

# Slovak parliamentary election 2020

Liberalism as a threat,  
Facebook as a battlefield





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**FB pages with problematic content received half a million interactions**

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**Who was accused of election interference?**

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**Stories promoting the far-right extremist ĽSNS party were systematically shared on FB pages and groups**

More on the page **20**

**Facebook measures were highly inadequate**

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# Online battlefield

The period of election campaigning is naturally characterised by fighting. Fighting occurring between political parties, its leaders, candidates and their supporters, all of it for gaining more voters and consequent power. While in an ideal, rational world, the debate should be focused on the programme, solutions and policies, the real world—full of emotions and feelings—is more about accusations, attacks and the alienation of specific individuals and groups in society.

Elections in Slovakia have become strongly influenced by these fights. Elections in Slovakia thus often become a battlefield in which many political actors select an (often imaginary) opponent portrayed as an alleged threat to the country or nation. The political discourse and electoral campaign is thus often a survival game of “us versus them”.

In the mid-2010s, it was the supposed threat coming from migration. Earlier, in the 2000s, it was the Hungarian and Roma minorities. Today, it is liberalism.

Building upon a larger phenomenon of rising illiberalism in the region and beyond, these elections have witnessed the phenomenon of antisystem narratives taking a firm foothold in Slovak mainstream political discourse.

Facebook (FB) was at the core of this phenomenon and thus played an important role in this debate, allowing the antisystem actors to flood the information space with divisive and harmful narratives, while incapable of securing the compliance with FB's own community standards.

For five months prior to the elections held on February 29, 2020, the analysts from the team of GLOBSEC's Strategic Communication Programme monitored the online information space. The monitoring results fall in line with a growing global trend of divisive, harmful and manipulative narratives being spread on websites and social platforms. As a result, we are witnessing an increasing polarisation, hatred against, and attacks on, different groups of society, mainly the advocates for liberal principles, the representatives of standard media and civil society.

What had been previously considered as an absurd debate at the fringes of the political spectrum has now become widely debated on TV. Liberalism has been labelled as “perverted”, “threatening”, “fascist” and “alien to Slovakia”. Flooding the information space with divisive and harmful narratives undermining the very basis of democratic systems and values securing fundamental rights and freedoms has become the new normal in the 2020 Slovak Parliamentary election. The distribution of forces in the newly elected parliament hints that these trends will not fade away, although the recent change of the government provides an opportunity to revive decency. However, no transformative change will be possible without FB's stepping up its efforts.

# Key findings

## #1

The key target of the attacks coming from the problematic sources was “liberalism”.

An effect of the systematic promotion of the “liberalism as a threat” narrative by the problematic side of the information spectrum is the transition of the attempts to undermine liberal democracy as the most appropriate political system for Slovakia (with the help of key political officials) into the mainstream political discourse.

## #2

The most popular theme on open FB groups sharing problematic content was the warning against potential election interference. A range of actors were accused of alleged interference and thus demonised on the platform, from NGOs to opinion poll agencies to media to the so-called “liberals”.

## #3

An important role in the pre-election campaign was played by webpages and FB pages and groups that promoted the interests of particular political parties but without any official attribution. As such, they developed an elaborate web of supporters and content amplifiers who systematically and repeatedly shared specific narratives.

## #4

The rise in support for the far-right extremist ĽSNS in the polls and elections was also evident on the internet. ĽSNS was the most-mentioned party on the most-viral posts by both standard and problematic sources within the five months of monitoring.

## #5

During the election campaigning, FB was not capable of securing a unified implementation of rules to increase the transparency of political advertising and compliance with their own community standards. The establishment of an independent Slovak fact-checker a few weeks prior to the elections had no effect on the amount of problematic content spread on FB.

# Recommendations for Facebook, national & EU authorities

## #1

Create a designated contact/office for each EU member state, which will be responsible for:

- a) communication with state institutions, delivery of comprehensive databases about political advertisements, as well as reported and deleted content;
- b) posting advance notice of planned modifications to community standards on a specific social medium in order to consult with relevant authorities about the proposed modifications prior to their implementation.

## #2

Ensure the enforcement of rules that secure the transparency of targeted ads and thus increase the users' awareness. At the same time, task Facebook with the automatic and regular delivery of information about all paid ads to national institutions supervising the financing of political campaigns.

## #3

Accelerate and increase the effectiveness of the removal of problematic content reported to Facebook by a verified trusted flagger.





## #4

Develop a complaint system for cases when social media fail in removal of content sharing hate speech, extremism or targeted bullying of individuals. The complaints should be promptly taken over by relevant state and EU institutions with competences to issue a financial penalisation of the social media platform for such failures.

## #6

Provide reasoning behind any account deletion or post removal to prevent the spread of conspiracies about Facebook censorship.

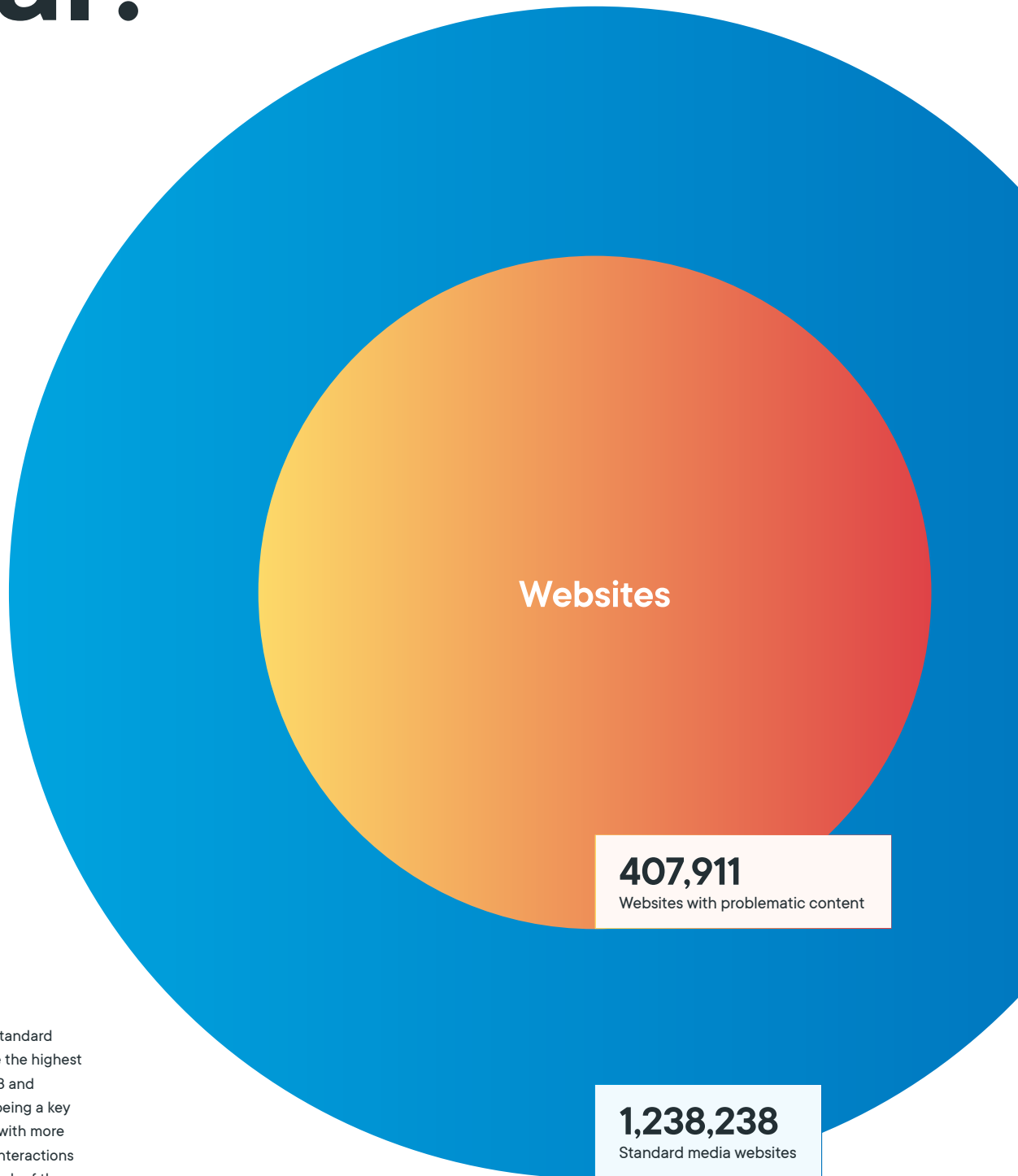
## #5

Hire more local experts to oversee the quality of content-moderation and provide data about the competency to resolve individual cases to independent institutions and analysts for auditing purposes.

In addition, we fully endorse the recommendations put forward by the EEAS for the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation, such as the development of a system of indicators determining the trustworthiness of individual websites in cooperation with media to help internet users distinguish between trustful and distrustful content, as well as the employment of independent auditing of the functioning of algorithms.



# Who went viral?

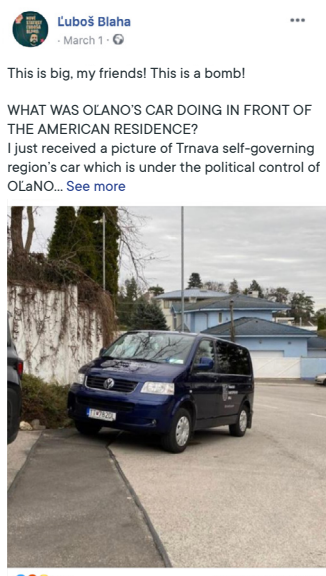
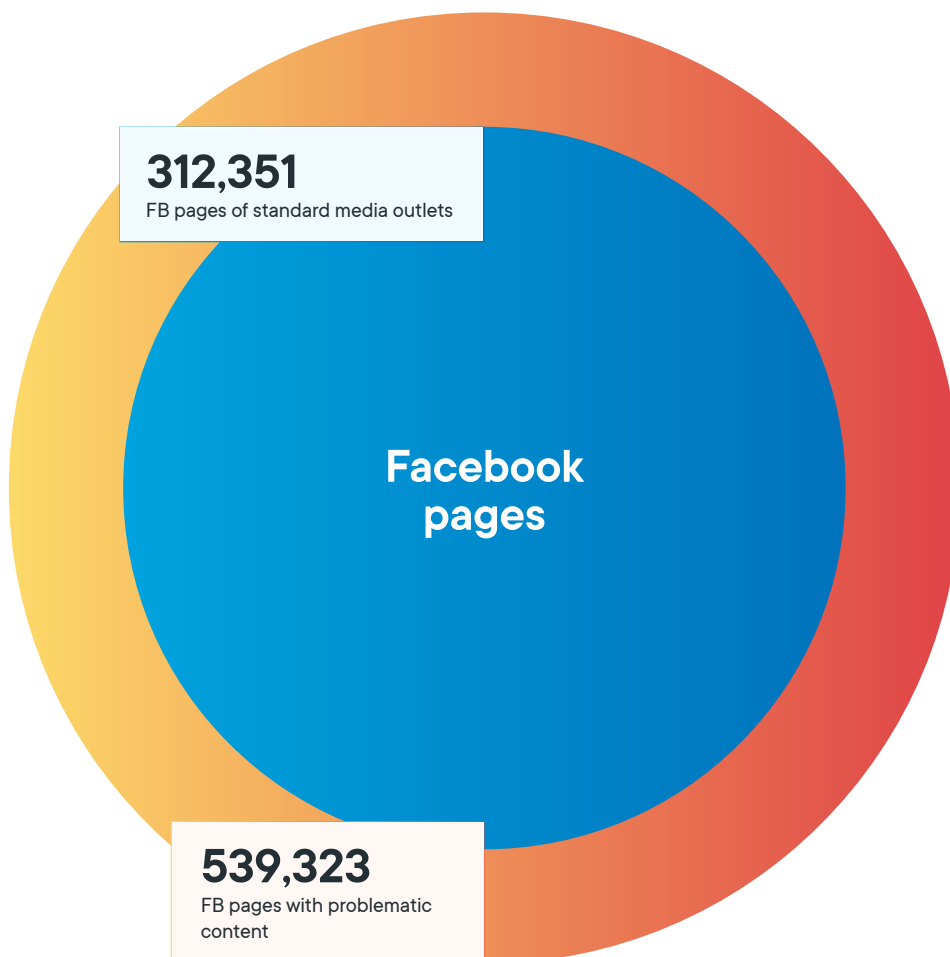


**W**ebsites of standard media have the highest reach on FB and maintain their role of being a key source of information with more than a million overall interactions in five months. The reach of the websites with problematic content amounts only to 30% of the reach of standard media. However, the dynamics is different for FB pages. Problematic FB pages receive by 73% more interactions than FB pages of standard media.



# Total interactions of the most viral content across the online information space, from October 2019 to March 2020.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Five-months monitoring period was divided into three rounds of data collection- October 1 – November 15, 2019; November 16, 2019 – January 26, 2020 and January 27 – March 2, 2020. For each monitoring period, we analysed a database of up to 250 entries based on the highest number of interactions on Facebook. After merging them we arrived at a total number of interactions for each category.



## 24,539 interactions

The post with the highest number of interactions belonged to Luboš Blaha, MP for SMER-SD, whose long posts are often based on “whataboutism” and use belittling, *ad hominem* attacks.

His most popular post was published just after the election and links the parking of the Trnava self-governing region's car in front of the residence of the US Ambassador in Bratislava with a supposed US influence on the election's winner, the OLaNO party (the head of Trnava's self-

governing region is Jozef Viskupič, a member of OLaNO). Based on this parked car, Blaha went as far as to blame the party's leader, Igor Matovič, of selling out Slovakia to the Americans and voiced alarmist expressions such as “there's a real threat that right-wingers will change Slovakia to the American fifth column.” He continued to develop this narrative in a number of his post-election posts.

# Popular narratives

**T**he Slovak 2020 Parliamentary election was highly anticipated; many experts and politicians made parallels to the excitement and anticipation around the 1998 election marking the end of Vladimír Mečiar's rule in the country. The 2020 election, however, took place in a markedly different environment shaping the electoral campaign and public discourse by promoting narratives undermining democratic processes and institutions. These narratives were almost exclusively used in the problematic spectrum of the information space, i.e. FB pages and open groups with problematic content specifically.

The primary target of the attacks was liberalism and the liberal-democratic system. The narrative that liberalism poses an "existential threat" has been systematically promoted on the problematic spectrum of the information space, particularly since the presidential election in 2019<sup>2</sup>. Ever since then, this antisystem narrative has been successfully

Andrej Danko, Former Speaker of the Slovak Parliament

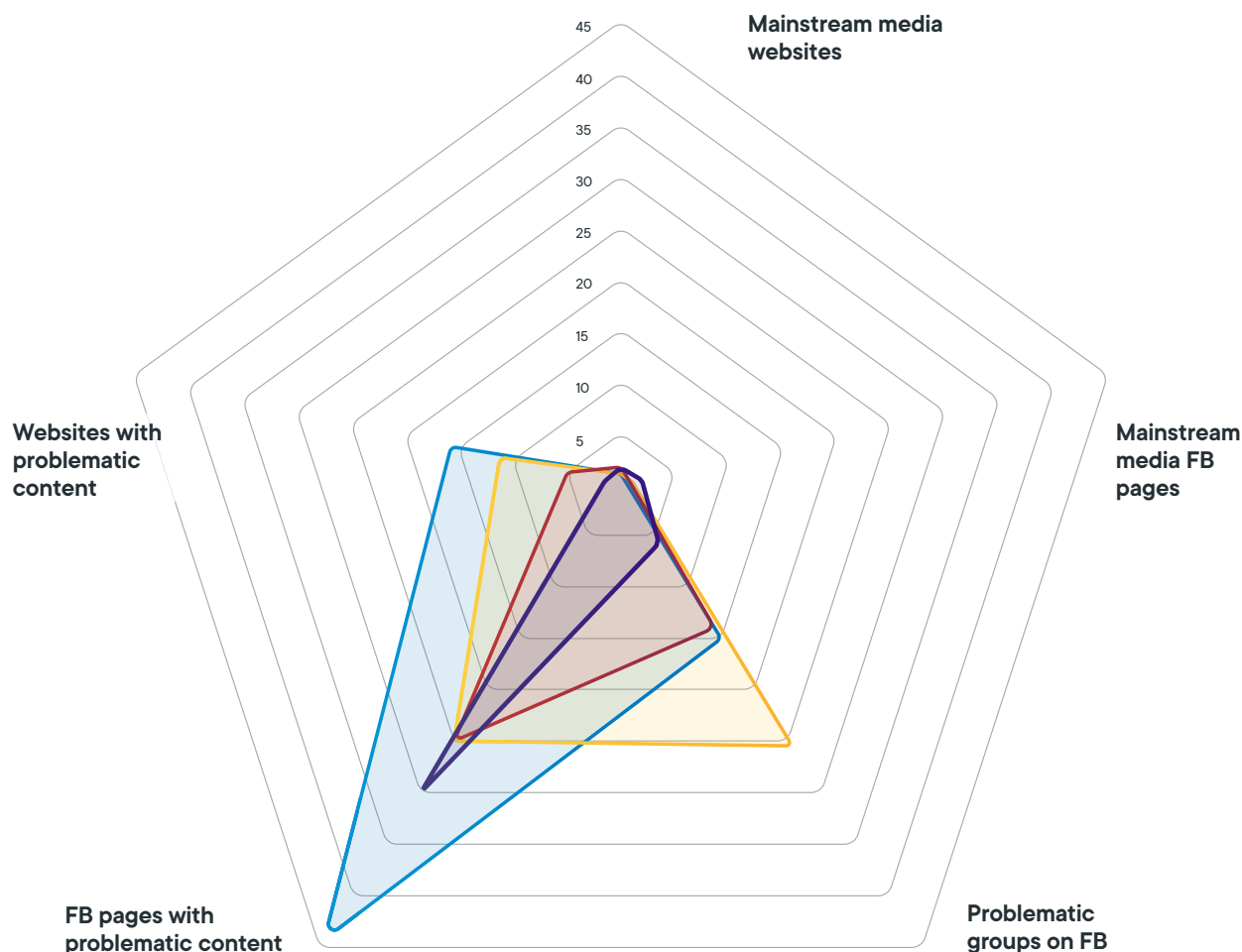
**„Let's make sure that liberal democracy, which is destroying our beloved Slovakia, won't win.“**

inserted into the mainstream discourse and contributes to demonising liberal parties in the Slovak political landscape, as well as to blocking laws and legislation seeking to guarantee human rights and freedoms in Slovakia. A classic example of this narrative's effect is influential public figures challenging the notion of liberal democracy as the most suitable political system for the Slovak Republic.

Facebook pages with problematic content share most of the polarising narratives in the infospace.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Presidential-Election-Monitoring-report-SK.pdf>

# Narratives shared across the information space



## Liberalism as a threat

member of LSNS, Nov 13, 2019

“A very important election is ahead of us now, in which it will be decided whether Slovakia will be controlled by liberal extremists... whether in 10 – 15 years we will have a hoard of migrants, LGBT and gender ideology here“

candidate for Vlast, Nov 21, 2019

“Kotleba<sup>3</sup> is not my enemy. My enemies are ultraliberal perverts.”

## Election Interference

FB page with more than 37,000 likes, Oct 29, 2019

“There is no worse election interference than the manipulation of public opinion through polls.”

outlet with problematic content, Oct 16, 2019

“Facebook censors the page of Slobodný vysielateľ (Free Broadcaster). We suddenly became invisible to people. Get ready everyone who is warning against the election interference!”

## Conspiracies

outlet with problematic content, Feb 26, 2020

“American interference into Slovak elections? Facebook three days ahead of the election cancelled Kulturblog and other pages, which are allegedly linked to LSNS”

candidate for Vlast, Feb 15, 2020

“AKO [polling] agency got ultraliberal Čaputová into the palace through the opinion polls. Now they are trying in it again”

## Oligarchs

MP for SMER-SD, Oct 30, 2019 about the Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová

“Oligarch’s rag from the presidential palace”

MP for SMER-SD, Oct 30, 2019

“Opinion poll surveys are not a human right but a means of manipulation by oligarchs.”

<sup>3</sup> Marian Kotleba is a leader of the far-right extremist LSNS party

# Inciting fear of liberals and media on Facebook pages

## Liberalism as a threat

A surprisingly large scale of elements characterising liberal democracy<sup>4</sup> were under attack, from the respect for the rights and freedoms of all, including minorities, to undermining the rule-of-law and the functioning of a representative system through elections.

Narratives, such as the one claiming that liberalism is a “foreign” ideology artificially implanted to destroy “traditional Slovak society” and, as such, needs to be perceived as an existential threat, have been systematically promoted through the problematic spectrum of the Slovak information space and have seeped into mainstream political discourse. This narrative echoes the Kremlin’s internal and external political strategy to portray “liberal machinery” as the new enemy, apparent since 2011<sup>5</sup>.

In the first half of November, 2019, posts containing expressions such as “Today, Čaputová definitely confirmed that she is a neoliberal extremist, which should be tried for scorning the people and

motherhood.” (MP for SMER-SD, Nov 11, 2019), or “The common goal of our parties is to stop the rise of liberal totality and protect traditional values and Slovak homeland also for our children” (member of ĽSNS, Nov 13, 2019). In both cases, liberalism is portrayed as a totalitarian ideology which is in conflict with human nature.

Another efficient form of discrediting liberalism as a legitimate part of the political spectrum is associating liberalism with sexual deviations and the targeted portrayal of sexual minorities as embodiments of these depravities. Liberalism is allegedly not advancing equality for discriminated individuals but for the perverted normalisation of sexual deviances with the goal of destroying “traditional Slovak society”.

<sup>4</sup> Defined as a “democracy based on the recognition of individual rights and freedoms, in which decisions from direct or representative processes prevail in many policy areas” in <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/liberal-democracy> or “A democratic system of government in which individual rights and freedoms are officially recognized and protected, and the exercise of political power is limited by the rule of law.” in [https://www.lexico.com/definition/liberal\\_democracy](https://www.lexico.com/definition/liberal_democracy).

<sup>5</sup> T. Snyder, *Cesta do Neslobody*, p.100 (Premedia, 2018)



Post by Informácie bez cenzúry (Information without Censorship) Page which attempts to portray liberalism as sexual perversion. It was shared over 2,300 times.

## Mainstream media that cannot be trusted

The role of the media in Slovakia’s democratic society continued to be attacked and undermined as well. The private “liberal media” allegedly controlled by oligarchs and large financial groups were also portrayed on the mushrooming number of web and FB pages with problematic content as untrustworthy, working for the interest of the elite and against “the people”. This concerted attack on journalism is a long-term trend in Slovakia, epitomised in former

Prime Minister, Robert Fico’s quote, in which he described journalists as “filthy anti-Slovak prostitutes”<sup>6</sup>. Reminiscent of Donald Trump’s treatment of reporters and journalists, attacking journalists in Slovakia represents a systematic effort to delegitimise factual information without which no liberal democracy based on the rule-of-law can properly function.

<sup>6</sup> <https://medialne.etrend.sk/tlac/fico-nektori-novinari-su-spinave-protislovenske-prostitutky.html>

Vlasť party candidate, Dec 18, 2019

**“Corrupted political elite and politically controlled and appointed judges and prosecutors are trying to change our homeland to dictatorship and totality. And they are efficiently assisted by the oligarchs-bought liberal press. They do it gradually, in a stealthy and creepy way. Step by step. They think we are frogs which can be boiled without us noticing. But we will not accept it!”**



# Election interference dominant on FB groups

Open FB groups represent a special monitoring category since they serve as an accessible space for FB users to create and share content with like-minded users. Therefore, a first-hand observation of how the so-called “echo chambers”, i.e., opinion bubbles which users seek out to confirm their own world views, are formed and function is possible in these groups. Since the content of these posts is created by users themselves, FB groups are also a hub for personal attacks on politicians, emotional and even aggressive expressions, as well as hateful and divisive narratives. The trending theme of monitored open FB groups were the accusations by individuals or larger groups of Slovak society about election interference. Of all analysed posts on open FB groups, 20%

warned against possible election interference.

Suggesting that the electoral process in Slovakia is manipulated and cannot be trusted has similarly been deployed to exploit an existing vulnerability – an already low level of trust by Slovak citizens in democratic institutions<sup>7</sup>, strengthened by the killings of the investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée, Martina Kušnírová, in February 2018. This narrative has been actively promoted since the 2019 presidential election and was built upon during the electoral campaign prior to the 2020 parliamentary election.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.noviny.sk/slovensko/510799-slovaci-neveria-svojim-instituciám-dovera-v-policiu-je-u-nas-doklonca-najmensia-z-celej-eu>

# 20%

On FB open groups, every fifth post analysed warned against election interference and manipulation.

# Who allegedly interferes in the election?

1.

## Opinion poll agencies

An important theme discussed in relation to election interference was the attempt to ban public opinion polls on political preferences 50 days ahead of the election. The former ruling party, SMER – SD, in tandem with the far-right extremist party, Kotleba – LSNS (People's Party Our Slovakia), passed a law forbidding the publication of public opinion polls 50 days ahead of the election, supposedly in order to prevent the spread of false information. This law was subsequently challenged by President Čaputová as unconstitutional. While the Constitutional Court of the

Slovak Republic ruled that the law would not be applicable in the upcoming parliamentary elections, the Court has yet to take a final decision on whether the moratorium is unconstitutional and violates citizens' rights to information<sup>8</sup>. The argument that the publication of these polls represents the manipulation of elections from abroad was based on the premise that opinion poll agencies themselves, or those who order these polls, are paid from foreign sources. Subsequently, everyone who was not in favour of the ban and later not in favour of the moratorium's cancellation,

from the President of Slovakia to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, was accused of supporting or contributing to the alleged election interference.

<sup>8</sup> <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22286688/50-dnove-moratorium-zatial-nebude-rozhodol-ustavny-sud.html>



2.

## NGOs

Other identified culprits of this alleged interference were meant to be NGOs, which by way of receiving grants from abroad supposedly act on behalf of vague, foreign (typically U.S.) interests. It thus serves two purposes: first, it demonises an important watchdog of democracy, i.e. civil society and second, it portrays a NATO ally, i.e., the U.S.A., as an enemy.

A law which stipulates that NGOs receiving grants from abroad need to register as foreign agents was passed in Russia already in 2012 in an effort to demonise and prosecute civil society. Similar laws were proposed in Central Europe.

Financing of NGOs from abroad that is interpreted as foreign interference has been an often-

repeated theme not only ahead of the election. Cases when an NGO comments on the electoral process or starts an initiative to increase voter turnout often elicit a reaction in the form of attacks against the organisation and its key representatives.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/russia-four-years-of-putins-foreign-agents-law-to-shackle-and-silence-ngos/>



User's post suggesting a conspiracy of election interference of the Slovak branch of the Open Society Foundation, a network of NGOs originally founded by George Soros.





# 3.

## Oligarchs controlling everything

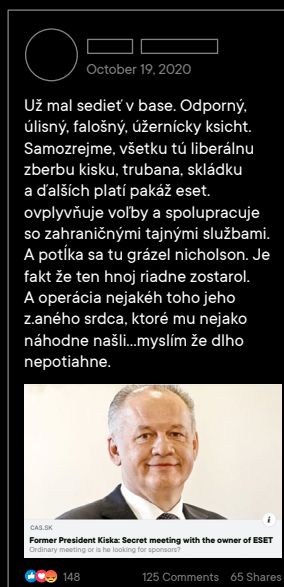
A typical example of linking various actors with the aim of portraying them as conspiring in the electoral process is the case of a world-known Slovak IT security company, ESET, whose key representatives openly support political parties and projects fostering liberal democracy in Slovakia.

One of the common and malign stories was that the company providing malware and antivirus protection software supposedly established a backdoor into the computers of the election committee which it could later use to manipulate the results in favour of liberal political parties. This narrative was disseminated, among others, also by SMER-SD's Ľuboš Blaha, claiming, for example, that "ESET could be influencing the elections"<sup>10</sup> that "we can calmly and expertly speak about the ESET as about oligarchs"<sup>11</sup> and that "the company ESET was labelled by Russian MFA as linked to American secret services"<sup>12</sup>.

ESET vehemently denied such accusations and launched a legal proceeding against Blaha for

defamation.<sup>13</sup> In February 2020, a court ordered Mr. Blaha to delete all his FB posts and videos that mentioned ESET.

Below is a typical example of hate speech and ad hominem attacks shared on FB groups. Even Andrej Kiska, the former President and leader of party the Za ľudí (For People), was accused of collaborating with ESET. "He was meant to sit in prison a long time ago. Repugnant, slimy, deceitful, usury face. Of course, all that liberal trash Kiska, Truban, dump and others are paid by the vermin ESET. It interferes in the election and cooperates with foreign secret services. And the roughneck Nicholson is roaming around. It's a fact that the dung has aged a lot. And surgery of somebody's f\*\*\*\*d heart, which they found on him somehow... I think he won't last long" (user's post from 19th October 2019)<sup>14</sup>



<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/posts/2542483942656836>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/posts/2543479642557266>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/LBlaha/posts/2543479642557266>

<sup>13</sup> <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22162363/esetu-dosla-trpezlivost-na-blahu-podal-zalobu.html>

<sup>14</sup> The "dump" in the post refers to current Slovak President, Mrs Čaputová. Prior to her political career, as an advocate she fought against illegal dumping of waste in Pezinok, for which she was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize. In the antisystem communities, this achievement is often used against her.

## Alarmist messaging

Election interference posts in open FB groups were often of an alarming character aiming to mobilise and influence voters.

One of the most popular posts shared in a number of groups, was a post about the ESET company originally published on a FB group called, *I vote for Harabin*, by a person with a closed account. The original post had 1119 shares and was reshared into different groups (such as *I don't trust ex-president Kiska, nor I trust president Čaputová or FOR SLOVAK SOVEREIGNTY, AGAINST NATO BASES*) 35 times and overall, its message reached over 64,000 people.



<sup>15</sup> ESET is a successful Slovak software company whose antivirus products are sold worldwide. The post suggests that somehow this company is conspiring to manipulate the elections and the double use of the letter 's' in the post is deliberately used to refer to the infamous Adolf Hitler's paramilitary organisation, Schutzstaffel.





# Content amplification on Facebook

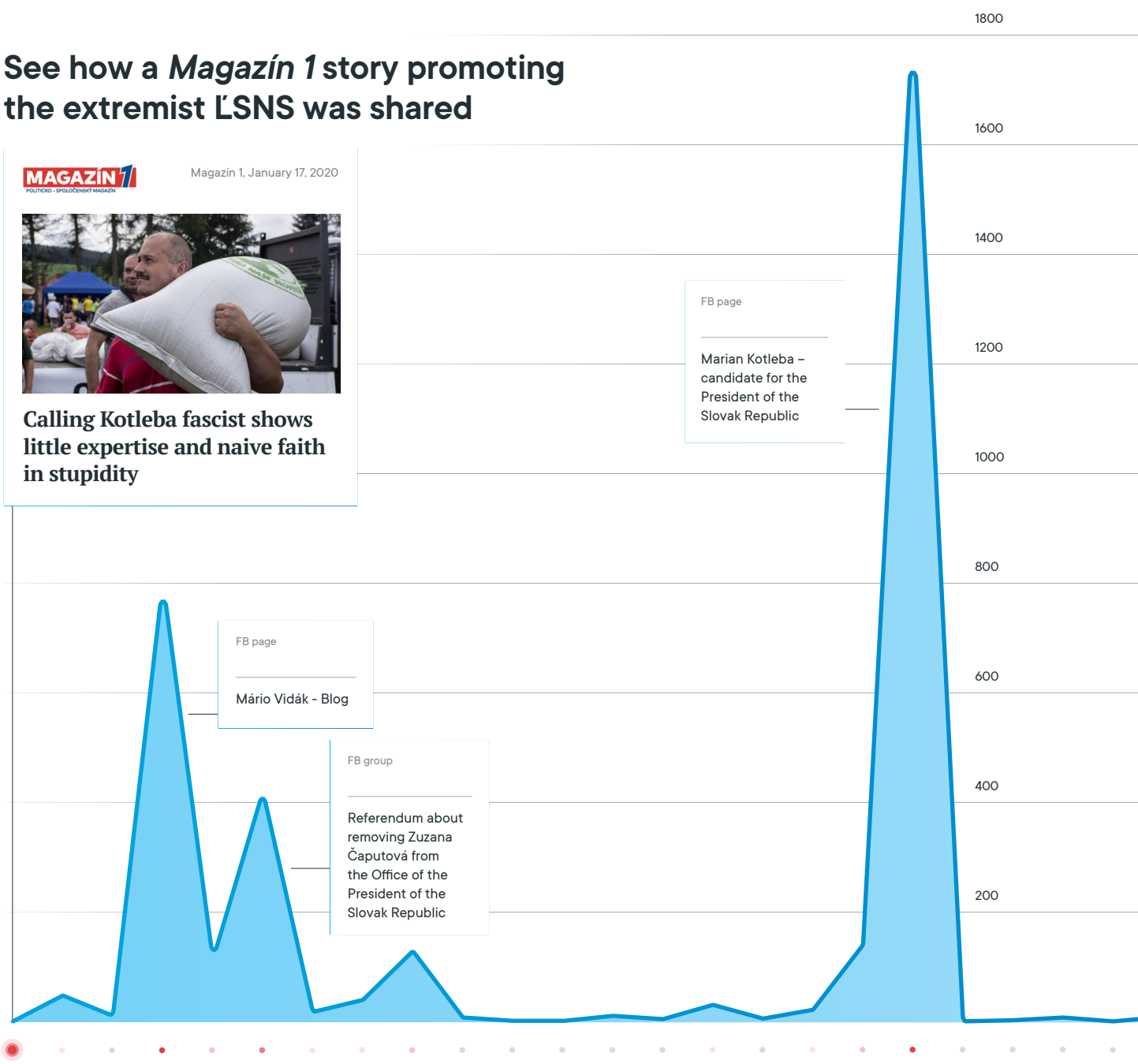
See how a *Magazín 1* story promoting the extremist ĽSNS was shared

**MAGAZÍN 1** POLITICKO - SPOLOČENSKÝ MAGAZÍN

Magazín 1, January 17, 2020



**Calling Kotleba fascist shows little expertise and naive faith in stupidity**



# 146,826

unique users were exposed to this Magazin 1 article

The majority of the parties campaigned via their official verified FB pages, supported with public accounts and pages of the party representatives.

However, different strategies were adopted by Kotleba's LSNS that steadily developed an ecosystem consisting of a wide variety of FB pages, open and closed groups. This network was further supported by older or freshly established outlets, posing as neutral news websites with names such as *Magazín 1* (Magazine 1) or *Prehľad Správ* (News Overview) that were not openly associated with the party. Investigative journalists, however, revealed the direct connections and influence of these and other similar outlets to the LSNS party. While openly promoting the LSNS party and its narratives, articles from these outlets were also systematically shared by the ecosystem of FB pages affiliated with the party. **76% of monitored election-related**

### **Magazín 1** articles contained positive reference to the LSNS party.

Another example of using FB for content amplification were open FB groups, characterised mostly by titles associated with nationalism, traditional values or anti-liberalism. While the groups serve as a platform for the users to act as content contributors, we spotted a large number of dedicated users re-sharing the same content on multiple groups in order to amplify their reach and message. Except for sharing specific narratives, the *Vlast'* (Homeland) party, with its leader Štefan Harabin, a former judge, head of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic, Minister of Justice, and an unsuccessful candidate in 2019's presidential elections, enjoyed the highest support in these groups. 45% of all positive party mentions on FB groups belonged to *Vlast'*, double that of LSNS. Due to the privacy restrictions, however, it is difficult

to assess whether the active users are true supporters or trolls.

Such interconnected ecosystems allowed the parties to spread the same message and articles effectively throughout the observed time period and to amplify their narratives to various users at different locations and at different times.

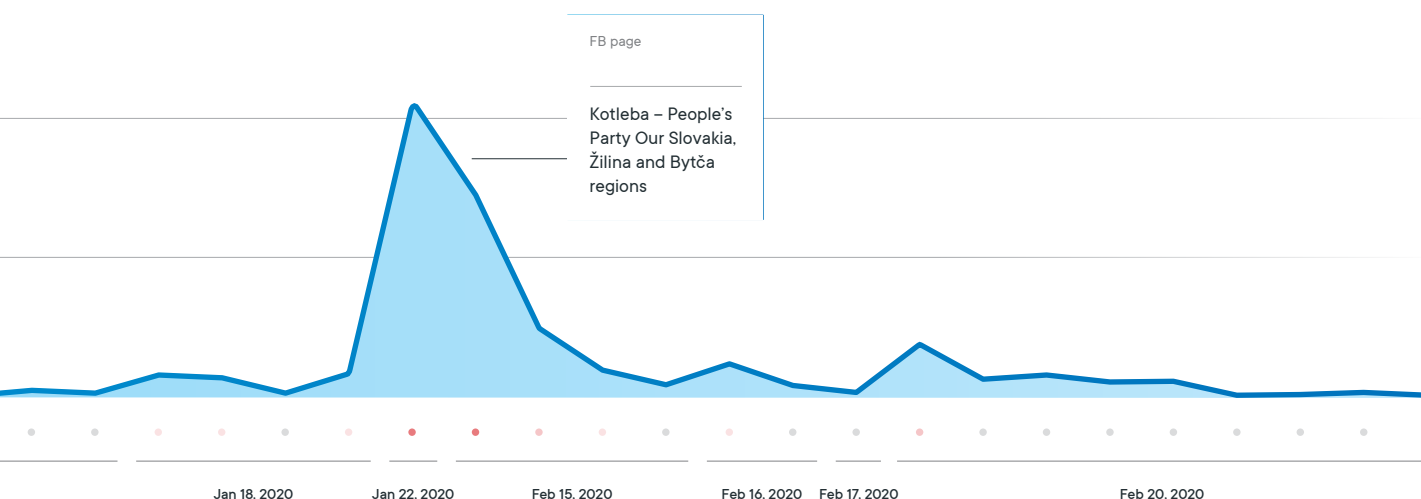
An exemplary case of efforts to frame the discussion and push through a specific narrative about the far-right party was an article "Calling Kotleba fascist shows little expertise and naive faith in stupidity" that reacted to anti-extremist activities of civil society and some political representatives in Slovakia. The article had more than 20,000 FB interactions and was one of the most-viral articles within the whole monitoring period.

During January and February of 2020, it was shared on 46 FB

pages and open groups. In this article, it is possible to observe the tactic of information-laundering and an attempt to reinstate the party's own narrative by resharing the article multiple times within the three-month timeframe.

The article also includes a reference to a recording of Kotleba's speech from one of the town rally meetings of LSNS with more than 800,000 views on FB. This demonstrates another effective example of content amplification.

Web and FB pages which promoted the interests of the party without official attribution played an important role in the electoral campaign. All in all, the article reached more than 146,000 unique FB users.



# Role of Facebook in the elections

## Large amount of problematic content

The data shows that the largest amount of disinformation and problematic content in Slovakia is spread on FB. The platform blbec.online currently monitors over 1550 FB pages and groups, most of which spread problematic or manipulative content.<sup>16</sup> Many of the pages do have official attribution to political parties, however, this does not mean that the rest of the pages' sponsors are not involved in shaping the political discourse.

FB's activities and efforts to block the spread of hoaxes, disinformation and other problematic content breaching the platform's community standards depends, to a large

extent, on independent fact-checkers. A Slovak fact-checker was established only a few weeks prior to the election. French Press Agency (AFP) has been assigned as a responsible entity for fact-checking in Slovakia and has only one Slovak-speaking person dedicated for this role for a country with around 2.7 million active users. We consider this measure as highly inadequate.

<sup>16</sup>Current database of Blbec.online portal includes and monitors 1825 FB pages and groups. The amount of 1,550 does not include FB pages labelled as politicians/public sector/political parties and state institutions.

## Fact-checking in practice

The fact-checker is supposed to identify false news and disinformation that should subsequently be less visible on users' FB News Feeds. These are collected on a dedicated AFP website for Slovakia fakty.afp.com listing the examples of posts shared on Slovak FB labelled as false. One month after the February 11, 2020 launch of the service, the page had only two examples of false information identified by AFP's fact-checker.

The first example contained an image of a supposed lightning

ball above a railroad track, and the second a false map of an alleged concentration of sulfur dioxide above the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the outbreak of COVID-19 originated. Given the extensive amount of harmful and malign content, attacks and conspiracies that have been shared on the platform prior to the 2020 parliamentary election, the gravity and destructive potential of these two cases is questionable. Our understanding after a consultation with AFP suggested that the establishment of an official fact-checker in Slovakia was not meant as an attempt to improve the quality of content prior to the elections. On the contrary, the date of establishing the fact-checker had probably nothing to do with the pre-election period.



# Blocking of FB pages

A visible attempt by FB to enforce its transparency measures and remove the content breaching them was the blockage of several FB pages associated with LSNS party. On February 26, 2020, FB blocked seven pages, including two pages of Kulturblog and the pages of Magazín 1 and Prehľad Správ.

The decision was based on FB's conclusion that these pages

helped to promote the LSNS party without any official party attribution. Until the pages admitted the party attribution, they would stay removed, claimed FB.<sup>17</sup> None of the mentioned pages were running until the publication of this report.

The removed pages' response, however, was the creation of their own alternatives, either by renaming existing pages, or by

setting up new ones. Instead of Kulturblog, a new page, Portál Kulturblog, with more than 11,000 fans was running in March. This page was set up on the same day FB decided to remove the original Kulturblog. Magazín 1 runs under the name Svet Politiky (World of Politics). Neither of these pages admit their direct relationship with LSNS. FB was thus repeatedly not able to secure compliance with their own rules and transparency measures.



<sup>17</sup> <https://dennikn.sk/1773184/facebook-zrusil-kulturblog-a-dalsie-stranky-ktore-pomahali-kotlebovcum-v-kampani/>

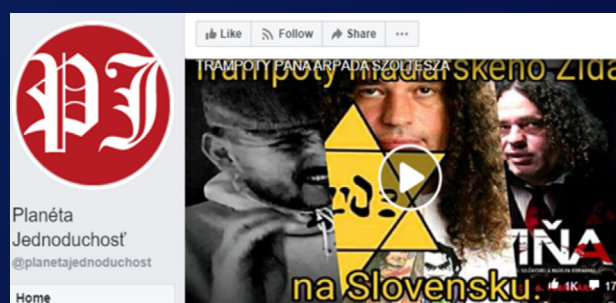
The reporting of problematic content breaching FB rules and the reasons behind the decisions to remove (or not) individual FB pages or posts are not transparent. A user reporting problematic content to FB administrators usually only receives a generic message about the reported content not breaching FB community standards. This includes cases of online bullying or hate speech based on an alleged or factual ethnic identity or belonging to a particular opinion group.

An example of such reported content is a video from the FB page, Planéta Jednoduchosť (Planet Simplicity), entitled, "Problems of a Hungarian Jew", aiming to defame the Slovak journalist, Arpad Soltesz, for his

supposed Hungarian and Jewish origin. The post has been reported several times without any result. The reporting of fake accounts or bots on FB is similarly problematic and the accounts concerned can freely continue to shape public discourse, creating the impression of a strong support base for a candidate, party or a cause, as well as amplifying specific content. Already, in November 2017, the

Slovak daily, Denník N (Daily N) published an article with evidence of reporting 74 fake accounts and FB's subsequent reaction in taking down only seven<sup>18</sup>. On the other hand, some FB pages and accounts have been removed without a clear explanation.

<sup>18</sup> <https://dennikn.sk/941955/upozornili-sme-facebook-na-vyse-70-falosnych-profilov-reakcia-adminov-bola-velmi-zla/>



## Lack of transparency

Inadequate implementation of FB's own rules, originally aiming at greater transparency, can be observed in relation to the system of FB Ads and sponsored content. We identified several cases of sponsored posts lacking necessary disclaimers about the sponsor or

political party, while data in FB's Ad Library showed them as sponsored posts. Moreover, despite the fact that the information about the paid ads should be kept in the FB Library for seven years, there were several instances identified by researchers when information

about paid content of some pages was suddenly removed.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/rorysmith/the-uk-election-showed-just-how-unreliable-facebooks>



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All examples of the posts included in this report are word-by-word transcripts or screenshots of real existing posts translated to English from Slovak. Authors by no means agree with or subscribe under these claims.

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## Methodology

Monitoring covers the period between October 1, 2019 to March 2, 2020 divided into three phases:

I. October 1, 2019 – November 15, 2019

II. November 16, 2019 – January 26, 2020

III. January 27, 2020 – March 2, 2020

The monitoring covers five databases consisting of **904 sources**:

- 95 most-often visited web and news portals according to the list on [medialne.trend.sk](http://medialne.trend.sk). Pages which are included on [konspiratori.sk](http://konspiratori.sk) were excluded from this list as the purpose of this database is to monitor content not deemed problematic by the expert community. Pages that do not produce original content were also excluded.

- 92 FB pages of web and news portals.

- 52 web pages which regularly produce problematic (unreliable, deceitful or propagandistic) content<sup>20</sup>. This category also includes web pages which often imitate legitimate news outlets and journalism visually, whilst their content does not meet the standards of quality journalism such as accuracy, using verified sources or preventing the distortion of facts and context. This list primarily relies on sources from the database on [konspiratori.sk](http://konspiratori.sk) (valid on October 1, 2019) and is supplemented by the most-viral sources from the database on [blbec.online](http://blbec.online) of which pages on FB have a web equivalent.

- 626 FB pages included in the database [blbec.online](http://blbec.online) as active pages producing content in Slovak, except for pages included in the category "Politicians / public

figures" and pages listed under no category. Second and third monitoring phases corresponds to pages listed in the database on January 31, 2020 and the first monitoring corresponds to pages listed there on September 30, 2019.

- 39 open groups on FB, identified through shares of the most-viral articles published by 52 webpages producing problematic content.

The content of the databases was further filtered through different forms of the word "elections" in Slovak and a total amount of interactions on FB. Content was analysed on 30 posts with the highest number of interactions for each database in each monitoring phase, whereas the outreach was generated from maximum 250 most-viral posts for each category and monitoring phase.

The generation of lists was carried out three days after the last day of monitoring to ensure that the evaluated content had stable numbers of interactions.

Data was collected via monitoring tools NewsWhip and CrowdTangle.

### Categorisation of the most important topics monitored

#### Liberalism as a threat

– a narrative in which concept of liberalism and liberal democracy as a political system based on the protection and empowerment of personal freedom and individual rights<sup>21</sup> is presented as a threat or danger to state, society, "traditional values", etc. The concept is often stripped of its original meaning and portrayed as a vague threat without stating the reasons behind the alleged risk.

#### Mainstream media cannot

**be trusted** – a narrative which challenges the trustworthiness of standard mainstream media through claims suggesting an alleged bias and obedience to political, financial and business elites and interests.

**Moratorium** – a narrative about a legislative proposal banning public opinion polls on voting preferences 50 days ahead of the Slovak Parliamentary Elections.

**Oligarchy** – a narrative about influential business and financial groups or members of these groups, which considerably interfere into political processes and policy agendas in Slovakia.

#### Election Interference

– a narrative that challenges the legitimacy of the electoral campaign and the elections as such suggesting some kind of interference into the electoral processes by foreign powers, NGOs or through publishing public opinion polls of voting preferences.

#### Used metrics

**Number of interactions** – a sum of all emoticons, commentaries and shares which a post generated within a given time period.

**Total number of interactions** – a sum of all interactions for each post in a given time period.

**Average number of interactions** – sum of all interactions divided by a number of posts in certain category within a given time period.

<sup>20</sup> This definition is taken from the initiative [konspiratori.sk](http://konspiratori.sk)

<sup>21</sup> Definition according to Encyclopaedia Britannica: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/liberalism>

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