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Pre-election Monitoring of Facebook in the Slovak Information Space

Who dominated the Slovak political and problematic scene in the three pre-election months?

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Introduction

The elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic have taken place on September 30. While various factors influenced the election results, the online information space, where potential voters have been actively engaging with content, stands out prominently. GLOBSEC has been regularly publishing reports leading up to the election date, analyzing key narratives, themes, and actors across various groups on Slovakia's most popular social media platform, Facebook. This final report focuses on problematic sources and political actors, analyzing trends and the most discussed topics that have resonated with the Slovak society over the last three months of this crucial pre-election period.

The monitoring covers the period from July 1st to September 15th, 2023, reflecting the pre-election campaign of political parties. It analyzes top 20 posts in terms of interactions published by problematic sources and political actors for each week during the monitored period (more details on source selection can be found in the methodology on page 16). Over the course of 11 weeks of monitoring, a total of 440 posts were thoroughly analyzed, comprising 220 posts for each monitored group."

The previous election monitors and case studies are available on GLOBSEC's website.

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Key findings

In terms of the quantity of Facebook interactions, the SMER-SSD party, led by its chairman Robert Fico, unquestionably dominated. The second most popular party in terms of interactions was **Republika**, with representatives such as Tomáš Špaček, Milan Uhrík, and Milan Mazurek. Both political parties were able to gain unparallel popularity during the monitored period, despite investing minimal financial resources into Facebook advertising over the last three months compared to other political parties.[1] Among problematic sources, pages of BRAT za BRATA, Eduard Chmelár, Matovičov cirkus and Televízia Slovan dominated.

Regarding narratives, there were concerted efforts to deepen societal distrust. The primary targets were trust in independent media, state institutions and their representatives, justice system, security forces, and fairness of political competition in Slovakia. While the theme of the media resonated among problematic actors, among political actors, the focus was more on the fairness of political competition and, in connection with that, accusations of persecution of the opposition.

In the context of eroding trust in the highest political leaders, several **monitored political actors positioned themselves as the sole solvers of issues** that would restore certainty and prosperity in Slovakia. This narrative was primarily propagated by representatives of SMER-SSD and Republika, who added it to their criticism of the government and the president, citing their stance on LGBTI+ rights, inflation, rising living costs, migration, and even alleged issues with bear overpopulation.

Pro-Russian narratives appeared far **more frequently among problematic actors than political ones** during the monitored period, making them the third most prevalent narrative in the monitored posts. The most common themes in pro-Russian narratives revolved around cultural and historical ties to Russia and its predecessor, the Soviet Union. However, narratives also emerged accusing NATO or the USA of sparking the war in Ukraine or denying Ukraine's independence.

The popularity of these narratives was also **embodied by individuals who were most frequently portrayed negatively in popular posts**. Among problematic sources, Denník N journalist Monika Tódová and judge Pamela Záleská received significant criticism, reflecting the alleged conflict of interest controversy, following the uncovering of their close relation by a former journalist Martin Dano. On the side of political actors, criticism was directed more towards individuals in specific political positions, including collective criticism of the governments led by Eduard Heger and Igor Matovič. Police President Štefan Hamran and Special Prosecutor Daniel Lipšic were targeted in connection to the conflicts within the police force, involving intelligence service and prosecutors.

In both groups, substantial criticism was directed at the political party Progressive Slovakia, seen as a symbol of liberalism. The **most negatively portrayed and attacked figure**, both among problematic sources and political actors, **was President Zuzana Čaputová**.

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1   Data from a time period 19. 6. - 16. 9. 2023: https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/?source=onboarding

Who dominated in terms of interactions?

The monitoring results indicate that the SMER-SSD party and its politicians were significantly dominant compared to other actors during the monitored period of nearly three months. The most popular page in terms of interactions was the Facebook page of Robert Fico (27%), followed by the Facebook page of the SMER-SSD party (13%). Among the popular political actors of this party, Erik Kaliňák (4%) and Robert Kaliňák (4%) also made appearances. The pages of politicians from the SMER-SSD party accounted for a total of 50% of the overall monitored sample of the most popular posts, with **Robert Fico securing the top post position for 7 out of 11 monitored weeks**.
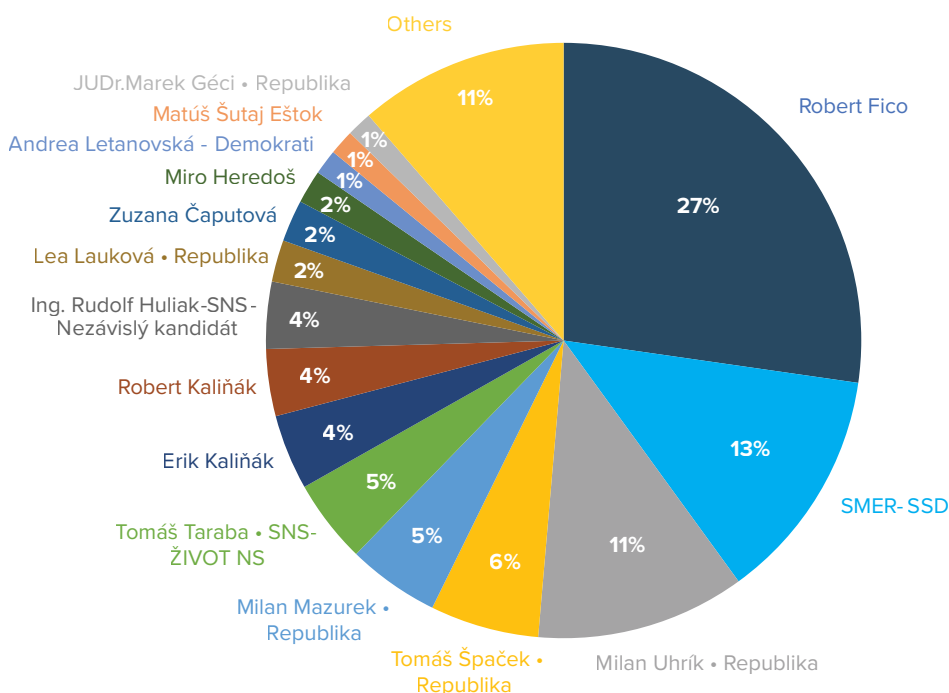
Popular narratives of the party were related to the so-called war within security forces, the abuse of the judiciary, economic topics such as inflation and food prices, as well as anti-LGBTI narratives,

undermining trust in the media, and criticism and attacks on non-governmental organizations.

The second most successful political party in terms of interactions was Republika. Its chairman, Milan Uhrík, had the largest share in the sample (11%), followed by Tomáš Špaček (6%) and Milan Mazurek (5%). In terms of the number of posts, the party accounted for up to 28% of the sample. Also, with a smaller share, President Zuzana Čaputová made her way into the monitored sample with five posts, and the leader of the Democratic Party, Andrea Letanovská, with three posts.

The most popular entity among problematic sources became the Facebook page of Slovak motorcycle group, BRAT za BRATA (BROTHER for BROTHER), whose posts accounted for 20% of the group's sample. They predominantly featured various nationalist narratives, often linked to pro-Russian sentiments through the frequent display of the Russian flag in their posts. Pages of Eduard Chmelár (17%), associated with the SMER-SSD party,[2] and Televízia Slovan (10%) (TV

Political actors with the highest number of posts
in the monitored sample of the most popular posts.
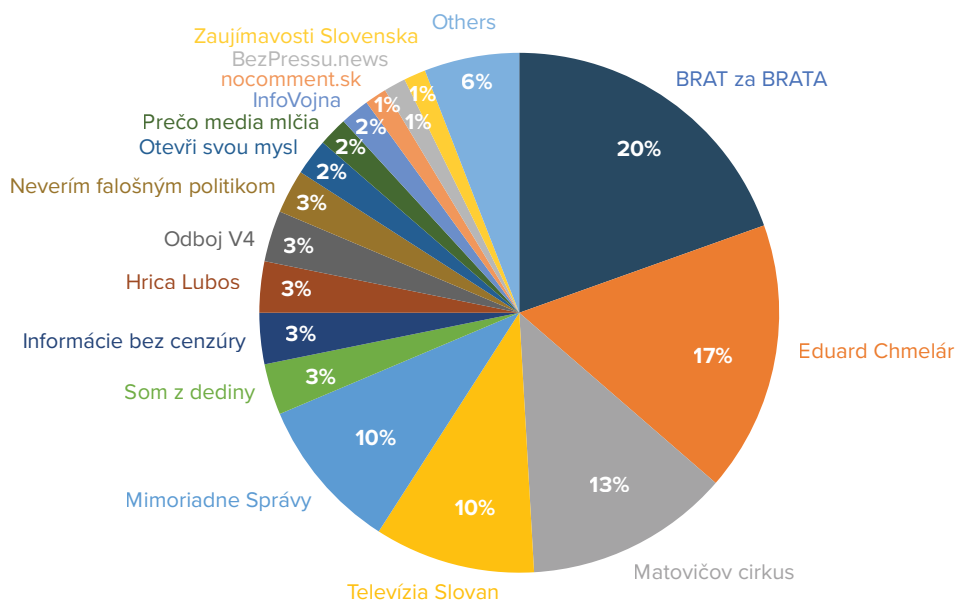

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2   Eduard Chmelár works as an advisor to the Vice Chairman of Parliament (2020-2023), Juraj Blanár, from the SMER-SSD party.

Slovan), directly linked to the SNS party, were also popular.[3] Particularly in the case of Eduard Chmelár, similarities with the SMER-SSD party were evident in the topics he addressed, including conflicts within security forces and narratives aimed at undermining trust in independent media. Moreover, in his posts, he frequently expressed positive views towards individual politicians and the SMER-SSD party itself.

Other popular pages included Som z dediny (I am from the village) (3%), which is likely connected to the high frequency of shared articles from the Hlavný denník (Main daily) portal, and Mimoriadne Správy (Breaking News) (10%), which gained popularity through a simple concept of posts. They shared statements by politicians, typically in the form of a singular sentence, often taken out of context for specific negative or positive portrayals. Posts of this type garnered thousands of interactions, surpassing the engagement of other posts on the page.

Problematic sources with the highest number of posts in the monitored sample of the most popular posts.
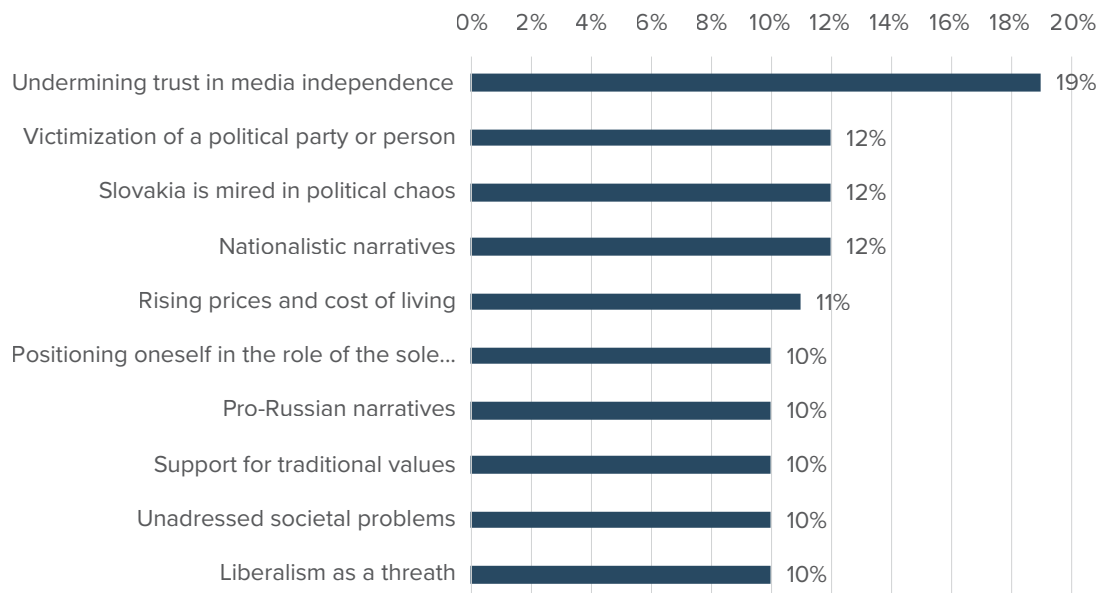
The Most Popular Narratives

Efforts to Deepen Distrust in Society

Over the last three months leading up to the elections, narratives that deepened distrust in society were predominantly present in the Slovak information space. These narratives were prevalent among both political and problematic actors, with a focus on undermining trust in independent media (present in 19% of posts in the entire sample). Such narratives persisted throughout the monitored period, but their dissemination intensified notably during the unfolding "scandal" surrounding the close relation between journalist Monika Tódová and judge Pamela Záleská.[4]

In addition to media, other targets of distrust included confidence in the president and government and their ability to lead the state (12%), the independence of the judiciary (10%), the work of security forces (18%), and the fairness of political

% occurrence of narratives in the entire monitoring sample

Narrative	%
Undermining trust in media independence	19%
Victimization of a political party or person	12%
Slovakia is mired in political chaos	12%
Nationalistic narratives	12%
Rising prices and cost of living	11%
Positioning oneself in the role of the sole...	10%
Pro-Russian narratives	10%
Support for traditional values	10%
Unadressed societal problems	10%
Liberalism as a threath	10%

Source: Facebook[5]

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4   This "scandal", as referred to by problematic sources and some political actors, concerns a paparazzi-like video posted by controversial former journalist Martin Daňo, in which he recorded prominent investigative journalist Monika Tódová from Denník N and Specialized Court Judge Pamela Záleska on a private vacation in Slovak High Tatras. Both women were accused by these actors of the conflict of interest due to them investigating and prosecuting high-level political corruption cases involving political actors. Both denied these allegations. In addition, Tódová informed the public that she had ceased any investigative activities even before the issue became public. Privacy of journalists has been a sensitive issue after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in 2018.

5   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=830673961718565

competition in Slovakia (12%). Together, these narratives contributed to deepening distrust in **60% of the entire examined sample**.
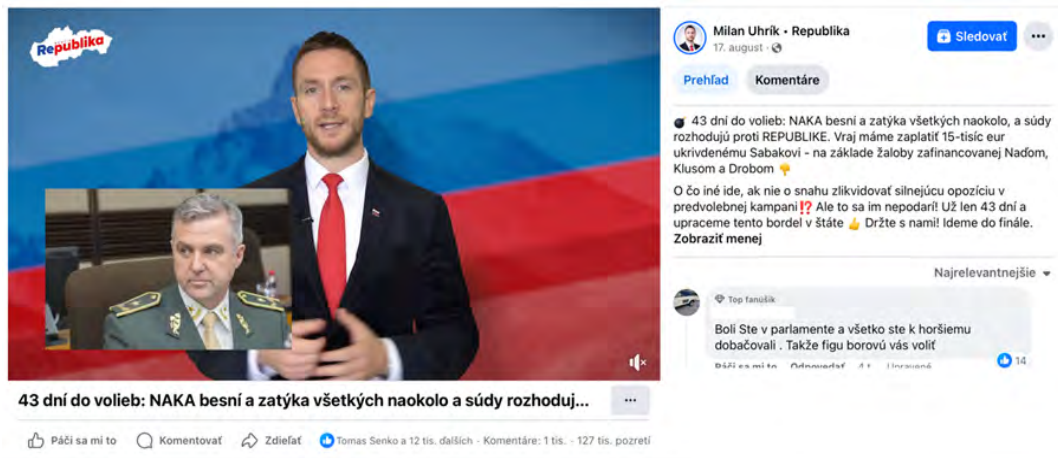
The monitoring shows that focusing on these topics during a time of political, economic, and security crisis triggered by Russian aggression against Ukraine resonated in the Slovak information space.

Various segments of society have been plagued by fear, uncertainty, and sometimes a sense of neglect of the domestic population in favor of issues related to the conflict beyond the borders. Coupled with long-standing low trust in state institutions[6] and Slovak media, there is a growing potential for such narratives to find their way to a wide audience.

Examples of individual narratives:

Narrative	Specific examples
Slovak media are far from independent	The media are not the watchdogs of democracy, but of the prevailing system of power; the media do not inform you impartially; the biggest disinformation in the Šimko case is being spread by the mainstream media; you are being purposely fed by our media; LIES as a working method of the so-called opinion-forming media; the liberal media and Soros NGOs are already openly entering the elections and playing it up for the progressive Šimečka; the liberal media stayed quiet about Tódová for three days, thus showing the whole of Slovakia that they cannot be trusted
opposition parties face discrimination and persecution	an official attack on the opposition by the official state power; three year old things are brought up six weeks before the elections because they don't know how to destroy us; [Žilinka and Aláč] are defending the abuse of criminal law to liquidate the opposition; what else is it if not an attempt to eliminate the growing opposition in the election campaign; the insincere and fake Zuzana Čaputová is apparently willing to do everything to destroy or criminalize the opposition; it is nothing less than persecution and intimidation of the opposition
the government and the president are incompetent, Slovakia is in political chaos	if someone tells me that the president is politically self-righteous, I will laugh at you; the "genius" of the Matovic-Heger government is once again on display; a government of incompetents who have brought the state to ruin and have in fact robbed it considerably more than the bribe-takers; politically short-sighted pipsqueaks; the state is crumbling under the president's hands; the responsibility for this disintegration of the state rests with Čaputová
security forces are waging war with each other, Slovakia is turning into a police state	Prime Minister Ódor and President Čaputová are mute and once again only sensitively perceive gross political misuse of the police; Hamran admitted today that after Minister Šimko, he is going after SIS chief Aláč; Hamran crossed all the lines by threatening the President and the Prime Minister and is a symbol of the politicization of the work of the police; the President has today officially put herself at the head of a police coup by removing SIS Director Alač; this only happens in a police state; the President has effectively stood up for the independence (even of prosecuted) investigators, whose independence is not threatened by anyone; police politician Štefan Hamran
Slovak courts act on political orders	it was a purely political case with no real basis; special investigations, special prosecutors, special courts, special journalists... chasing "extremists" and opposition politicians; this case absolutely destroys any trust in the mainstream media (if there was any) and, worse, in the judicial system; politically motivated cases that would never have arisen if there had not been an order, according to the famous game of pairs of Mrs. Remišová, who all should be removed; obediently in the political theater, they removed all those ordered by the politicians

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6   https://www.startitup.sk/prieskum-ukazal-katastrofalnu-nedoveru-slovakov-v-stat-vynimkami-su-hasici-a-prezidentka/

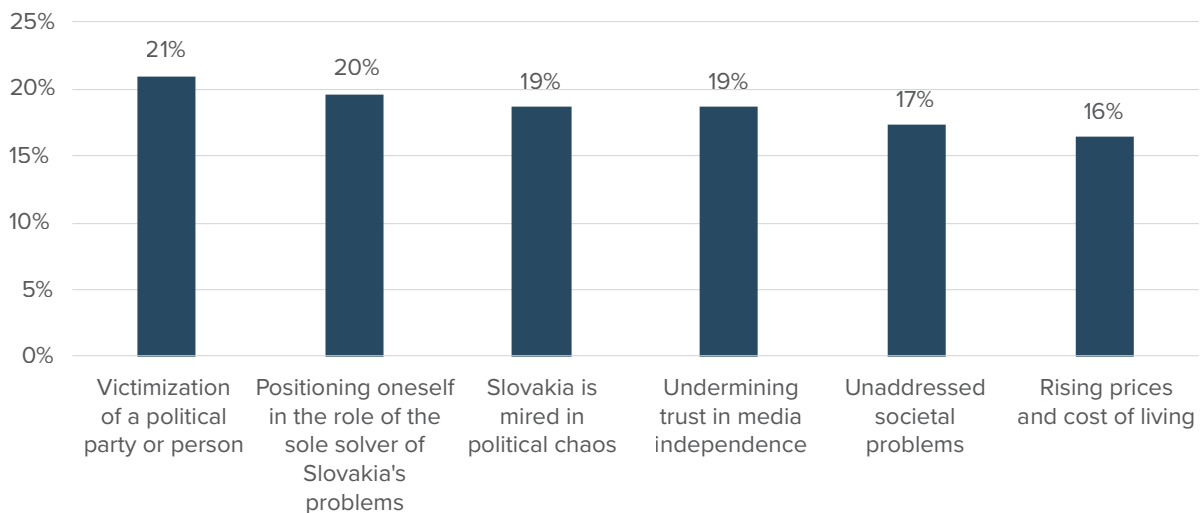## Political actors put themselves in the role of the sole problem solver

Source: Facebook[7]

In connection with the narrative of the alleged inability of the highest political leaders, several observed political actors positioned themselves as the sole problem solvers who would restore security and prosperity to Slovakia. This narrative appeared in 217 posts of the examined actors and was accompanied by several topics that individual political actors addressed. Most often, it served as an addition to topics related to LGBTI+ people, inflation, rising living costs, migration, and even the alleged issue of bear overpopulation. Against the backdrop of these issues, political actors portrayed

the alleged incapability of the president and government, favoring foreign interests over Slovak ones. In contrast, they presented themselves as the opposite, as a decisive voice that, if elected, would bring order, security, and a focus on the interests, and needs of the Slovak nation.

The pre-election campaign and the popularity of posts was also aided by the creation of enemies or threats, accompanied by the self-glorification of many of the examined political actors. While at the beginning of the monitored period, the main

% occurrence of narratives in the sample of political actors

Victimization of a political party or person — 21%	Positioning oneself in the role of the sole solver of Slovakia's problems — 20%	Slovakia is mired in political chaos — 19%
Undermining trust in media independence — 19%	Unaddressed societal problems — 17%	Rising prices and cost of living — 16%

7   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=299108426121273

alleged threat were supposed be overpopulated bears, they were later replaced by LGBTI+ people, migrants, and banks. All these groups are supposed to be specifically protected by the current government and President Čaputová who allegedly hindered the regulation of the brown bear population, promoted the so-called "LGBTI+ ideology, propaganda, or agenda", favor banks that exploit the population, and ignore the security threat posed by illegal migration.

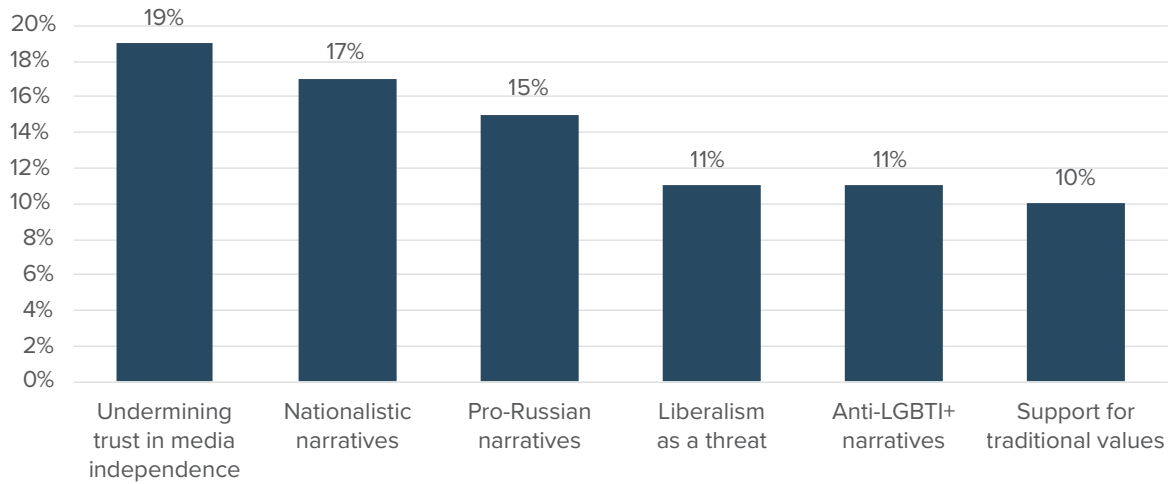As can be observed from the monitoring results, the artificial creation of enemies in the Slovak online space resonates. It targets fear and anger - two of the most potent emotions frequently exploited by disinformers and manipulators. Furthermore, it encouraged people to genuinely come to the polling stations on September 30th and vote for parties that purportedly want to bring about change and possess necessary abilities and courage to do so. This may also be one of the reasons why such narratives and positioning as the sole problem solver appeared far more frequently among political actors than problematic ones during the monitored period. While this narrative was present in 43 posts from political actors, it was mentioned only in 2 posts from problematic actors.

Examples of individual narratives:

Narrative	Specific example
our government was far more capable	under the Smer government there were years of abundance, during which Slovakia was close to a balanced budget; under our government, migrants avoided Slovakia; the ruling coalition abolished the extraordinary bank levy, which SMER - SSD successfully introduced in 2012; under Robert Fico there were some rules, someone ruled; under SMER there was not a single illegal migrant in Slovakia
if we win the elections, we will put Slovakia in order	only 43 more days and we will clean up this mess in the state; the REPUBLIKA movement will stop this madness; I believe that after September 30, we will send the progressives into the past and the rules will change hard; it bothers me that he sees the evil not in the Progressive Slovakia and its leader, who used to be his assistant, but in the only party that today is able to ensure change for the better; right after the elections WE WILL MAKE ORDER; you will see how we will put them in their place if we are in the government
LGBTI+ poses a threat to the current status of the country	we only recognize a man and a woman; the EU is preparing a new "birth certificate", it will allow three parents to be registered, we need to stop these fools; we need protection for families and youth from the spread of LGBT ideology; LGBT are oxidizing and parasitizing on the system; the push for the extremist LGBT agenda is brainwashing; the fanaticism of Progressive Slovakia's leaders to infect, poison and divide society with the LGBT agenda and criminalize its opponents is a red flag; the danger of the perverted LGBT agenda
Slovakia is threatened by a wave of illegal migrants	not to mention that bears, immigrants, etc. are supposedly just scarecrows and not serious problems; there hasn't been a single illegal immigrant here under SMER, under the progressive government of Čaputová we have thousands of them here; we have a police president who does not protect Slovakia, but in the interest of progressive migration policy deepens the security risks in Slovakia; if according to Naď we have to "get used to" immigrants, even to those terrorists who were detained among them?; the INVASION OF IMMIGRANTS must end! SLOVAKIA must protect itself from them
the economic situation in the country is critical	it is the responsibility of President Čaputová that Slovakia is not governed, is languishing and is in economic decline; the bankers are able to deny the reality of mortgages just so they don't have to give up their billions in profits; Matovič and Heger came after us, broke the public finances and left us with a 7% deficit without any results whatsoever; under our government Slovakia would never have reached the state of total economic, moral and institutional crisis that it is in today; this is our offer for a way out of poverty, which has become more widespread than ever in the last 30 years due to the inaction of amateurs

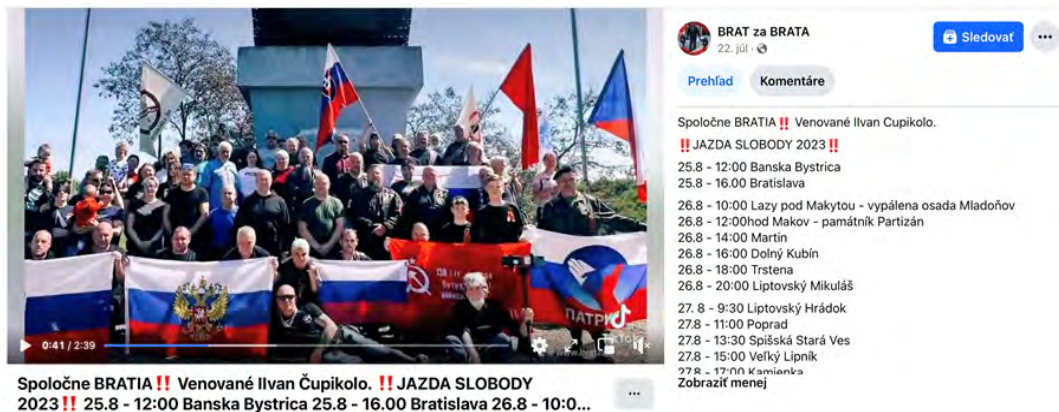## Pro-Russian narratives especially among problematic actors

% occurrence of narratives in the sample of problematic sources

Pro-Russian narratives were more common among problematic sources than political actors. This is mainly because in the pre-election battle, domestic political issues have a greater potential to resonate with voters. Even among problematic actors, pro-Russian narratives were the third most common group of narratives in the examined sample (15%). The first group consisted of narratives related to undermining trust in media independence (19%), and the second were nationalist narratives (17%).

Among pro-Russian narratives, **cultural and historical ties dominated - as much as 60% of pro-Russian posts were dedicated to these topics**. To a lesser extent, there were also narratives attributing blame for the war in Ukraine to the USA and NATO (12%). The most common source was the Facebook page BRAT za BRATA (Brother for Brother), which regularly shares content from the Russian Embassy in Bratislava. During the monitored period, it published up to 69% of posts with pro-Russian narratives. Behind this page is the civic association Motorkári Slovenska (Slovak Motorcyclists), founded by members of a motorcycle gang. This group often engages in the maintenance of Soviet memorials and celebrations of holidays associated with the liberation of Slovakia by the Red Army.

Source: Facebook[8]

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8   https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=190198467366116

The page BRAT za BRATA also achieved some of the highest interaction numbers throughout the entire monitored period among the studied actors. Their pro-Russian posts are successful, in part, due to the long-standing uncritical or even positive attitudes of a portion of the Slovak society towards Russia. According to the latest GLOBSEC Trends 2023 survey, despite Russia's aggression against Ukraine, only 54% of people in Slovakia perceive the country as a threat.[9] Only 40% of those surveyed see Russia as responsible for the war in Ukraine. Narratives with pro-Kremlin rhetoric have the potential to resonate in the Slovak information space, as evidenced by the reach of BRAT za BRATA posts. Within the monitored sample, they received 205,192 interactions.

Examples of individual narratives:

Narratives	Specific examples
NATO/USA is to blame for the war in Ukraine	Solzhenitsyn knew what NATO expansion would lead to; the goal of NATO and the US is to dominate and subjugate Russia; this war, in its origins, was caused by NATO expansion; we must not forget that the whole Ukrainian tragedy arose because of the dispute over the inclusion of this strategically key state in NATO
Ukraine is not a sovereign state	Ukraine does not exist anymore

President Čaputová Once Again the Most Criticized Figure

President Zuzana Čaputová has once again, as in several pre-election surveys, become the most criticized, negatively depicted, and even attacked figure during the pre-election period. This trend was confirmed not only by the August edition of the pre-election monitoring[10] but also by the report on gender-based hatred during the pre-election period[11] and the election monitoring from May and June 2023.[12] Among political actors, criticism towards the president was present in 25% of the sample posts, with politicians from the SMER-SSD party accounting for as much as 79% of these cases. The high representation of the party and its members in the criticism is expected given their overall share in the sample, but it also points to the fact that politicians from SMER-SSD predominantly portray the president negatively in the majority of their posts, which subsequently became popular on Facebook. Similarly, among problematic sources, the president was the most criticized figure, with over half of such posts belonged to Eduard Chmelár.

Source: Facebook[13]

Source: Facebook[14]

We can also observe a similarity between the two groups in the large number of critical posts targeting party Progressive Slovakia. These posts often associated narratives of liberalism and LGBTI individuals as threats or a dangerous ideology. Likewise, both groups frequently mentioned the governments after 2020, primarily the Prime Ministers Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger. These governments were linked to narratives about inflation, high food prices, societal issues, narratives of a chaotic and stagnant government. In the last monitored weeks, there were also posts in the political spectrum attributing responsibility for the threat of migration and incoming migrants to them. Similar narratives were disseminated in connection with former Prime Minister Igor Matovič and the current Prime Minister Ľudovít Ódor, who was associated with President Čaputová in a significant portion of the posts.

The analysis of negative mentions in individual groups reflects the most popular topics. In the group of problematic sources, journalist Monika Tódová and judge Pamela Záleská were heavily criticized, highlighting the popularity of the "conflict of interest" case in the observed group. The deepening of distrust in the media was also evident in frequent attacks on Denník N and TA3 moderator Richard Dírer.

10   https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/predvolebny-monitoring-facebooku-augustove-vydanie
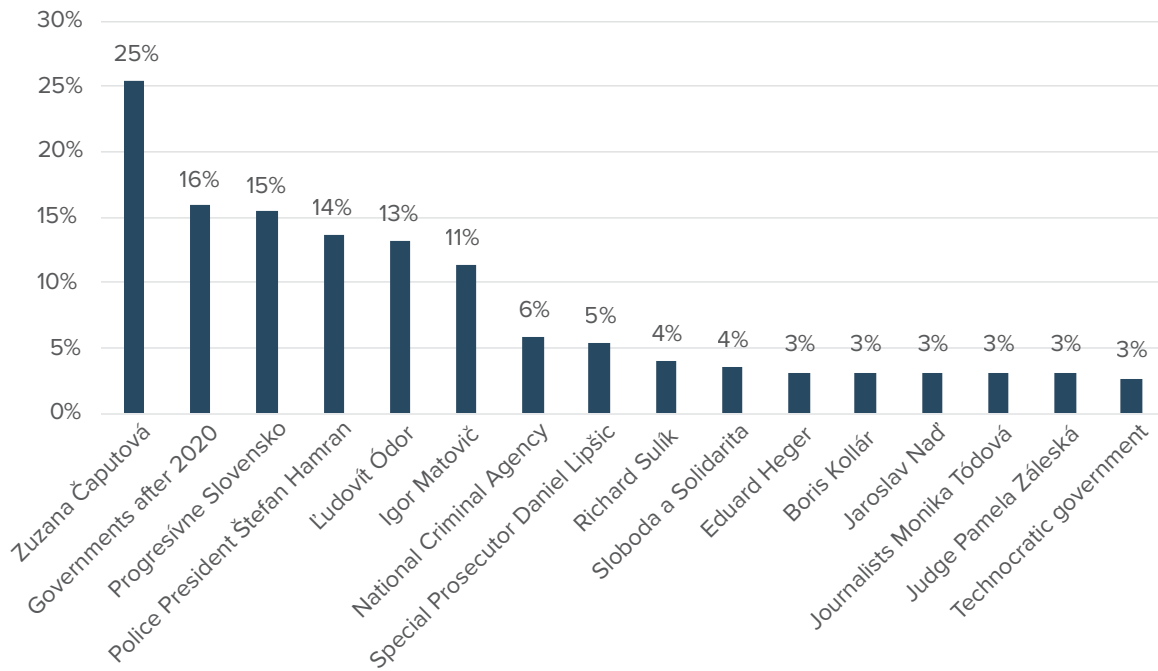11   https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/rodovo-podmienena-nenavist-v-predvolebnom-obdobi
12   https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/monitoring-narativov-o-volbach
13   https://www.facebook.com/100080982531861/posts/278032968239452
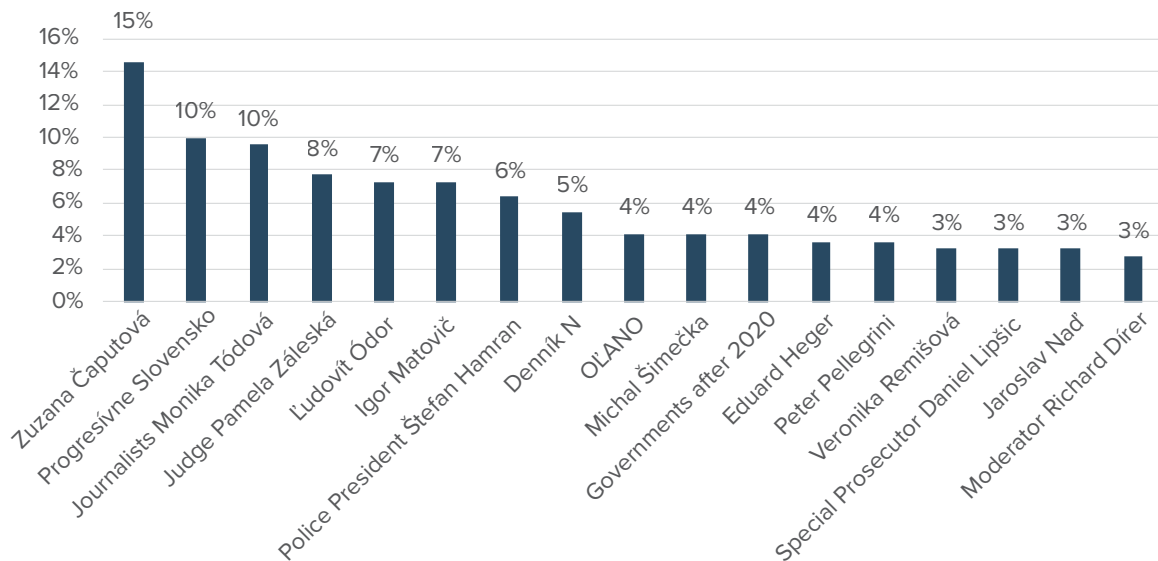14   https://www.facebook.com/100080982531861/posts/304002438975838

On the side of political actors, less attention was given to the media, and the focus was mainly on negatively portraying individuals working in key political, power, and security structures. Among them were, for example, special prosecutor Daniel Lipšic and police president Štefan Hamran. In connection to conflicts within security forces and the investigation of corruption cases, the National Criminal Agency (NAKA) was often criticized, and negative portrayals of specific investigators also emerged.

% of posts of the monitored sample in which persons and entities were negatively portrayed by political actors

% of posts of the monitored sample in which persons and entities were negatively portrayed by problematic sources

Most Popular Posts of the Pre-election Period

Political Actors

1. Robert Fico (31 thousand interactions)

„WHERE BOOKS BEGIN TO BURN, PEOPLE WILL BURN LATER
To the celebrations of the Slovak National Uprising, we must bring back the honor and glory they deserve!"

2. Robert Fico (29 thousand interactions)

„TWO LESBIANS ON A TRIP. THE MEDIA-JUSTICE MAFIA IN ACTION."

3. Robert Fico (28 thousand interaction)

„Who gave the President of Slovakia, Z. Čaputová, the mandate to approve this invitation to the third world war? No one in Slovakia."
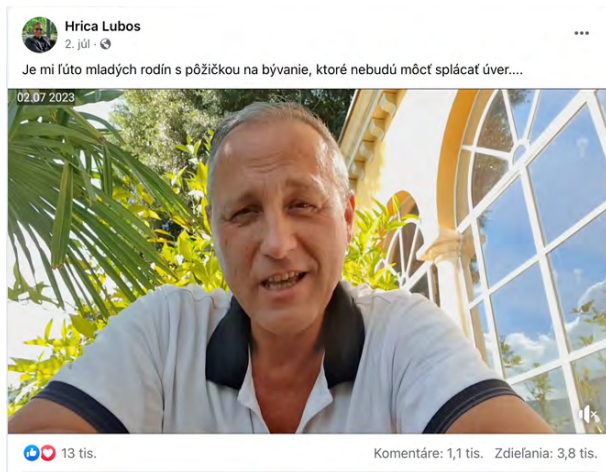
Problematic Sources

1. Hrica Lubos (22 thousand interactions)

„Something for activist Todová & Company."

2. Hrica Lubos (19 thousand interactions)

„JI feel sorry for young families with a housing loan that they won't be able to repay...."

3. Mimoriadne Správy (17 thousand interactions)

„Finally, a normal opinion! Thank you for sharing!"

"Marriage is a union of a man and a woman. - Milan Majerský"

Methodology

The monitoring outcomes comprise data gathered from July 1 to September 15, 2023, using the CrowdTangle and Gerulata monitoring tools, encompassing two categories of observed Facebook pages – Problematic sources and Political Actors.

The "Problematic Sources" group encompasses 158 Facebook pages identified by organizations konspiratori.sk[15] and Gerulata Technologies[16] as sources of problematic content which they define as, among other things, content spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories, pro-Kremlin narratives, extremism etc. 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. In addition to sites publishing in the Slovak language, the list also includes sites publishing in the Czech language with an outreach to the Slovak audience. However, there are no political entities in the group.

The group "Political Actors" is a collection of all political entities, politicians as well as political parties that are currently (before the outcomes of the September election) represented in the National Council of the Slovak Republic or running for the seats in the early parliamentary elections. The monitored accounts also include political actors who were constitutional officials of the Slovak Republic or are members of the European Parliament for the Slovak Republic during the monitoring period. As the tool from Gerulata Technologies does not monitor private profiles, the report focuses exclusively on public Facebook pages of political actors. Solely posts published in the Slovak language are monitored in the group.

During the monitored period, the most popular posts were analyzed on a weekly basis, starting from the week of July 1st – 7th, 2023. In the "Problematic Sources" group, posts on the social network Facebook were sorted each week according to the number of interactions (sum of reactions, comments and shares, regardless of the type of interaction). From the sample, the top 20 posts were selected, filtered from posts not relevant to the topic of elections and subsequently qualitatively assessed in terms of reach and topics disseminated.

In the "Political Actors" group, all posts on Slovak Facebook during the period under review were ranked according to the number of interactions, and then the top 20 posts posted by political actors and related to the social, political or economic situation in Slovakia or directly to the elections were selected. The posts from the sample of each group were discursively analysed and described in the content of this report.

The graphical representations use data for individual posts from the same monitoring period. This data includes the number of interactions, reactions, comments or shares obtained from the monitoring tools. At the same time, data on the number of mentions of different actors, political or non-political, obtained by discursive analysis of individual posts are used for the graphical representations.

In the case of posts where a URL to a third-party website is present, the post is analysed as it is displayed on the Facebook social network without examining the content of the URL in question. In the case of Facebook videos, the first 5 minutes of the video content is discursively analysed. In the case of a record of a live stream, the first 5 minutes from the start of the content of the stream or discussion are monitored.

The goal of this analysis is to offer a comprehensive view of the most influential posts and actors on Facebook in Slovakia in the lead-up to the elections. By examining both the quality and quantity of engagement, it aims to shed light on the pages, individuals, topics, storylines, and assertions that are capturing the most public attention.

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15   https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok
16   https://blog.gerulata.com/russian-propaganda-network-in-slovakia/