

## POLITICS, DEMOCRACY AND DISINFORMATION

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### ABSTRACT

Disinformation and conspiracy theories systematically threaten our European democracy. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine has shown us even more that we have a big problem with harmful propaganda directed by an undemocratic Putin's regime. This problem prevents citizens from making informed decisions and undermines our foreign policy orientation, as well as the values of our society. And although the war in Ukraine has changed a lot in this regard, a significant part of EU citizens is still prone to easily succumb to massive disinformation campaigns. The aim of this text is to present the important steps of the institutions of the European Union, as well as the Government of the Slovak Republic and other official European or state authorities, which are trying to reverse this negative trend and gradually expand the capacity to combat hybrid threats.

*Keywords: disinformation, democracy, social media, hybrid war*

There is no doubt that the deliberate use of disinformation, conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and other manipulative content on the internet represent a grave long-term threat for our democratic institutions and societies. The reason is simple. Disinformation manipulates open democratic debate, thus preventing citizens to make informed decisions. Foreign actors can exploit the inherent openness of our democracies to pursue their goals by manipulating public opinion, undermining the trust of our citizens towards our institutions democratic system itself and they can also influence the outcomes of elections, as we saw in the recent past.

Since 2014, Slovakia has been a frequent target of (mainly Russian) hostile information operations which mostly focused on undermining our geopolitical orientation, especially our membership in The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU), which we consider as basic pillars of our foreign and security policy. But it's not just about Slovakia. Other European Union countries have a very similar experiences, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, but also Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. It is no coincidence that these are the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, i.e., the States of the former Soviet bloc.

In the context of the continuing Russian aggression against Ukraine, we see even growing assertiveness of disinformation campaigns. Slovakia, as Ukraine's neighboring country, has been subject to these hostile campaigns. The strategic goal of these campaigns is to justify Russian aggression and spread the Russian narrative on the Nazi regime in Kyiv, undermine the support of citizens for military aid offered to Ukraine by the Slovak government, undermine public support for EU sanctions, especially for gas and oil embargo, undermine the will of Slovaks to help refugees from Ukraine. These campaigns try to spread distrust and doubt, inciting instability and not least, weakening support for government's policies at national and European levels. This is done by exploiting pre-existing grievances and polarization of our society. Sadly, I have to say that such attempts have been quite successful.

A significant part of Slovak society has long been very vulnerable to disinformation campaigns and propaganda, which is confirmed by several opinion polls or studies. When it comes to believing in conspiracy, Slovak citizens are most likely to believe them, compared to other Central and Eastern European countries. On average, 56 percent of Slovak respondents tend to believe a statement that involves conspiracy or deception. This is followed by Bulgarians (48 percent), Romanians (39 percent), Hungarians (35 percent) and Poles (34 percent). Lithuania was the best in this survey question (17 percent).

This emerges from a survey conducted by GLOBSEC Policy Institute (GLOBSEC,

2020), a policy-oriented think-tank analyzing foreign policy and international environment based in Bratislava, as part of the study *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of Democracy & Governance* realized in ten countries. According to other findings of the Slovak think-tank from last year, published in the yearbook *GLOBSEC Trends 2021* (GLOBSEC, 2021), up to 55 percent of people perceive Russian President Vladimir Putin positively. And for 47 percent of respondents, Russia is the most important partner for Slovakia. And another example Slovaks (40 percent) identify less than Czechs (52 percent) with the fact that we are part of the information war led by the Russian Federation. This follows from a survey by the Ipsos agency carried out in cooperation with the Central European Digital Media Observatory (IPSOS, 2022).

However, since the outbreak of war in Ukraine at the end of February 2022, the results of several public opinion polls have also been published, which mirror the citizens of Slovakia in a slightly better light. GLOBSEC followed up on previous work and pointed out that Putin's support in our society had dropped significantly. While in March 2021 it was positively perceived by 55 percent of the population of Slovakia, in March 2022 it was only 28 percent (Kern, 2022). This follows from a telephone survey conducted by Focus agency.

In addition, according to the same survey, the perception of Russia as an aggressor has increased. In contrast, NATO's popularity as a guarantor of our security and territorial integrity (62 percent) has increased even more. What can these shifts in the citizens' opinions of Slovak society evoke in us?

Slowly, we seem to be opening our eyes, and we are beginning to realize who our real allies and trusted partners are. But we are not yet cured of a disease called "Kremlin propaganda." This was also shown by recent findings by experts that more than a fifth of Slovaks and Slovaks trust pro-Kremlin propaganda and reports justifying the involvement of Russian troops in Ukraine (Gáliková, 2022).

In this context, the Government of the Slovak Republic, as well as the leading state authorities and relevant institutions, are fully aware of the urgent need to proactively counter foreign influence and protect democratic processes from external interference.

We have adopted several important documents and taken steps that help us to deal more effectively with the spread of disinformation. The new Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic, which we adopted in 2021, brings specific measures aimed at increasing our resilience to hybrid activities. The Government has already approved an Action Plan for the Coordination of Counting Hybrid Threats which

strengthens capacities and improves coordination in this area. This Plan includes a number of measures, including boosting coordinated strategic communication at the government level, allowing to move from crisis communication to preventive strategic communication, strengthening inter-institutional coordination regarding detection, analysis, and response to the hybrid threats, implementing risk assessment screening mechanism of the FDI', intensifying hybrid threats and disinformation trainings and awareness raising campaigns for government, public administration and security sector employees, implementing media literacy, critical thinking, and digital skills in education curricula, strengthening institutional cooperation with civil society, media, academia and private sector in the field of combating disinformation and enhancing societal resilience – whole-of-the-society approach – it affects all and requires comprehensive approach (Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic, 2022). The existing capacities are also further strengthened not only by the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, but also by the Slovak Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic itself.

Next, when speaking about tackling disinformation, we must also stress the importance of critical thinking, media literacy, and free and critical media. This is the true whole-of-society approach and the best way to make our societies more resilient.

Since social networks, in the case of Slovakia, especially the most used Facebook, play a key role in disseminating disinformation, we need to support all current initiatives of the EU authorities to strengthen the responsibility and obligations of large digital platforms in the fight against harmful conduct online.

As a current example, I see the EU Digital Services Act (DSA), which aims to ensure stricter regulation of online platforms and faster removal of illegal content from internet platforms, including hate speech, harmful disinformation, or war propaganda.

We also support ongoing work on the new EU toolboxes to counter hybrid threats as well as to counter foreign information manipulation and interference in order to strengthen the EU's posture and deter external interference into democratic processes. We believe that these toolboxes should bring about existing as well as new instruments, allowing us to impose costs to perpetrators, including the possibility of joint public attribution by the EU.

We must finally take this negative phenomenon seriously. So far, we see only minimal, if any, interest from private owners of these digital platforms in solving

this serious problem. But I still believe that we do not have to reject social networks immediately, but they need to be cured together.

Let us not allow disinformation to become a cancer of decent and honest communication between citizens in the countries of the EU. Hatred, aggression, lies, and conspiracies must not prevail over friendly debate, truthful news, or useful information. I remain convinced that social networks can also help, bring people together, connect them and, if necessary, provide reliable information or warnings. After all, this was also one of the ideas with which these internet platforms were created. Business interest cannot stand above social responsibility, morality, and truth.

And therefore, it should be true that what is illegal offline, in real life, must also be illegal online.

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