandemic, the most discussed topics are the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis. Governments and the European Union are looking for ways to respond to the hybrid information operations by which authoritarian regimes have long sought to subvert democratic environments from within. Society is polarising. The aim of this study is to use a theoretical background to analyse Slovak politicians on social networks, where they have virtually unlimited space to spread lies, distorted facts and anti-system views.

Keywords: disinformation, fake news, politics, populism, social media

INTRODUCTION

Facebook has become for many people an essential source of information and a space for unrestricted freedom of expression. We observe a recurring trend in user comments - if an editorial office shares a news article, the recipients do not read the journalistic texts themselves. They express their own opinion on social media based on merely the information from the headline and the perex. The user environment of social networks has simplified dramatically and even people with basic digital skills can use them. A historic turning point, online journalism penetrated the information dissemination system, creating multiplatform media opportunities that all other traditional media lacked. In addition to the ability to publish content instantly, it also benefits from the ability to tailor content to the target audience and significantly reduce the cost of content production and distribution. [1] According to A. Sámelová, people on the Internet have learned to receive information through the self-representation of individuals and institutions, which has not passed through the editorial hierarchy, even though throughout the 20th century professionals from traditional media were accused of editorial manipulation. [2] Social networks have brought new opportunities for

easy information sharing, and a system that reinforces an algorithm focused solely on keeping the recipient's attention is an ideal platform for the dissemination of sensationalism and misinformation. It is an environment that has not escaped the attention of politicians and populists, who have gained virtually unlimited space to spread one-sided information. At the same time, they have a tool at their disposal to effectively target their content at target groups. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, we are witnessing a second unifying element in populist communication in a short space of time that knows no national boundaries. Already, the Covid-19 pandemic has shown us that in times of adversity, we observe a tendency for a unification of communicated narratives, ideas and communication approaches in different countries. [3]

GOALS AND METHODS

The study provides a theoretical basis for research on populist communication of elected representatives in the Slovak Republic. We analyse the popularity of the members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on the social network *Facebook* and focus on the content analysis of their posts with the largest number of interactions. N. Ernst et al. defined populist stylistic elements on social networks in three dimensions: negativity, emotionality, and sociability. In particular, younger and extremist left and right political parties are more prone to disseminate content via social media, as online platforms allow them to bypass traditional media and make voters feel close to the people. [4] We predict that, as in other liberal democracies, politicians from the populist and extremist scene will have the most followers on social media. To measure the popularity of MPs on *Facebook*, we used *CrowdTangle*, an analytical tool that collects data from all public pages, public groups, and verified profiles. We searched the pages and verified accounts of all 150 members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and compiled a ranking based on the number of their followers. We then analyze the posts with the most interactions of the ten most popular MPs. We expose misinformation and explain the distorted information that MPs work with in their posts.

POPULISM

Social networks, according to B. Moffitt have undoubtedly reshaped politics, but warns against jumping to the conclusion that they are the main reason for the rise of populism worldwide. The rise of populism has been observed even before the advent of social networks [5]. According to the European Committee of the Regions, an association of municipal politicians in the European Union, populists challenge all three pillars of liberal representative democracy: the legitimacy of elected representatives, the accountability of elected representatives and the transparency of the exercise of power. [6] The standard themes of Slovak populists are the protection of traditional values, the rescue of the poor, the fight against migration, anti-Americanism, and the elevation of common peasant sense over intellectuals from the "Bratislava café", who are supposed to be divorced

from reality. According to J. W. Müller, however, a proper understanding of populism helps to deepen our knowledge of democracy. He identifies populism as a permanent shadow of modern representative democracy and a constant danger that allows us to define the shortcomings of democracies. [7] Research by I. Piterova et al., states that in the geographical environment of the Slovak Republic, voters of populist parties share a high emotional attachment to their country and lower to Europe. They have negative attitudes towards migration and call for state care for poor people or income equality. [8]

THE MOST POPULAR MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC ON THE SOCIAL NETWORK FACEBOOK

Based on our analysis of *CrowdTangle* data, we found that 123 out of 150 MPs have an established *Facebook* page as of early September 2022. Peter Pellegrini, the chairman of the Hlas-SD party, had the most followers in the period under review - 314,089. After descending order of the respective pages, we select the ten most popular MPs on *Facebook* according to the number of followers. We give the exact name of the page in the monitored period.

Table 1. MPs with the most followers on Facebook

	Name of Facebook page	Nr. of followers
1.	Peter Pellegrini	314089
2.	Robert Fico	191628
3.	Milan Mazurek – kandidát na prešovského župana	175203
4.	Boris Kollar	143991
5.	Jožo Pročko - stránka	74182
6.	Tomáš Taraba – predseda ŽIVOT NS	57566
7.	Richard Raši	55400
8.	Denisa Saková	55157
9.	Erik Tomáš	54461
10.	Patrick Linhart poslanec	42869

Source: own processing, 2022.

Members of the current political opposition have the biggest reach on *Facebook*. Of the coalition MPs who support the Government, only Boris Kollár, chairman of the Sme rodina party, and Jozef Pročko, MP for the OĽaNO movement, made it into the top ten. It should be pointed out that the analysis in question may not provide a picture of the overall political situation in Slovakia, because the study does not focus at this stage on the communication of political representatives in the executive, but only on the members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

ANALYSIS OF POSTS WITH THE MOST INTERACTIONS ON FACEBOOK

We also used *CrowdTangle* to analyse the popularity of posts. We chose the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine from February 24, 2022 to August 31, 2022 as the period of interest. Sociological research in Slovakia has long described pro-Russian sentiment among the population and a desire for the establishment of a government of a decisive, authoritarian leader, modeled after the Russian Federation. [9] We suggest that the war in Ukraine, which has brought with it a wave of refugee migration and indirect effects on the population not in the immediate vicinity of the conflict, has become a breeding ground for populists to further divide a polarised society.

1. Facebook page of *Peter Pellegrini*

On 9 April 2022, the day the Slovak Government decided to allocate 530 million euros of unspent money from EU funds to support Ukrainian refugees, Pellegrini called on Prime Minister Eduard Heger not to solve the world's problems, but mainly the problems of the people in Slovakia. He invited the Prime Minister to go with him to central, eastern or southern Slovakia to see how difficult life is there. The post received 18,188 reactions, 2,299 comments and 1,349 shares.

Pellegrini has held senior executive positions, having been prime minister from 2018-2000, previously serving as deputy minister for investment and informatisation, being temporarily in charge of the health and culture ministries, and in 2014 he served as education minister for five months. He is himself co-responsible for the state of the regions and the country's preparedness for crises such as the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic and the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He received the greatest number of interactions simply by questioning the legitimacy of the current government of the Slovak Republic, which has decided to redirect unused European Union funds to help the population of the war-stricken country.

2. Facebook page of *Robert Fico*

Robert Fico, the chairman of the opposition Smer-SD party, achieved the highest number of interactions in the period under review with a post containing a video with a four-minute clip from a press conference at which he criticized Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky the day before his speech in the National Council of the Slovak Republic. Mr Fico said that he firmly rejected the Ukrainian President's threats to cut off Slovakia's gas and oil and would therefore not attend his speech in Parliament. The post, dated 9 May 2022, had 63,036 reactions, 7,058 comments and 30,877 shares.

In the post, Robert Fico emotionally mentions the Ukrainian president's alleged words about "losing patience" with EU policy on sanctions against Russia. He claimed that the decision to adopt sanctions on the withdrawal of energy carriers from Russia was born in the US. He stressed that the Slovak Republic had nothing to do with the war in Ukraine and that it was, in his view, a war between the US and the Russian Federation. He projected a personal dimension to his recipients and asked, "What do Jozef, Peter, Milan, who live somewhere in Puchov, Žilina, Banská Bystrica, Košice, Prešov, have to do with the fact that they have to solve the oil problem and have to pay three euros (for fuel) for the war in Ukraine, I would really like to know, let somebody explain it to me". In line with Russian propaganda, R. Fico claims that fascists are fighting on the side of the Ukrainian army, to whom the government is sending weapons.

3. Facebook page of *Milan Mazurek – candidate for Mayor of Prešov*

Milan Mazurek is deputy chair of the Republika movement, which split from the openly racist and xenophobic Kotleba People's Party Our Slovakia. Mazurek was convicted in 2019 by the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic of the deliberate offence of defamation of a nation, race or belief for a racist interview on the local radio station Frontinus. During the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic, he spoke out against anti-epidemic measures, the wearing of masks and respirators, vaccinations, and spread misinformation and hoaxes. During the reporting period, he achieved his highest number of interactions on *Facebook* with a post from March 3, 2022, which is no longer publicly available, but is still recorded by *CrowdTangle*. M. Mazurek shared a video in which he refers to the Governor of Florida in the US and calls for an end to "corona theatre". Media hysteria about the disease, he said, has been replaced by hysteria about the war. He urges his followers not to believe the media. The post has garnered 11,521 reactions, 704 comments and 12,392 shares.

4. Facebook page of *Boris Kollar*

Boris Kollár, the chairman of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and the chairman of the Sme rodina movement, is a businessman who was already a popular figure in the tabloid media in Slovakia before he entered politics. He is known to have twelve children with ten wives and even after entering top politics he claims that he is not a politician. B. Kollár has not shied away from sharing articles from disinformation online media on *Facebook* in the past. In the period under review, he recorded the highest number of interactions on *Facebook* on the day of the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine - 24 February 2022. Under the post in which he strongly condemned the military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine as a sovereign state, we register 2,587 reactions, 721 comments and 94 shares.

5. Facebook page of *Jožo Pročko*

OĽaNO MP Jozef Pročko recorded the highest number of interactions on *Facebook* during the period under review under a post from 31 August 2022. He uploaded a video to the social network, which he himself recorded while driving, with the caption "I believe that a decent and fair person will open his heart..." It recorded 8,380 reactions, 5,108 comments and 557 shares under it. In the video interview, he responds to the crisis in the ruling coalition. He criticises the attitude of his coalition partner, the SaS party, and defends the chairman of his movement, Igor Matovič. In his contribution, Pročko states that at the time when there is a war in Ukraine, when everything is becoming more expensive, the return of Robert Fico's government is imminent... there is no room to put pressure on Igor Matovic to leave his position as finance minister. J. Pročko is a former television entertainer, known for his emotional and unconventional speech.

6. Facebook page of *Tomáš Taraba – president of ŽIVOT NS*

The chair of the Život - Narodná strana party and MP Tomáš Taraba ran for the National Council of the Slovak Republic on the candidate list of the extremist party Kotleba - People's Party Our Slovakia. In the period under review, he achieved the highest number of interactions on *Facebook* under a post in which he uploaded a one-minute excerpt from a press conference of the director of the employers' association Klub 500, Vladimír Soták, to the social network. In his speech, he reads from a sheet of paper a statement about which he says, "it looks like it is from the president's office" and paraphrases the words of President Zuzana Čaputová, "So whoever today is still talking about our continued dependence on Russian gas is acting against the interests of Slovakia and directly endangering the security of our citizens." In connection with the dependence of Slovak industry on Russian gas, V. Soták states in the video "what kind of bullshit is this, who dares to say that...?" In the video, the director of the Club 500 association does not read from an official document of the Presidential Office, but responds to the conclusion of a *Facebook* post by President Zuzana Čaputová, which is taken out of context. In the post, dated 11 March 2022, the Head of State explains in detail that the Russian Federation has been restricting gas supplies to Europe even before the invasion of Ukraine, and in order to maintain security, we must find other and more reliable suppliers of strategic raw materials. The narrative, taken out of context, is also taken up by Taraba in the description of his most successful paper. Taraba said: "Zuzana Čaputová called the entire Slovak industry, which wants to produce and employ people in Slovakia and does not want to be cut off from the only source of oil and gas available today, a threat to Slovak security." It has received 14,112 reactions, 1,058 comments and 4,527 shares.

7. Facebook page of *Richard Raši*

Richard Raši, the former health minister and deputy chair of the Hlas-SD party, received the most interactions on *Facebook* under a post from 27 March 2022, in which he shared a short video of a political debate in which he himself was speaking. In it, he criticises the Interior Ministry, led by Roman Mikulc, which he says has bought overpriced beds and mattresses for asylum facilities for war refugees from Ukraine. Mr Raši said that the ministry had bought one thousand mattresses at EUR 114 apiece and five hundred bunk beds at EUR 246 apiece, whereas he said that a bunk bed could be bought in a Swedish chain for EUR 136 and a mattress for EUR 26. The post has received 2,052 reactions, 290 comments and 742 shares. The Interior Ministry said in response that the main criteria for the purchase was durability and reusability, so that the beds and mattresses could be used in the future.

8. Facebook page of *Denisa Saková*

Denisa Saková, the former Interior Minister and deputy chair of the Hlas-SD party, received the most interactions on *Facebook* under a post from 3 April 2022, in which she shared a short video from a political debate in which she herself spoke. In it, she focuses on her criticism of the Slovak government, which she says is putting the country into record debt, spending billions, and no one is feeling it. Emotionally, she states, "health workers are angry, teachers are angry, state and public administration employees are angry, private companies are on their knees..." The post garnered 4,866 reactions, 480 comments and 1,485 shares.

9. Facebook page of *Erik Tomáš*

Erik Tomáš, the former health minister and deputy chair of the Hlas-SD party, received the highest number of interactions on *Facebook* under a post from 23 June 2022, in which he shared a short video of a political debate in which he himself was speaking. He criticizes the government for its poor assistance to seniors and states that if Finance Minister Igor Matovič came to the Unity of Pensioners of Slovakia, he would be chased out of there with shovels. According to E. Tomáš, they are terribly frustrated with the government's failure to help them at all at a time of rising prices. There are 6379 reactions, 716 comments and 748 shares below.

10. Facebook page of *Patrick Linhart MP*

Patrick Linhart, MP for the We Are Family movement, shares a personal selfie photo from his car in his most popular post of the period under review. On 26 February 2022, he is pictured with four Ukrainian refugees whom he was supposed to have picked up in Ukraine and bring to safety in Slovakia. In the caption of the photo he writes: "I took a family from Kiev out of the crowd. 3 small children with their mother and 15 year old daughter. The parting with their

father who stayed at the border brought me to tears. I managed to do what I wanted to do and that was to take at least one family." The post has garnered 1,948 reactions, 270 comments and 27 shares.

CONCLUSION

In all the monitored posts, we observe a strong emotionality and references to current crises. In most posts, they refer to the war in Ukraine and the problems it has caused on a national level. MEPs are no strangers to the communication practices of exaggeration, distortion of facts and creating an impression of social sensitivity. The largest number of interactions, 100,971, was achieved by Robert Fico's *Facebook* page during the period and in the sample studied. In this paper, we observe all the populist features defined by Nicole Ernst et al. Negative tuning in the form of the threat of an energy crisis which for Slovakia is represented by Ukrainian President V. Zelensky, via an emotional speech in the video of the press conference shared with the paper and the declared social proximity in the form of naming random names of potential Slovak citizens from different regions.

Facebook pages of the most popular politicians are managed by teams of communication experts and spend thousands of euros on sponsored messages to increase the visibility of their posts. According to publicly available information on *Facebook*, all the pages we analysed may have multiple administrators. Sponsored links were not used only by the *Facebook* pages of Jožo Pročko and Denisa Saková. In disseminating one-sided, misleading, or outright deceptive information, the creators no doubt rely on the lack of critical thinking of the recipients and the gaps in the school system in teaching critical thinking. [10] Among the top ten most popular members of the National Council of the Slovak Republic on *Facebook* was also the MP Patrick Linhart, who is not well known to the public and does not receive much space in the mainstream media (in the news agency TASR his name appeared in a total of thirty articles between January and August 2020, including daily news summaries). Based on the available tools, we are currently unable to analyse the practices of MP Ľuboš Blaha, who was one of the most popular politicians on social media. *Facebook* blocked his page with over 174,000 followers for violating the social network's rules. [11] Ľuboš Blaha, has already been ordered by the Regional Court in Bratislava to refrain from spreading false information about the President of the Slovak Republic, Zuzana Čaputová. [12]

Despite the fact that in Slovakia politicians manage to work with the theme of nationalism and the supposed preference of national interests over world interests, the trends in political communication in Slovakia are the same, or at least similar, to other democracies that have been affected by populism. [13] In the communication of politicians on social networks we observe the application of elements of political entertainment - Politainment. MPs pretend to be in conflict with the system, although they themselves created it and are an integral part of it.

Strategic populism is an integral part of political communication in both liberal democracies and authoritarian systems. [14]

Expanding the research sample to include other posts to which recipients respond directly on social media will be the subject of further research.

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