



facebook

Meta



Pre-election Monitoring of Facebook in Slovak Information Space

What are this week's most popular posts
in the four bubbles across the Slovak Facebook?

Just three and a half years following the previous parliamentary elections, Slovakia finds itself on the precipice of a critical moment in its political trajectory. SMER-SSD party, which is, under the leadership of Robert Fico, leading as the frontrunner in pre-election polls, is surrounded by substantive concerns about the party's members entanglement in corruption,¹ disseminating disinformation and spreading pro-Kremlin narratives,² all while endorsing the suspension of military aid to Ukraine.³ Simultaneously, there's a surge in the popularity of extremist parties that in past harbored inclinations aligned with fascist ideologies.⁴ Within this complex landscape, prodemocratic parties that came to power in 2020 elections also maintain presence. Their tenure in power, however, can be characterized as tumultuous – marked by political battles and governmental crises resulting in changes in key government positions including the prime minister, finally resulting in a care-taker government named by the President in May 2023. The political instability further catalysed the feeling of insecurity among the population, fuelled by the Russian war against the neighbouring Ukraine.

As the nation inches closer to September 30th, a date set for the upcoming preliminary elections to the Slovak National Council, the political scene is anything but dormant. Even amidst the summer, where political discourse often takes a lighter tone, the campaign trail is in full swing.

While the political candidates fight hard for the voters, they are not the only ones shaping voters' decisions. Equally influential are the narratives that echo within the online information bubbles, in which citizens actively navigate on a daily basis. This is even more important to monitor and study given the increasing influence of disinformation narratives that have taken hold in the minds of the Slovak public.⁵

Leading up to the election date, GLOBSEC has committed to releasing a weekly *Pre-election Monitoring of Facebook in Slovak Information Space report*. This weekly update dissects key themes, influential actors, and notably, the most resonating posts in terms of reach across four distinct groups within Slovakia's most frequented social media platform - Facebook. These groups encompass Problematic Sources, Prodemocratic Actors, State Institutions, and the Hungarian Minority (for a comprehensive insight into the methodology, please refer to the Methodology section below).

From July 29th to August 8th, two well-known Facebook pages took centre stage in the online landscape, capturing attention with the highest number of popular shared posts. The first being "Zomri," the satirical page known for its commentary on political affairs, and the second being "Hoaxes and Frauds – Police SR," a platform maintained by the Slovak Police to debunk disinformation, foster media literacy and cognitive resilience of the society.

Central to the online discourse was the topic of Ukraine and efforts to debunk disinformation surrounding the Russian invasion of the Ukrainian territory. In the midst of these discussions, it became evident that the realm of problematic sources yielded the greatest reach, the standout post being a video extracted from a documentary that disseminates conspiracy theories concerning President Zelensky. Political satire also wielded considerable influence on a public and political discourse.

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1 <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/23204019/police-detain-ex-top-cop-gaspar-again-fico-claims-his-party-is-victim-of-attack.html>,

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/former-interior-minister-of-slovakia-charged-with-corruption-again/>

<https://euobserver.com/rule-of-law/154892>

2 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-02-02/eu-diplomats-warn-on-slovakia-s-opposition-as-election-nears?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner

3 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/06/25/slovakia-russia-ukraine-robert-fico/>

4 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/slovak-far-right-with-neo-nazi-origins-eyes-government/>

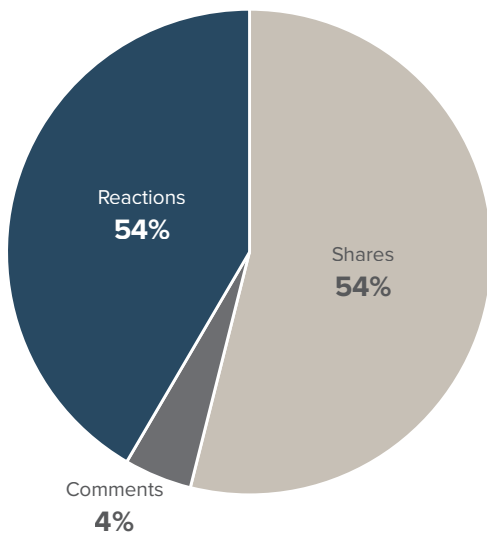
5 <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publication/globsec-trends-2023-united-we-still-stand>

Why do problematic sources have such a large impact?

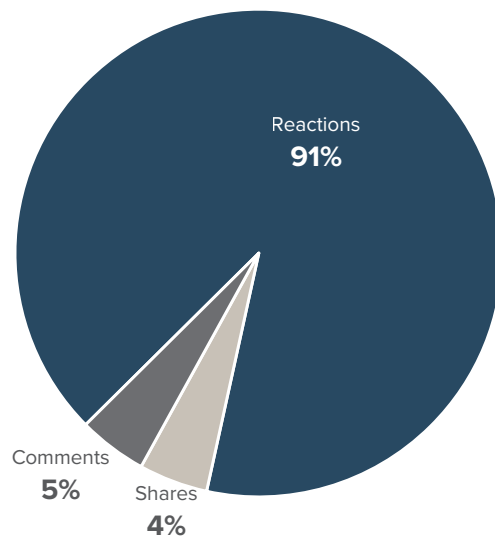
Problematic sources have garnered over double the number of interactions—counting reactions, comments, and shares—during this week's monitoring, in comparison to the most popular posts in other sections of the report. This trend is notable even in light of the fact that the most prominent page within the Prodemocratic Actors category, "Zomri" (Die), boasts a larger following (401k) than the combined follower count of the top three pages in the Problematic Sources group ("Otevři svou mysl" (Open your mind): 15k, "Televízia Slovan" (TV Slav): 68k, "Matovičov cirkus" (Matovič's circus): 86k)."

An examination of interaction patterns reveals a notable contrast in the composition of shares between the Problematic Sources and Prodemocratic Actors. The percentage of shares in relation to total interactions surges to 42% in case of Problematic Sources, a striking contrast to the mere 4% observed for Prodemocratic Actors. Concurrently, a substantial 91% of interactions within this category consist of reactions. This dynamic underscores an important observation: the substantial influence of Problematic Sources stems primarily from the extensive sharing of their posts by Facebook users who follow them. This, in turn, grants such pages a significant platform to propagate disinformation, even in the crucial lead-up to elections.

Interaction Patterns within Problematic Sources



Interaction Patterns within Prodemocratic Actors



Graphs were prepared by summing the individual types of interactions of the top 3 posts in the group Problematic Sources and the group Prodemocratic Actors

Problematic Sources

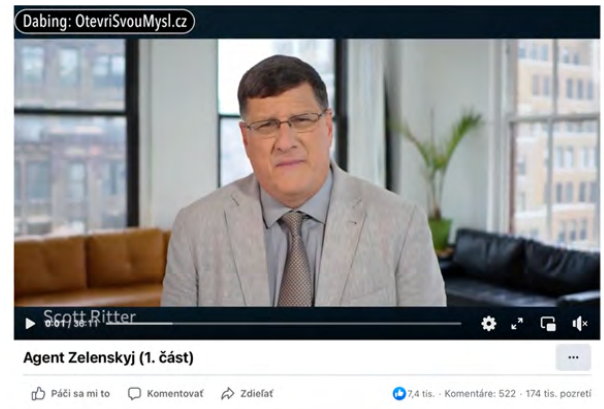
The posts originating from problematic sources exhibit diversity in the subjects they cover during the monitored period, spanning cultural, ethical, domestic, and foreign policy matters. Notably, in terms of their influence, these posts have garnered over double the quantity of interactions when compared to the most successful posts found within the other groups under observation.

1. Otevři svou mysl (Open your mind)

2nd august 2023 – **16 403 interactions**, (7 345 reactions, 520 comments and 8 538 shares).

The most interacted with post of the monitored week among all the observed groups originates from the Czech social media page "Otevři svou mysl", which, based on the comments under the post, resonates both among Czech and Slovak audiences. The post features a video, constituting the initial segment of a documentary named "Agent Zelenskyj" by Scott Ritter, a known American disinformant and convicted sex offender.⁶ The video is presented in the Czech language and delves into conspiracy theories surrounding the ascent of President Zelensky to power. The second part of this documentary was also posted on the social media platform YouTube but was subsequently taken down⁷ due to a violation of their terms of service. The video aligns with a persistent narrative within the disinformation landscape, which seeks to erode support for Ukraine by diminishing trustworthiness of President Zelensky.

Its wide reach is attributed primarily to the fact that the video was published by a Czech problematic site, which implies it was consumed also by the Czech audiences (Czechia is twice as big as Slovakia in population). Czech sources, however, are commonly consumed by Slovaks, due to language proximity.



2. Televízia Slovan (TV Slav)

30th july 2023 – **16 282 interactions**, (9 593 reactions, 1 059 comments and 5 630 shares).

In a brief video clip, Martina Šimkovičová, a former mainstream media anchor and a candidate for the National Council of the Slovak Republic representing the Slovak National Party (SNS), along with a colleague, misinterpret the contents of a newly introduced textbook on relationship and sex education. Within the video, they characterize it as an "expedition through pornographic illustrations". Furthermore, they assert that the text incorporates an "ideology of liberalism, and criticize the few depictions of a traditional family, suggesting that the presentation appears "somewhat cynical" due to the characters being rendered in the style of a "modern multicultural family". The video aligns with a narrative centred around "resistance against liberalism" and is reinforced with allusions that carry undertones of racism.

3. Matovičov cirkus (Matovič's circus)

3rd august 2023 – **15 602 interactions**, (9 095 reactions, 601 comments and 5 906 shares).

The website released a video wherein they employ satire responding to the campaign of the political party "Ordinary People and Independent Personalities" (OLANO), which pledges €500 to each voter and a Fiat 500 for their backers. In the video, they humorously sing, "No need to work anymore, I'll give my vote to "OLANO" and make money."

6 <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/magazine/scott-ritter.html?auth=login-smartlock>
7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hq-Jab4DUhA>

Prodemocratic Actors

The three most influential posts in the Prodemocratic Actors category over the previous week all originated from the satirical website Zomri (Die). Notably, content from Zomri dominated the entirety of the top 20 positions among the most widely interacted with posts throughout the monitored period.

1. Zomri (Die)

2nd August 2023 – 7 765 interactions, (6 826 reactions, 535 comments and 404 shares).

The most widely circulated post from the monitored week offers a response to the ongoing pre-election campaigns of various candidate political parties. It features a collage comprised of photographs of politicians who have been part of previous Slovak governments. A satirical caption accompanies the images: “If you elect us, we can achieve everything easily and swiftly. We just couldn’t do so during our time in government,” a subtle comment that indirectly erodes trust in all representatives of the political parties depicted in the collage. Zomri supplements the post with the commentary “A lackluster campaign - it’s time to get things going.”



2. Zomri (Die)

31st July 2023 – 7 329 interactions, (6 911 reactions, 93 comments and 325 shares).

The second post takes the form of a meme featuring a picture of a despondent bear, accompanied by a phrase, ‘When you find out Boris Kollár thinks you’re aggressive and overpopulated, but all you wanted was to emulate him.’ This post employs satire to highlight the Speaker of the Slovak National Council, Boris Kollár, who recently faced allegations of physical assault from one of his former partners. The post accompanies the image by the phrase ‘Vivat Slovakia’ to allude to the manipulation of the topic of alleged bear overpopulation in Slovakia as a diversion from the nation’s more pressing concerns.

3. Zomri (Die)

1st August 2023 – 5 252 interactions, (4 751 reactions, 304 comments and 197 shares).

The third post with the highest reach asserts that “The most potent remedy for Russophilia is a firsthand visit to Russia.” This statement alludes to the recurring and excessively positive misconceptions about Russia,⁸ which persist within a segment of the Slovak population. The post likely draws from the recent experience of a Slovak composer who illicitly entered Russia by swimming across a river, harboring hopes of a brighter future. However, his aspirations were dashed when he was apprehended on Russian soil and underwent a transformation in his perceptions of the country during his time in a Russian prison.

State institutions

Among the state institutions, the most widely received Facebook posts during the observed week were attributed to two Slovak Police accounts (encompassing 17 out of the top 20 posts). Amidst other state entities, the **National Security Authority** secured a place within the top 20 by issuing an alert concerning a hazardous mobile application named Barbie.me. Additionally, the **Ministry of Defense** contributed with a post debunking a hoax, centring around a supposed mobilization. The **Ministry of Interior** also played a role, disseminating information regarding the option for overseas voting in the upcoming parliamentary elections.

1. Hoaxy a podvody – Polícia SR (Hoaxes and frauds – Police Slovak Republic)

31st July 2023 – **5 778 interactions**, (4 926 reactions, 179 comments and 673 shares).

The post recounts a moment during the 1969 hockey championship, wherein Slovak national players chose not to shake hands with the Soviet hockey team following the invasion by Warsaw Pact troops. This refusal, deemed an act of heroism by the public at the time, marked a pivotal event. The post's objective is to draw a parallel between this episode in Slovak history and the ongoing situation surrounding the conflict in Ukraine. Notably, it highlights the recent actions of multiple Ukrainian athletes who have also refrained from shaking hands with their Russian opponents.



2. Hoaxy a podvody – Polícia SR (Hoaxes and frauds – Police Slovak Republic)

29th July 2023 – **3 394 interactions**, (3 082 reactions, 202 comments and 110 shares)

The article responds to the incident during the World Fencing Championships in Milan, where on July 27, 2023, Ukrainian athlete O. Kharlanova declined to greet her opponent, Russian competitor A. Smirnova, following her victory. Initially, the Ukrainian athlete faced disqualification, but later this penalty was rescinded under the condition that she fulfils certain requirements which would grant her eligibility to participate in the upcoming Olympic Games in Paris.⁹ The article draws a parallel between this scenario and the historical context involving Germany and Poland in 1939, remarking that “Expecting Ukrainian athletes to extend a handshake to their Russian counterparts is as convoluted as requesting Polish athletes to shake hands with German counterparts in 1939.

3. Hoaxy a podvody – Polícia SR (Hoaxes and frauds – Police Slovak Republic)

1st August 2023 – **2 437 interactions**, (1 759 reactions, 347 comments and 331 shares)

Likewise, the third most popular post among the group of state institutions originates from the Hoaxy a podvody - Polícia SR (Hoaxes and frauds – Police SR) page. This post features a video in which Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni criticizes the opposition party Movimento 5 Stelle for advocating for Italy ceasing to send arms' supplies to Ukraine.

9 <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ioc-urges-sensitivity-handling-ukrainian-russian-athletes-after-fencers-2023-07-28/>

Hungarian minority

During the initial monitoring phase, all three contributions published in Hungarian were attributed either to Alliance politicians or to the party itself. The most well-received post centred around the restoration of a small monument with ties to Hungarian history. However, alongside this narrative, themes opposing European Union, migration, and LGBTI matters were also present.

1. Örs Orosz

2nd august 2023 – **3 847 interactions**, (3 225 interactions, 89 comments and 533 shares).

The video shared in the post depicts the restoration of a commemorative stone dedicated to János Mahler, a Hungarian mountain guide, on occasion of the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Carpathian Society. Instead of advancing a particular narrative, the video centres on accentuating the portrayal of Örs Orosz as a proactive politician actively engaged in supporting local communities.



2. Szövetség (Alliance Party)

29th júl 2023 – **1 871 interactions**, (1 543, 266 comments and 62 shares).

The Alliance Party divulged the outcome of a pre-election preference survey, unveiling a support rate of 5.4%. Within the post, the party stresses its commitment to further fortify its regional representation.

3. György Gyimesi

1st august 2023 – **1 482 interactions**, (1 212 reactions, 174 comments and 96 shares).

In a featured video, György Gyimesi alleges that Brussels allocates funding for three distinct purposes: furnishing arms to Ukraine, aiding migrants, and disseminating LGBTQ-related messages. He contends that the EU sustains these 'generous handouts' primarily through loans. Asserting that Slovakia's 'progressive politicians' refuse to condone such practices, he points out the nation's subpar state of education and healthcare. Gyimesi then urges voters to contribute to a more promising future through their participation in the September elections. Interestingly, the same video garnered slightly higher engagement when posted in **Slovak** compared to its Hungarian version.

Methodology

The monitoring outcomes comprise data gathered from July 29 to August 4, 2023, using the CrowdTangle and Gerulata monitoring tools, encompassing four categories of observed Facebook pages.

The “Problematic Sources” group encompasses 158 Facebook pages identified by organizations *konspiratori.sk*¹⁰ and Gerulata Technologies¹¹ as sources of problematic content (sharing disinformation, conspiracy theories, extremist or pro-Russian content). This collection of pages has been expanded to include those consistently disseminating such material and maintaining significant reach among users, thereby rendering them relevant within the context of Slovak-language content on Facebook.

The “Prodemocratic Actors” group comprises 90 Facebook pages associated with non-profit organizations, NGOs, think tanks, fact-checking platforms, influencers, movements, or satirical platforms that have consistently shared political content aligning with fundamental democratic values and principles. Such content includes endeavours such as voter mobilization, advocacy for core rights and freedoms, support for minority rights, initiatives against extremism and fascism, endorsements for education and media literacy, and more. All pages within this group were required to have a minimum of 1,000 followers, apart from the “Vol'by 2023” and “Chcem tu zostať” pages, given their relevance to pre-election monitoring.

In the groups “Problematic Sources” and “Prodemocratic Actors”, in addition to pages publishing in the Slovak language, the list also includes pages publishing in the Czech language, as they are regularly consumed by the Slovak audience.

Simultaneously, these two groups intentionally exclude any political parties, entities, or individuals participating in the upcoming Slovak parliamentary elections in September 2023. Furthermore, they do not encompass standard mainstream media sources, as both categories of actors will undergo monitoring by other organizations during Slovakia's pre-election phase, notably MEMO98. The objective of these analyses is, therefore, to complement each other and encompass the broadest conceivable spectrum of actors possessing the potential to shape public opinion during the pre-election period in Slovakia.

The “State Institutions” group brings together 34 Facebook pages of ministries and other relevant central government bodies, state institutes and other state authorities publishing in the Slovak language, which share content with the aim of raising regular public awareness and trust in the institutions, as well as content promoting democratic values, justice, media literacy and historical education. All sites in the group had to meet the requirement of at least 1,000 followers.

The last group, “Hungarian minority”, consists of 38 Facebook pages of media, political parties and political representatives who publish in the Hungarian language and whose target audience is the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The condition for inclusion in the sample was a minimum number of 1,000 followers. Since Hungarian minority actors are not monitored by other organisations in Slovakia, we also included media, political entities and actors in this monitoring group. In the case of the media, the 10 media Facebook pages popular and consumed among Hungarian minority in Slovakia are included. Political parties include the top 3 parties representing the Hungarian minority according to the surveys, namely the Alliance (Szövetség/Aliancia), the Hungarian Forum (Magarské Fórum) and Bridge (Most-Híd), on the joint candidate list of the Blue Party (Modrí). Among the political actors, sample includes politicians who have a public Facebook page and are among the

10 <https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>

11 <https://blog.gerulata.com/russian-propaganda-network-in-slovakia/>

20 top candidates on the Alliance's candidate list, the top 10 candidates of Most-Híd and the top 10 candidates of the Hungarian Forum. This results in 18 politicians, whose list is supplemented by four political names relevant in terms of outreach - politician György Gyimesi from the Alliance party list, Pál Csáky, former chairman of the Slovak Hungarian Coalition (SMK) party, Dávid Nagy, former politician and supporter of the Alliance, and László Gubík, former politician for the SMK and Fidesz candidate for the European Parliament. The website of the Új Egység Mozgalom movement is also included in the group in terms of relevance, due to its exclusive focus on the Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia and its regular political content.

Within every category, Facebook posts were ranked based on the total number of interactions (combining reactions, comments, and shares, without distinction among interaction types) during the monitoring period. Top 20 posts were then chosen from the sample of each category. These selections were filtered to exclude posts unrelated to the pre-election period. Additionally, the chosen posts were subjected to a qualitative evaluation in regard to their reach and the subjects they conveyed. Subsequently, three highest-ranking posts from each category's sample were subject to discursive analysis and comprehensively discussed in the content of the weekly report.

The graphical representations use data from the same monitoring period, showing which sites in each sample added the largest number of posts or comparing the structure of interactions (reactions, comments and shares) between the different groups analysed. In the case of the analysis of the number of mentions of individual political parties in the posts, keywords in the form of the name of the political party (e.g. SMER - SSD, Progresívne Slovensko...) and its variations and abbreviations (SMER, PS...) were used.

The purpose of this analysis is to provide a qualitative insight into the posts and actors that across groups are gaining the most attention from Facebook users in Slovakia during the pre-election period and to offer a picture of which pages, actors and narratives are having the greatest impact.