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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN SLOVAKIA

EU DISINFO LAB



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INTRODUCTION

- Slovakia largely ignored the issue of disinformation and hybrid threats until 2020. Apart from a few exceptions, the role of the state in this respect was mainly covered by NGOs.
- The year 2020 was a wake-up call for Slovakia – the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent infodemic, which continues to this day in connection with the war in Ukraine. As the topic began to resonate more in society, after the 2020 parliamentary elections, the Slovak government took the first steps to limit hybrid threats, mainly by updating strategic documents, concepts, or action plans.
- The disinformation ecosystem has been forming in Slovakia since 2014. Since then, the disinformation scene in Slovakia has diversified considerably. Nowadays, it concerns not only alternative and marginal websites but also various actors on social media, especially Facebook, the dominant platform in Slovakia.
- At present, politicians are particularly evident disinformation spreaders, thanks to their visibility, the possibility to attract engage the public, and shape discussions on societal topics. Through politicians, disinformation narratives enter mainstream information circulation.
- Topics related to Russian geopolitics have long been a dividing line in the Slovakian public discourse between pro-Western and pro-Russian views. These matters carry considerable mobilisation potential, which can be considered a vulnerability ahead of the 2023 early parliamentary elections.
- Given the historical experience with the USSR, positive sentiments towards Russia (paradoxically) persist in Slovak society. These are linked to the idea of pan-Slavism and deepen vulnerability to Russian propaganda, in relation to the war in Ukraine, with which Slovakia is neighbouring. The situation is also exploited by the Russian Embassy in Slovakia, which is extremely active in information and influence operations as evidenced by the Beacon Project [list](#).
- The [low level](#) of critical thinking and media literacy makes Slovak society the most most prone to [believe](#) in conspiracy theories among the CEE countries, as evidenced by the 2022, Globsec Trends survey. Moreover, according to a 2023 Reuters Institute study, only 27% of Slovaks [trusted](#) the media.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

The following cases reflect the various patterns and schemes by which disinformation or Russian propaganda is spread in Slovakia. They naturally fit into the broader framework of the narratives we present below.

MURDER OF AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST JÁN KUCIAK

- In February 2018, investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were murdered. According to the Slovak Police, Kuciak's investigative work for the news portal Aktuality.sk was the likely motive.
- The violent event sparked a wave of mass protests, which were the largest since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. The Za slušné Slovensko (For a Decent Slovakia) initiative [directed](#) marches against silencing journalists, corruption and abuse of power. However, the organisation almost immediately faced discredit from politicians and disinformation websites.
- The initiative's funding was disclosed in its transparency account. Nevertheless, a hoax accused the protests of being directed from abroad and financed by George Soros. This version of events was believed by 35% of citizens, according to a FOCUS [poll](#) from December 2018.
- Initially, the claim came from the politicians of the SMER-SD party, especially from its chairman, Robert Fico. It was one of the first cases in Slovakia when a disinformation narrative entered the mainstream thanks to the activity of a political representative.
- The falsity was based on the former [work](#) of some of the protest organisers in a non-profit organisation whose actions may have been previously supported by the Open Society Foundation.

DEFENCE COOPERATION AGREEMENT FRAMED AS AN OCCUPATION

- The defence Cooperation Agreement between Slovakia and the United States (DCA) had a strong polarising potential in the Slovak information space. The DCA was the main mis- and disinformation target at the time of its approval and ongoing discussion in society (since December 2021). It was the first to replace the topics related to the COVID-19 pandemic and foreshadowed the later dissemination of non-factual content on the war in Ukraine.
- Disinformers, websites, and social media account spread hoaxes and conspiracies on the agreement. The rhetoric was also taken up by several political representatives (especially from the Kotlebovci – ĽSNS, Republika, SMER-SD parties or from the extra-parliamentary Socialisti.sk movement).
- Attorney General Maroš Žilinka reinforced fears of a fictitious danger resulting from the agreement, [misleading](#) about a possible placement of US nuclear weapons on Slovakian territory and [interpreting](#) the agreement as a threat to sovereignty. Žilinka also [created](#) a false parallel with the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, claiming that the Warsaw Pact troops was more favourable to Slovakia than the DCA.
- Fears that the US would build military bases in Slovakia, reducing the country to a colony fuelled the information ecosystem with long-term anti-American sentiments.

CEMETERY IN LADOMIROVÁ

- In September 2022, a Russian information operation was launched to spread [disinformation](#) about the destruction of a cemetery in the village of Ladomirová in eastern Slovakia, where soldiers killed in the World War I, including Russians, are buried. Accordingly, the former mayor instructed the destruction of the cemetery, whose reconstruction was financed by the Russian Embassy in 2014.
- In reality, only the curbs have been removed from the cemetery for better maintainability. The Russian Embassy [served](#) as the main channel for the information operation. The outrage served as a cover-up for the war crimes committed by the Russian army in the Ukrainian town of Izium.
- The Attorney General of the Slovak Republic, Maroš Žilinka, [spread](#) the hoax, describing the action as a “manifestation of gross disrespect” and an act “worthy of moral condemnation”.
- Other actors who took up the narrative included the pro-Kremlin biker group BRAT za BRATA (Brother for Brother), and several Telegram accounts and pro-Russian websites.
- This incident is also a good example of an early, coordinated, and proactive state response, as some state and non-state actors reacted swiftly to the spread of false allegations and informed the public about Russia’s ongoing information operation. Among the most active institutions were the Slovak Police, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense.
- Even though the information operation was halted in its initial phase, the narrative was part of the efforts to victimise Russia and offer alleged evidence of Russophobia.

NARRATIVES

In Slovakia, narratives along the Russia-West axis have been present for a long time, but increased since Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. The well-developed disinformation ecosystem, dominated by various political actors, helped the dissemination of these narratives attacking Western institutions (especially NATO and the EU) and seeking to polarise society against Slovakia's membership in Euro-Atlantic structures.

COVID-19: AGAINST VACCINES AND 'TOTALITARISM'

- The pandemic-related infodemic elicited medical and political disinformation, especially directed at scientists, doctors, or representatives of state institutions. COVID-19 narratives are also [discussed](#) in more detail in the Police Report on Disinformation in Slovakia.
- Hoaxes questioned COVID-19's seriousness, comparing it to an ordinary influenza and calling out allegedly inflated numbers of victims. In this context, disinformation actors questioned state-ordered safety measures (e.g., wearing masks, closing borders, or compulsory testing), labeling them as attempts to "impose totalitarianism". The pandemic also saw a flourishing of charlatanism recommending unscientific and potentially dangerous alternative cures.
- The vaccination was massively targeted, accused of being ineffective or even harmful. In this context, fake reports of vaccine-related deaths circulated, as well as conspiracies that the pandemic was a secret plan by global elites to take over the world. Initial anti-vax sentiments were eventually replaced by criticism of Western vaccines in favour of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V.

NATO, THE EU AND THE WEST THREATEN SLOVAKIA'S SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERESTS

- Among the longest-lasting disinformation narratives in Slovakia are those against Euro-Atlantic structures (especially NATO and the EU) or the West. The primary aim is to discredit these organisations, undermine Slovakia's membership in them, and even cast doubt on whether Slovakia is part of the West.
- Topics tackle the decadence of the West, the erosion of traditional values, and the loss of Slovakia's foreign policy independence and sovereignty vis-à-vis the West. The fundamental idea is that integration made Slovakia a servant to foreign interests while overlooking the needs of its citizens. These allegations are particularly effective thanks to Slovakian society's relatively conservative nature, which is easily exploited, especially by pro-Russian narratives, placing Russia as a "big brother" and protector of traditional values.
- In the EU context, narratives about the "Brussels dictatorship" and "nonsensical" European measures that are supposed to threaten Slovakia's interests are particularly prevalent. For example, disinformation actors recently framed European sanctions on Russia as harming European states more than Russia. Moreover, the EU is often accused of corruption or disinterest in its member states.
- Concerning NATO, disinformation accuses the alliance of being offensive rather than defensive, [leading](#) its members into war through its expansion and militarisation. Alternatively, it is [presented](#) as a mere gnawed tool of American interests, fuelling strong anti-American and anti-Western sentiment present in part of the Slovak population. Furthermore, NATO's enlargement is framed as a [betrayal](#) of and threat for Russia (i.e., the [myth](#) of the Gorbachev deal). These narratives also form the basis for Ukraine war-related disinformation and Russian propaganda, e.g., NATO (or the West) is rejecting peace negotiations and prolonging the conflict.

GLORIFICATION OF THE “BIG RUSSIAN BEAR”

As mentioned above, topics related to Russian geopolitics represent the primary dividing line in Slovak public discourse as pro-Western or pro-Russian. Pro-Russian sentiment are primarily based on shared historical experiences with the USSR and the presence of pan-Slavism. This ideological strand speaks of a certain value and historical interconnection of Slavic nations that Russia, in its role as a “great brotherly nation”, can protect. The Russian Embassy in Slovakia and various friendly local actors (i.e., some politicians, various alternative media, commemorative associations or motorcycle groups) disseminate and reinforce these [sentiments](#).

The essential effort is to [build](#) Russia’s image as a strong and feared strategic partner (e.g., in energy policies), a legitimate alternative to the “decadent” West. In this scheme, Russia presents itself as a defender of traditional values while also building on the remnants of Soviet propaganda. This is particularly evident in portraying Russia as an eternal fighter against fascism today in the context of the war in Ukraine. Therefore, Russian-directed historical revisionism plays an important role, which uses the anti-fascist struggle and pan-Slavism as a gateway to other pro-Russian narratives and propaganda. Criticism of Russia is automatically discredited as Russophobia in a successful defence mechanism that victimises and glorified the Kremlin.

THE WAR IN UKRAINE: FROM 2014 TO TODAY

Ukraine’s demonisation in the Slovak information space has been ongoing since approximately 2014. The key narrative accuses Ukraine’s elite and population of fascism or militarisation, which was gradually built to justify the Russian invasion in 2022. Related narratives question Ukraine’s statehood and sovereignty. Claims of [Ukrainian fascism](#) affirm Russia’s image as an eternal anti-fascist fighter while very closely related to the propaganda of the so-called Ukrainian genocide of the Russian-speaking population in the Donbas. This is a stable pattern is the absolving of Russia’s responsibility for civilian casualties, participation in the rigged Crimean referendum, or direct involvement in the war in the Donbas. Many of the discrediting narratives are tied to President Zelenskyy, accused of drug addiction or cowardice. Attacks on Slovak politicians who are pro-Ukrainian are frequent. According to the disinformation actors, the needs of ordinary people who are facing rising inflation or are about to fall victim to the energy crisis are being forgotten.

In the context of a full-scale war in Ukraine, the narratives pursue similar objectives – to exonerate Russia, legitimise Moscow’s aggression, and discredit Ukraine in the eyes of the West. At the beginning of the invasion, there were conspiracies about US-sponsored bio labs in Ukraine, the militarisation of Ukraine, and so on. Local actors spreading Russian propaganda targeted humanitarian or military support for Ukraine. Regarding military aid, the transfers of the S-300 defence systems and MiG-29 fighter jets gained prominence. Disinformation actors mainly spread fears about losing Slovakia’s defence capability and sovereignty, pushing the narrative of the country’s possible direct involvement in the war or Russia’s potential retaliation. For example, in January and February 2023, the Slovak information space was [flooded](#) with hoaxes about the allegedly planned citizen mobilisation in the war. A document about “a planned comprehensive exercise to perform tasks following the declaration of martial law and the order to mobilise the Slovak Armed Forces” was circulated on social media. As the Slovak Police [explained](#), the document referred to annual exercises to test administrative readiness for mobilisation. In the wake of the falsity, up to 40,000 Slovaks [declared](#) their refusal to perform extraordinary service in the event of mobilisation.

This fits into the broader framework of the disinformation ecosystem that today accuses the West of rejecting peace negotiations and deliberately prolonging the war. However, these false calls for peace (including sporadic peace marches) are, in reality, calls for Ukraine’s surrender. Moreover, disinformation narratives also portray Ukraine’s membership in NATO as a threat to Slovakia’s security.

CONSPIRACIES ABOUT MEDIA, NGOS AND ESET

Since the 2018 murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová, narratives accuse NGOs of being “paid by Soros and Western oligarchs”. Political party SMER-SD was crucial in [claiming](#) that the ultimate goal was to organise a coup d’état. Many media outlets have taken up these narratives with problematic content, thus promoting the polarisation of public opinion ahead of the 2020 elections.

ESET (a software company) is also a constant target of hoaxes and conspiracy theories. Ahead of the upcoming snap parliamentary elections, it [faces](#) accusations of allegedly interfering in the vote-counting process. These allegations have no factual basis, as the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic carries out the vote counting, which does not even use any software from ESET.

NGOs are accused on links to mainstream media or political parties that manipulate public opinion to discredit the political opposition. In addition, polling agencies are said to distort results in favour of certain political parties. Conspiracies regarding pre-election polls are based on the belief in unrepresentative samples, manipulative questions, as well as the alleged ideological bias of the polling agencies.

Narratives about NGOs influencing elections also resonate in disinformative media. In this spirit, the working trip of state officials and representatives of the NGO sector in Brussels in May 2023 was exploited. At the invitation of the Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, they discussed the dangers of spreading disinformation and undermining the country’s pro-Western orientation. The opposition party SMER-SD [claims](#) that the group has branded it as a hybrid threat, discussing interference in the election campaign and a coordinated approach to discredit the opposition. However, the real essence of the working trip was to [exchange](#) information and experiences, gain knowledge on the work of international services against hybrid threats and present the Police Department’s annual report on disinformation for 2023.

COMMUNITY

The firm presence of the NGO community is one of the major strengths of Slovakia's fight against disinformation and hybrid threats.

ACTORS

The Konšpirátori.sk project is a public database of websites with unserious, deceptive, fraudulent, conspiratorial or propagandistic content. The project was [established](#) in 2016 and offers a sophisticated and transparent repository of problematic websites in the Slovak and Czech information environment. In the criteria for evaluating the content and activities of websites, the project focuses on disinformation, including false health advice, conspiracy theories, extremism, and content that does not meet the basic requirements of journalistic ethics. At the same time, it warns advertisers against placing their ads on problematic sites.

The Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK) was [established](#) in 2018 after the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová. It carries out domestic and foreign investigative projects, deals with journalists' protection and participates in investigative journalists' education. In Slovakia, ICJK works to strengthen evidence-based and fact-based investigative journalism, which helps the rule of law by exposing organised crime, corruption, money laundering, and also helps combat hoaxes and disinformation spread by foreign and domestic actors.

Infosecurity.sk is a watchdog platform [operating](#) in Slovakia since 2019. It is currently the flagship project of the Adapt Institute, focusing on the fight against disinformation. The project is based on continuous communication with the Slovak public, to whom it tries to deliver high-quality information to navigate the information chaos. Infosecurity.sk focuses on identifying key disinformation and Russian propaganda narratives, as well as identifying the actors who spread them. In addition to regular publishing activities, the project is also dedicated to monitoring the information environment and analytical activities.

The Demagog.SK project has been [operating](#) in Slovakia since 2010 as part of the Institute for a Well-Governed Society. It focuses on checking the factual statements made by politicians and other public figures and media political debates on TV or on social media. Demagog.SK has analysed over 700 political debates and 15,000 factual statements. Its sister organisation in the Czech Republic (Demagog.CZ) has also become a partner of Meta for fact-checking in Slovakia.

Zmudri.sk [focuses](#) primarily on the educational aspect of the fight against disinformation. Also explaining democracy and politics, its activities centre on building critical thinking and media literacy, especially among the younger generation, as well as teachers.

Gerulata Technologies is a private sector actor [focusing](#) on developing and providing tools to democratic institutions to counter disinformation and propaganda. In particular, their state-of-the-art AI-powered tools enable streamlined monitoring and analysis of the information environment. They improve skills for detecting, tracking and responding to disinformation and propaganda campaigns.

It is also worth mentioning various social media actors, such as **Sebavedomé Slovensko** (Confident Slovakia), **Checkbot**, **Krotíme hoaxy** (Taming Hoaxes) or **Mladí proti fašizmu** (Youth Against Fascism), whose activities contribute to improving the health and quality of the Slovakian information space. Whether it is on Facebook or Ins-

tagram, they often replace state authorities in explaining critical situations and debunking hoaxes. Through their continuous communication, they also help share strategic and key messages in building trust in democracy and foreign policy.

Several **state authorities** are also focusing on the fight against disinformation. However, it is important to add that the low level of their cooperation and coordination at the institutional and procedural levels remains a problem. For instance, the **Slovak Police** is directly [involved](#) in the fight against disinformation. It communicates with the public through social media and has a dedicated page for alerting and refuting hoaxes or disinformation. It has long been one of the most viewed sites focused on countering disinformation.

The **Council for Media Services** supervises compliance with legislation governing broadcasting, retransmission, the provision of on-demand audiovisual media services, and the provision of content-sharing platforms. It also initiates and carries out research and analytical activities in the media field to monitor and assess the state of the media environment. It is a focal point for cooperation on media regulation (including social media) within the EU. The Council for Media Services is the long-standing leader of the ERGA working group on disinformation.

Two key bodies have been established within the **Government Office of the Slovak Republic** (within the **Office of the Security Council**). The **Department for Strategic Communication** is a dedicated unit for the implementation of strategic communication; its main tasks are to centralise the coordination of the communication planning, to speed up the supra-ministerial exchange of information and to increase the responsiveness and effectiveness of the communication of the relevant bodies. The Situation Centre (SITCEN) was established to gather and evaluate information on events affecting the security environment of the Slovak Republic. The Centre provides analyses, which are further shared with the relevant state administration bodies.

The **National Security Authority** (NSA) is a state body that [deals](#) with the prevention and monitoring of disinformation, which can negatively impact the security interests. Following the adoption of the amendment to the law on cyber-security as part of measures related to the situation in Ukraine, the NSA has in the past intervened against some disinformation websites by blocking them for a limited period of time. Centres and units focusing on countering hybrid threats, analytical work, resilience building, or strategic communications are also present in various capacities at the **Ministry of the Interior**, the **Ministry of Defense** and the **Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs**.

POLICY

Currently, there is no effective legislation in Slovakia that would specifically address the issue of disinformation. At the same time, the legislation lacks a precise and legally graspable definition of disinformation. However, several legal provisions touch upon it:

- Firstly, it is necessary to mention the strategic documents of the Slovak Republic, which reflect the danger posed by disinformation and hybrid threats. The Programme Declaration of the Government of the Slovak Republic [emphasised](#) that the growing hybrid threats require strengthening of capacities at the national level and active participation of the country in international efforts to counter these threats. The 2023 Officials' Government Programme Statement takes a similar [approach](#) to the issue. In particular, it points to threats to democratic values and foreign policy orientation, mentions ensuring the development of sustainable national capacities across the state and public administration for strategic communication and countering hybrid threats, including disinformation. The growing importance of hybrid threats is reflected in the need to systematically strengthen their resilience in the [Slovak Security Strategy](#) and the [Slovak Defence Strategy](#).
- **The Media Services Act (264/2022 Coll.)**, effective from August 2022, [introduces](#) rules for audiovisual media, including television and radio. The current wording of the Act imposes certain obligations on providers of audiovisual media services (AVMS) via social media (TikTok, Google, Instagram or Facebook) or their website. It also includes an obligation to ensure the correctness and accuracy of the information disseminated by these media. The law also establishes and specifies the remit of the regulator (Council for Media Services), whose powers include initiating and carrying out research and analytical activities in the media field to monitor and assess the state of the media environment, also concerning the dissemination of hate speech or disinformation. The law also has the potential to streamline the fight against disinformation websites.
- **The Act on Cyber Security (69/2018 Coll.)** [deals](#) with protecting critical information infrastructures and protecting against cyber-threats. The law also sets out a definition of malicious content, which includes disinformation and other forms of hybrid threats. The Act allows for the blocking of harmful content or harmful activity directed to or from the cyber-space of the Slovak Republic and provides for the enforcement of this decision or carries out the blocking upon request through the National Security Authority (NSA). After the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the NSA [blocked](#) four disinformation sites until June 2022. The law was to be further amended in 2022 and 2023 to make it more effective in combating hate speech, extremism, and deceptive content. However, the amendment did not pass through the parliamentary legislative process.
- **The Criminal Act (300/2005 Coll.)** [contains](#) provisions concerning the dissemination of lies and false news that may harm the public interest or the reputation of other persons (defamation). Such conduct may be prosecuted. The law also provides for imprisonment in case of spreading false alarm messages. In the broader context of disinformation (and its disseminators), the law also focuses on hate speech or defamation of nation, race and beliefs.
- **The Action Plan for the Coordination of Combating Hybrid Threats (2022-2024)** was adopted at the end of 2021. It is [based](#) on the Government's Programme Statement for 2021-2024 and builds directly on the **Concept of Combating Hybrid Threats of the Slovak Republic (2018)**. The aim is to strengthen inter-ministerial coordination and response to hybrid activities against the Slovak Republic, raise public awareness about hybrid threats, build a system of strategic communication at the governmental and ministerial level, and strengthen international cooperation in combating hybrid threats. An important task resulting from this document was the establishment of a strategic communication unit at the Government Office of the Slovak Republic or a

permanent working committee of the Security Council of the Slovak Republic on hybrid threats. The plan identifies the need to develop concepts focused on strategic communication and building resilience to hybrid threats. The document also touches on the protection of electoral processes and protection against foreign influence.

- The Government of the Slovak Republic [adopted](#) the **Concept of Strategic Communication** in June 2023. Its main objective is to improve the communication of institutions towards citizens. Its adoption is part of the commitment made in the aforementioned Action Plan for the Coordination of the Combating Hybrid Threats. The concept aspires to increase population awareness about the activities and services of the state, to improve communication between the state and citizens, to formalise and streamline cooperation and coordination of state institutions in strategic communication, and to speed up the state's response in the fight against disinformation. The concept identifies key principles and topics of strategic communication, defines mechanisms for coordination and information exchange, and highlights the need for cooperation with actors from the media, NGO sector and academia.

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