



**COUNCIL FOR
MEDIA SERVICES**

**QUANTITATIVE
CONTENT
ANALYSIS
OF NARRATIVES
SURROUNDING
THE 2023
ELECTIONS
TO THE NATIONAL
COUNCIL OF THE
SLOVAK REPUBLIC**

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Foreword

On Saturday 30 September 2023, Slovakia held early elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic, which were preceded by an intense election campaign. Political parties and their representatives endeavoured to reach their constituents using billboards, leaflets, face-to-face meetings, appearances on radio and television, as well as via social networks. The media provide a platform for much of the election campaign, making it possible for political actors to mobilise large numbers of people. According to Act No. 264/2022 Coll. on Media Services (“AMS”), broadcasters of radio and television programme services must *“ensure that programmes and other components of the programme service broadcast in frame of an election campaign comply with a special regulation”*, as provided for by the Act No. 181/2014 Coll. on the Election Campaign. However, in the recent years, marked by the emergence of digital technologies, election campaigns are increasingly shifting to social networks, which have become one of the key tools for disseminating political messages, gaining support and interacting with potential voters. This creates new regulation challenges which need to be addressed.

In order to establish an effective surveillance of online platform content, a detailed understanding of the information environment and the recurring trends and patterns is necessary. This can be achieved by monitoring social networks and thoroughly analysing the collected data. As this area is still relatively unexplored, there are few regulators who have detailed data on the specific content and trends spreading on digital platforms at their disposal. This report is exploratory in nature. It aims to analyse the content of one of the most widely used content sharing platforms – Facebook. It also aims to improve the regulator’s navigation capabilities in the information environment for the purposes of further systemic oversight. The Council for Media Services (“CMS”) performs this task under the AMS, setting out that the regulator’s remit includes *“initiating and conducting research and analytical activities in the media field for the purposes of monitoring and evaluating the state of the media environment, particularly regarding dissemination of hate speech, disinformation [...]”*.

Furthermore, the Slovak parliamentary elections were the first elections held after the entry into force of the Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act, hereinafter referred to as [“DSA”](#)), applicable for very large online platforms and online search engines. Its purpose is to harmonise the rules for all intermediary services in order *“to ensure a safe, predictable and reliable online environment, to address dissemination of illegal content on the internet and the societal risks potentially arising from the dissemination of disinformation or other content, and which effectively protects the fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter”*.¹ This EU regulation requires platforms to assess and mitigate systemic risks, for example. These include any *“negative effects on civic discourse and electoral processes, and public security”*. The DSA further specifies that providers of such services should *“also focus on the information, which is not illegal, but contributes to the systemic risks”* and *“pay particular attention on how their services are used to disseminate or amplify misleading or deceptive content,*

¹ Regulation 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)(OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p. 3).

including disinformation".² The potential dissemination of disinformation, manipulative information or otherwise problematic content may thus point to failures of the platforms which must be actively addressed and resolved.

This report analyses and describes the social reality on Facebook over the examined period, from the announcement of the early parliamentary elections until two weeks after the elections. The examined content primarily concerns the elections and election-related topics. In order to ensure impartiality and independence, the election narratives were analysed with the assistance of a statistical programme and statistical topic modelling using unsupervised machine learning. This type of analysis is based on data obtained from third parties, minimising the bias of subjective data evaluation. Moreover, the CMS endeavours to strengthen cooperation and coordination with the non-governmental sector, and considers partnerships and cooperation with the civic sector to be important elements of a healthy democratic society.

The first chapter (following the key findings) presents the research design used in the preparation and implementation of this analysis. This section describes how data was collected and processed, as well as the methods used for quantitative content analysis thereof. It also explains what the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) – the method chosen for topic modelling – entails, as well as the requirements which must be met for its correct implementation. The next section describes the limitations and restrictions of the chosen method, as well as of the report as a whole. These are followed by the analytical part. The analytical part presents the most viral posts and the most prevalent topics related to the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia. The penultimate chapter focuses on the description of 16 selected topics analysed in detail which are divided into four categories ("Affairs and activities of political parties affecting election-related topics", "Attempts at challenging institutions", "Awareness-raising campaigns and reporting on the conduct of the elections" and "Geopolitical context"). The analysis includes a description of specific narratives within their social and political context. Finally, the report concludes with a summary of the results and the conclusions drawn from them.

² Regulation 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)(OJ L 277, 27. 10. 2022, p. 23).

Key findings

- In the examined period from **10 June 2023** (the date of the announcement of the elections) to **15 October 2023** (two weeks after the elections), **12,301 posts** related to the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia were recorded on Facebook, based on the predefined conditions and after data cleaning. These received a total of **8,552,967 interactions**.
- Based on the analysis of word frequency in the selected dataset, **57 most common topics** were identified. 16 of these were subjected to in-depth qualitative analysis and described. The remaining topics constituted political campaigns of parties (12), were not directly related to the parliamentary elections (10), contained unrelated posts (11), or reported on election-related events in a neutral manner (8).
- The **16 topics analysed in detail** were divided into four categories: **reporting on the activities of political parties affecting the election-related topics, attempts at challenging institutions, awareness-raising campaigns and reporting on the conduct of the elections, and geopolitical context**.
- The topics subject to qualitative analysis included topics that **objectively reported on the elections**, for example on election polls, voting from abroad or the transparency of electoral processes. However, a significant part of the topics focused on **challenging or criticizing public institutions**, such as the Office of the President, the Specialized Prosecutor General's Office, the Police Force or the Ministry of Interior. Finally, they included topics dealing with **geopolitical issues**, such as Hungary's influence on the election campaign or the war in Ukraine, as well as **reporting on the activities of political parties and individuals**.
- The report also examines the most viral posts of the examined period, albeit to a limited extent. Eight of the top ten most viral posts belonged to the chairman of *SMER-SSD*, Robert Fico. They generated 257,414 interactions in total. Seven of them were accompanied by video recordings, which generated a total of 2,869,120 views.
- The analysis shows that **the most prevalent topics** (i.e. quantitatively most recurring) **were not automatically the most viral ones** (i.e. posts with the quantitatively highest number of interactions). However, some topics could be classified as both prevalent and viral. These include particularly topics challenging public institutions and their activities, such as the Office of the President, the National Criminal Agency, the Specialized Prosecutor General's Office or the Police Force, or those concerning foreign policy orientation (illustrated primarily by the war in Ukraine and the issue of migration).
- The posts which achieved high virality rates but did not appear among the most prevalent topics addressed vaccination, the rights of the LGBTI+ community, and criticizing the media and NGOs.
- An analysis based on statistical software and statistical modelling using unsupervised machine learning proves to be a suitable tool to gain a better understanding of the characteristics and nature of the information environment. **Indeed, the results suggest that it is not only the virality of posts which requires examination but also their prevalence.**
- The exercise detected a significant amount of content produced by individuals whose accounts were suspended due to repeated violations of Facebook's terms of use (for example, content published by MP Ľuboš Blaha on other platforms effectively contributed to shaping a quarter of the topics examined in more detail on Facebook). This raises the

question whether the measures for repeated violations of the platform's rules are effectively and appropriately enforced.

Research design

In order to obtain analytical outputs, it is first of all necessary to collect the required dataset and transform it into a form allowing for performing the analysis using the chosen method. For the purposes of this research, data was collected from Facebook's environment. Facebook is one of the most widely used platforms, regularly accessed by [3.2 million people](#) in Slovakia.

The data was collected using *CrowdTangle*, a tool which [collects](#) data from verified profiles, from public pages with more than 25 000 followers or "likes", and from public groups with more than 95 000 members on Facebook. This data includes, for example, text of the posts or information about the time of their publication, their author or the number of interactions generated by the content. This analysis included data from all profiles, pages and groups without distinction.

The following keywords were used to retrieve relevant data about posts related to the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia: "*voľby, volieb, voľbám, voľbách, voľbami, voľbe, voľbou, volebná, volebný, volebné, volebnú, voliť*" (elections, electoral, vote³). The examined period was determined as the period from 10 June 2023 (the date of the announcement of the elections⁴) to 15 October 2023 (two weeks after the elections). The actual data collection took place on 7 November 2023. The data was collected in cooperation with *Infosecurity.sk*.

It produced a complete dataset containing a total of 71,962 posts. However, this dataset contained several cases which, although selected on the basis of the above-mentioned keywords, were not suitable for the analysis as such. Therefore, data cleaning had to be performed.

In the first step, all URLs were removed from the dataset, as well as posts which were too short. In reality, it might be difficult for the software to identify the topic based on a text consisting of only a few words. A simple calculation showed that the average length of text occurring in the dataset is 510 characters. In order to limit the impact of very short texts, posts with content which exceeded this average post length by approximately less than 10% were excluded. In this case, it was content containing less than 51 characters. In the Slovak language, this basically corresponds to a complex clause.⁵ By applying this rule, the dataset was reduced to 35,741 entries. The reason why more than half of the posts from the dataset contained less than 51 characters is that they often contained no more than a short description of the attached video or image. However, the report uses a statistical model which can only process textual data.

In the second step, all posts that generated fewer than 50 social network interactions at the time of data collection were excluded from the dataset. This was preceded by an extensive analysis of the collected data. In frame of this analysis, two test models were developed and their results were compared by the authors of the report. The model processing posts without interaction

³ Translator's note: Slovak is a highly inflected language in which words can be modified using suffixes to express many different grammatical categories, resulting in the existence of numerous forms of the same word.

⁴ <https://volby.statistics.sk/nrsr/nrsr2023/sk/index.html>.

⁵ <https://www.juls.savba.sk/ediela/sr/1965/4/sr1965-4-lq.pdf>.

restrictions contained a disproportionately large number of identical inauthentic posts.⁶ These largely influenced the results of the analysis and distorted its meaningfulness. The authors of the report therefore considered it appropriate to define a threshold for the number of interactions. This step also eliminated content that was likely to be less popular among users and thus affected the discussion surrounding the elections to a lesser extent than the content with a higher number of generated interactions.

Finally, posts that could be described as “false positives” were excluded. These are posts which contained the keywords, but were not related to the parliamentary elections in Slovakia. The excluded posts included various promotional offers concerning cars, electronics, travel or recipes. This data reduction resulted in a final dataset of 12,322 posts.

As this report aims to explore the most common topics which emerged in the context of the parliamentary elections, it was necessary to convert the collected content into a form facilitating examination. Due to the large amount of data, it was not possible to examine each post individually. Therefore, quantitative content analysis was used. In this case, the analysis aimed to identify the topics reflected in a large amount of content published on Facebook. A “topic” refers to a quantity identified by a series of words that plausibly represent a set of interrelated ideas. A “narrative”, on the other hand, is a certain story which exists within a topic, represents it, is logically based on it and can be attributed the characteristics of that topic. A narrative contains and promotes the values or messages of its author or institution. Its aim is to disseminate these messages among a specific audience.

This report seeks to identify the main topics emerging from the examined posts, which are represented in a short and concise form. Subsequently, in cooperation with researchers from *Demagóg.sk*, the main narratives of some of the selected topics were identified. These were based on the results of the analysis linked to individual posts on Facebook which attribute specific meanings to relatively general topics.

⁶ Posts that were not original, but whose content was copied and disseminated artificially to promote given messages or ideas.

Methods used

The available literature defines the quantitative content analysis used for this report as a *“systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption.”*⁷

Statistical topic modelling was used to analyse a large number of posts, which would have otherwise required a lot of time, human and financial resources to process manually. It is an unsupervised machine learning technique which creates clusters based on the simultaneous occurrence of words. This technique is based on algorithms designed to examine major topics that permeate extensive and otherwise unstructured document collections.⁸ Topics are identified using a set of words which occur in all the examined posts, i.e. in the word corpus.⁹

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was designated as the tool for topic modelling. In the context of this selection, the report was inspired by the *“COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories on Social Media: A content analysis of Twitter data”* report, which equally examined data from one of the content sharing platforms.¹⁰ LDA is referred to as a mixed membership model of clustered data. In practice, this means that instead of linking each individual document to a single topic, it links each document to multiple topics in different ratios.¹¹ In other words, the model assumes that each document subject to the analysis may represent multiple topics. A particularity of the LDA is the fact that it shares the same set of topics for all documents in the analysis, while the prevalence of these topics varies from document to document.

One of the main advantages of this approach is that it does not require any prior work focused on reading and coding, or tagging documents (in this case, posts). Another particularity of using this model is that it does not entail any information related to individual topics. These are defined only by the words provided and shown by the model, but must subsequently be interpreted by an analyst.¹² In order to successfully perform the LDA analysis, several conditions need to be met. These include creating a file where the order of the words in a document is not of consequence, and neither is the order of the individual documents in the examined corpus. Another condition is that the author must know in advance how many topics the model is to work with. This needs to be determined prior to the analysis.

⁷ Riffe, Daniel, Stephen, Lacy, and Frederick Fico. 2014. *Analyzing media messages*. New York: Routledge. p. 25.

⁸ Blei, David M. 2012. “Probabilistic Topic Models.” *Communications of the ACM* 55, no. 4. 77 – 84.

⁹ “Word corpus” refers to an entity which contains all the analysed texts.

¹⁰ Nuzhath, Tasmiah, Samia Tasnim, Rahul K. Sanjwal, Nusrat F. Trisha, Mariya Rahman, S M Farabi Mahmud, Arif Arman, et al. 2020. “COVID-19 Vaccination Hesitancy, Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories on Social Media: A Content Analysis of Twitter Data.” *SocArXiv*. December 11, 2020, <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/vc9jb/>.

¹¹ Blei, David M. 2012. “Probabilistic Topic Models.” *Communications of the ACM* 55, no. 4. 77 – 84.

¹² Blei, David M. 2012. “Probabilistic Topic Models.” *Communications of the ACM* 55, no. 4. 77 – 84.

In addition, the data to be processed needs to be converted into a specific format. This involves several steps. First, the input data must be tokenized. This means that the text of individual documents is divided into individual words delimited by a comma - "tokens". Furthermore, the text needs to be stripped of all symbols, punctuation and figures.¹³ The next step is text normalization. This involves transforming upper case letters into lower case letters and converting individual words to their basic form, free of declination or conjugation. All words thus become uniform. This step was followed by the exclusion of "stop words". These are words which are very common in the text, but carry almost no meaning (e.g. "and", "to", "because", etc.). Words that occur most and least frequently in the documents were also removed. This avoids their unwanted intervention in the resulting topics. When all these steps had been completed, the LDA analysis as such was conducted.

The tool used for the analysis and by the analysts is the *R* programming language. The software environment allowing for working with this language is called *RStudio*. It is a very popular software used, for example, by the academia, among other things to process data, perform various analytical and computational tasks or visualize data.

¹³ Welbers, Kasper, Wouter Van Atteveldt, and Kenneth Benoit. 2017. "Text Analysis in R." *Communication Methods and Measures* 11, no. 4. 245 - 265.

Limitations and restrictions

One of the basic technical limitations is the use of a Slovak language library designed for lemmatization of text. This library is essential for the analysis of the Slovak language and its properties; however, its scope is limited. For the R programming language, the authors of the report used the library included in the *UDPipe* package, which is one of the few packages offering a library with the Slovak language. While this library can be used for the purposes of this report, it is not perfect and mistakes in determining the basic form of some words were detected throughout the exercise. This concerned, for example, the basic form of “*prídte*” (the conjugated form of “to come”) or “*ctíme*” (the declined form of “to honour”). A more advanced processing of Slovak data would require optimising this library in the future. In addition, ignorance of grammar rules or mistakes in the wording of posts may have also interfered with the results. However, analysts are not in a position to prevent such cases.

In terms of the limitations of the report regarding data collection, two specific elements can be discussed. The first one is a possible intervention of content which occurs in the examined dataset to a lesser extent without being directly related to the parliamentary elections in Slovakia. These are, for example, posts which contain the keyword “*voľby*” (elections/choice) or variations thereof, but are used in a different context. These are posts such as:

“Agi is a large female, weighing about 40 kg. She has a big heart – even though her previous family abandoned her, she loves people. She is not an ideal choice as a companion for a female dog, but she gets on well with male dogs...”¹⁴

or

“New arrivals of this fall... a great choice to refreshing your  wardrobe  #new #fashion.”

Although these “false positives” were eliminated as much as possible by the manual efforts of the analysts combined with automated means, some of these posts may have remained in the dataset and thus interfered with the results of the analysis to some extent.

Furthermore, the data collection is limited by the inability to capture the actual reach of the posts. *CrowdTangle* (the tool which was used) does not provide access to information about the number of impressions of the content. For video posts, the tool also provides data on the number of views. However, for all other types of posts, only data on the number of interactions is available. Identifying the actual impact of posts would require data about the number of impressions. This data should be provided by Meta in its new tool entitled “Content Library”¹⁵, which is not currently open to regulators. Authorised researchers should be given access upon request.

Another limitation of this report noted by its authors is the issue of labelling narratives and topics as disinformation or manipulative. It is a very fluid term, often with a relatively strong negative

¹⁴ Translator’s note: “choices” and “elections” constitute a homonym pair covered by the Slovak word “*voľby*”.

¹⁵ <https://transparency.fb.com/sk-sk/researchtools/meta-content-library/>.

connotation. Therefore, the authors proceeded with extreme care when labelling certain topics or narratives as such, ensuring it was always in line with the official definition as set out in the Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation.¹⁶ However, despite the challenges related to labelling narratives as disinformation, the authors of this report consider it necessary to investigate this topic further in the future. Indeed, it is increasingly relevant and often permeates other areas which have the potential to polarize the society further, interfere with human rights and undermine the position of public institutions and democracy as such. This report therefore seeks to grasp the concept of disinformation in an objective manner and to establish its potential presence purely based on substantiated, verified and well-founded information.

¹⁶ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2022-strengthened-code-practice-disinformation>.

Analytical part

Prior to the actual analysis, a data completeness check was conducted to identify the most common topics related to the early parliamentary elections. It detected 21 cases of text which did not meet the requirements of the chosen method.¹⁷ These cases were subsequently excluded and the analysis was conducted with a resulting dataset of 12,301 posts.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the reality of Facebook, the examined period was divided into three subperiods. The first subperiod lasted from 10 June to 31 August, marking the start of the election campaign. The second subperiod was determined as the period from 1 September to 30 September, the final month before the elections. At this time, as the election campaign intensified, an increased number of election-rated posts was recorded. The third and final period was from 1 October to 15 October, the first days after the elections. The primary reason for this practical division of the dataset into time periods is to be able to track and capture more effectively how the election-related topics were disseminated over time and how the associated communication increased or decreased. However, the analysis itself was performed on the entire dataset without dividing it into individual periods.

Between 10 June and 31 August 2023 (83 days), 5,592 posts were recorded within the dataset, generating a total of 3,852,748 interactions. In the second examined subperiod, from 1 September to 30 September (30 days), 4,798 posts appeared among the data. This significantly higher figure, relative to the number of days over which the content was posted, was in line with our expectations. This was the last phase of the pre-electoral period, traditionally marked by an increased interest in informing the public about this topic. These posts accumulated a total of 3,389,446 interactions. During the first two weeks following the elections, from 1 October to 15 October 2023 (15 days), 1,911 posts were recorded in the dataset. These received a total of 1,310,773 interactions.

Over time, the posts generated a similar number of interactions. In the first subperiod, until the end of the summer, the posts had an average of 688 interactions, a month before the elections an average of 706 interactions, and two weeks after the elections 685 interactions. Considering that posts with less than 50 interactions were removed from the dataset, the average number of interactions the posts received over the examined period was 695. However, this figure is significantly distorted by the most viral posts, often posted by active politicians.

At a first glance, eight of the ten most viral posts belonged to the leader of *SMER-SSD*, Robert Fico. These generated a total of 257,414 interactions. Seven of them were accompanied by a video, accumulating a total of 2,869,120 views. This confirms previous findings that active politicians, such as those from *SMER-SSD* or *Republika*, have the largest reach on Facebook.^{18,19}

¹⁷ These posts did not contain a coherent, complex text, and therefore were not accepted by the software. Had they not been removed, the final analysis would not have been possible due to discrepancies in the number of elements.

¹⁸ <https://dennikn.sk/3178587/najpopularnejši-politici-na-facebooku-v-roku-2022-boli-uhrik-fico-blaha-taraba-a-mazurek-caputova-predbehla-pellegriniho/>.

¹⁹ <https://infosecurity.sk/studie/predvolebna-komunikacia-tem-o-vojne-na-ukrajine-a-zahranicnej-politike-slovenska-pocas-septembra-2023-policy-brief-kremlin-watchers-movement-oktober-2023/>.

All of Robert Fico's posts can, more or less, be considered a part of the election campaign. In what was clearly the most viral post, [receiving](#) 80,922 interactions and 1,243,367 views, Robert Fico declared that Slovakia cannot agree to everything just to keep the "big guys" [large countries] happy. In his opinion, these countries do not care about our lives, they only want us to be "obedient". In this context, he mentions in a video post further arming of Ukraine and alleged support for war, the annulment of the definition of marriage and the equivalence of same-sex marriages, the admission of illegal migrants and "forced vaccination".

In other posts, Fico [criticises and verbally attacks](#) President Zuzana Čaputová, refers to the "[progressive](#) activists affiliated with ESET", [economic](#) issues, the [possibility](#) of the "using force" to tackle illegal migration, the [arrest](#) of Tibor Gašpar, [criticism](#) of the ruling politicians, and the willingness to "fight" against the compromises that had been [made](#) over the past three years, allegedly "for the sake of NGOs and the media". The ten most viral posts also included posts which were not directly related to the parliamentary elections or referred to them only briefly. The third most viral post was that of President Z. Čaputová, [explaining](#) why she would not run in the upcoming presidential elections. In addition, the list included a post by Milan Uhrík, chairman of *Republika*, in which he [announced](#) that the conservative European parties were "joining forces" in order to "defeat progressives, stop illegal immigration and spread of Islam, stop the LGBT agenda and the destructive 'green policy'".

The following sections of the report focus on the most prevalent topics, rather than the most viral ones. The difference in this approach is that while prevalence captures how often the selected topics appeared in the online space, virality reflects topics which gained the most attention among users. Both approaches have their merits and can be considered complementary.

The first output allowing for monitoring the presence of words in the dataset is the "word cloud". It was created using a document matrix. In this operation, posts are converted and represented by rows, and words are converted and represented by columns. Subsequently, the value of each cell is the frequency figure of the word for the given document.²⁰ This makes it possible to create a "word cloud" showing the most frequently used words in the entire corpus. The more often a word occurs, the larger it is in this graphics, and vice versa. This visualisation provides insight into the composition of the words which were most frequently used for election-related topics on Facebook. In this case, the most commonly used terms included words such as "Slovensko, človek, voľba, strana, volebný, voliť, politický" (Slovakia, person, choice/elections, party, electoral, vote, political, etc.).

²⁰ Ashish, Kumar, and Paul Avinash. 2016. *Mastering Text Mining with R – Master text-taming techniques and build effective textprocessing applications with R*. Birmingham: Pact Publishing.

approach this estimation.²³ After running the algorithm, the program suggested 58 topics for analysis. This data then served as input for the next steps.

In order to determine the number of topics that would most reliably represent the content of the entire analysed dataset, diagnostics were performed on different models that approximated the proposed model with 58 topics in terms of the number of topics. During the diagnostics, five variants of the models were specified, processing 56 to 60 topics. This resulted in four figures shown below.

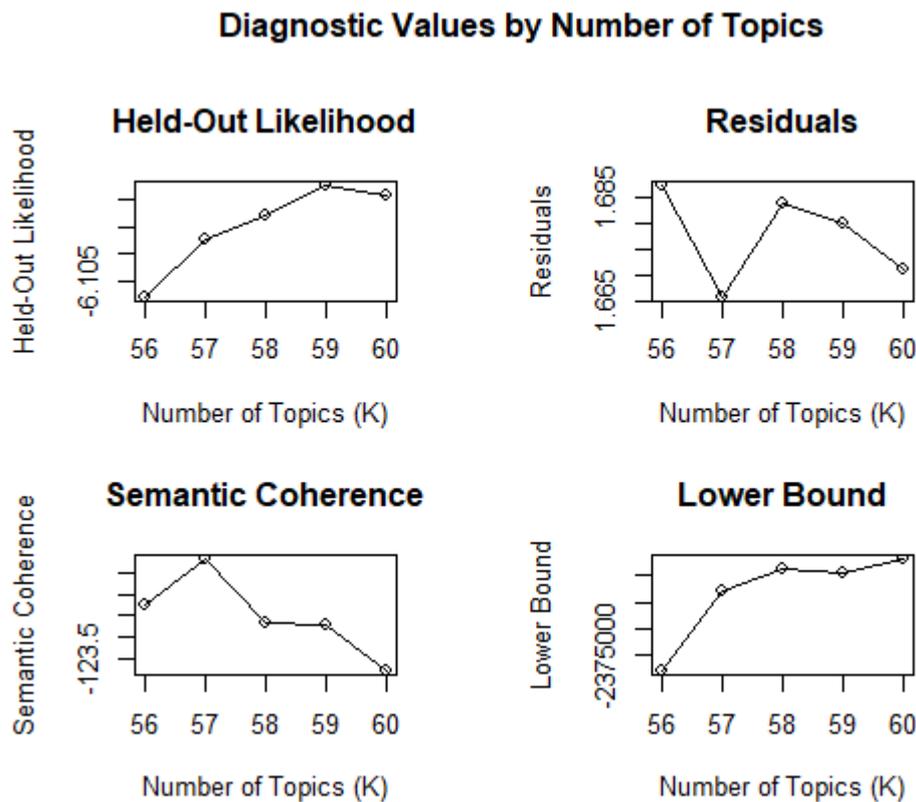


Figure 2: Diagnostics of models 56 – 60

Each of the figures above represents a different characteristic. The first one is “Held-Out Likelihood”, which is one of the possible model comparisons. This figure indicates how efficiently each model predicts the words in a document. The second figure, labelled “Semantic Coherence”, reaches the maximum value when the most probable words within a given topic frequently appear together. Increasing values of these two figures thus indicate “better” topic modelling. In practice, this means that the higher a data point’s position in the figure, the more efficient the model.

The “Residuals” figure can be defined as the difference between the observed value and the mean value predicted by the model for that observation. The lower a data point’s position in the figure,

²³ Roberts, E. Margaret, Brandon M. Stewart, and Dustin Tingley. 2019. “stm: An R Package for Structural Topic Models.” *Journal of Statistical Software* 91, no. 2: 1–40.

the more accurate the model. The last figure, entitled "Lower Bound", can be understood as a value lower than or equal to each element of the dataset. Similarly to "Residuals", the lower the data point's position in the figure, the better the model.

Based on a comparison of the models across all four types of statistical indicators, it was concluded that the most appropriate model to apply would be the model working with 57 topics. Each of these was identified by seven words in four different variations based on four different types of statistics. The first set of words ("Highest Prob") shows a list of words most likely to be associated with a given topic. However, words from this row may overlap across topics. The second set of words ("FREX") contains frequent words which are simultaneously not common to other topics. This row is therefore generally considered to be the most relevant for determining the topic. The third ("Lift") and fourth ("Score") variations contain the most important words for further analysis of the text, which was not necessary for our purposes. However, for our model with 57 topics, the words identified for each topic were often similar or identical within the four variations designated for them.

Topic 41 Top Words:

Highest Prob: ukrajina, vojna, nato, ruský, rusko, zahraničný, usa

FREX: ukrajina, ruský, rusko, usa, západ, nato, vojna

Lift: putin, rusko, usa, ukrajina, západ, ruska, ruský

Score: ukrajina, ruský, nato, rusko, vojna, usa, putin

Figure 3: An example of one of the identified topics, represented by seven words identified in four different ways

Although all the analysed posts contained the word "elections" or its variations, not all of them were directly related to the early parliamentary elections. Therefore, some of the identified topics were not relevant to our research. For example, Topic 2 was defined in frame of the FREX variation by the following words: "stať, názor, právo, kedy, ľudský, moc, Sloboda" (become, opinion, right, when, human, power, freedom). However, majority of the most associated posts attributed to this topic [highlighted](#) the undemocratic nature of the communist regime or the [commemoration](#) of the death of Milada Horáková, who was executed in 1950 as part of the fabricated communist political trials.

As the LDA method is a probabilistic model whose algorithm identifies topics based on an analysis of the frequency of words in the dataset, multiple topics are likely to be identified with posts which are unrelated. This risk is even higher for minority languages such as Slovak. This is because the library used for word analysis is significantly limited. This may cause various inconsistencies related to its small scope, which automatically increases the possibility that the LDA model merges posts with different content into a single topic. For example, Topic 31 was defined within the FREX variation by the following words: "dostať, treba, viesť, sledovať, riešiť, otvorený, po" (get, needed, lead, follow, address, open, after). The most associated posts, however, did not relate to a single topic; rather, they [included](#) posts about the physical clash between Robert Kaliňák and Igor Matovič, about Boris Kollár and his [alleged](#) acts of violence against women, or [informative](#) third-party banners.

16 of the 57 topics identified by the model were analysed and described in detail. The remaining topics were excluded from further qualitative analysis, as they constituted political campaigns of political parties (12), were not directly related to the early parliamentary elections in Slovakia (10), the set contained mutually unrelated contributions (11), or constituted topics neutrally reporting on events related to the elections (8).

All 16 topics analysed in detail can be divided into four categories. The first category, containing five topics, was entitled "Reporting on the activities of political parties affecting the election-related topics". These include topics associated with specific political parties and the activities of their representatives, or situations that occurred in the examined period they were involved in. The second category is entitled "Attempts at challenging institutions". This category includes topics which criticize and challenge public institutions in various ways. The third category is a cluster of four topics defined as "Awareness-raising campaigns and reporting on the conduct of the elections". The last category, entitled "Geopolitical background", includes two topics related to the foreign policy orientation of Slovakia and its relations with the neighbouring countries.

Qualitative analysis and description of the selected topics

The following part of the report is dedicated to a qualitative analysis and description of 16 topics, which were selected based on an evaluation by the team of *Demagóg.sk* in consultation with CMS analysts. *Demagóg.sk* is a Slovak fact-checking organization which is a certified member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Since March 2023, it has also been involved in Meta's third-party fact-checking program. The topics addressed in the following section are introduced by a detailed description of a specific narrative or narratives which were disseminated within them. In addition, they are complemented by quotations from the most associated posts that were assigned to each topic by the analytical model. Furthermore, all topics are introduced with their social and political context.

In the interest of clarity of the report, the selected topics were divided into four categories. The first category, entitled "Reporting on the activities of political parties affecting the election-related topics", and the second category, entitled "Attempts at challenging institutions", contain five topics each. The third category "Awareness-raising campaigns and reporting on the conduct of the elections" includes four topics. Finally, the fourth category "Geopolitical context" contains two topics.

Websites with potentially problematic content are highlighted where necessary. This evaluation by the analysts was based on the assessments of *Konšpirátori.sk*. This portal provides a list of websites whose credibility and content quality raise doubts among members of the expert committee of *Konšpirátori.sk* based on clearly defined criteria. Finally, for each topic, special attention is paid to the examination of related narratives, information or statements by *Demagóg.sk*.

The following categories and their topics are listed in random order. Neither the numbering of topics based on the analytical model, nor the chosen structure represent in any way their prevalence or virality on Facebook in the period from 10 June to 15 October 2023.

Reporting on the activities of political parties affecting the election-related topics

Warnings against artificially generated content (Topic 16)

A Facebook posts

Topic 16 represents posts which primarily concern the emergence of various manipulated video and audio recordings. These posts responded to rapidly spreading content created using AI, refuting its inauthenticity or explaining its impact and origin. The most associated ones were posts about the alleged recording of a conversation between the chairman of *Progresívne Slovensko*, Michal Šimečka, and the journalist Monika Tódová. In this recording, they were allegedly talking about rigging the elections. The examined sample captures mainly the reactions of representatives of *Progresívne Slovensko*. For example, M. Šimečka [shared](#) a screenshot of this post, commenting: *“This colossal, blatant stupidity has already been shared several thousand times. The anti-campaign clearly doesn’t respect the electoral silence period. Our opponents have created yet another fake video with an audio made by artificial intelligence.”*

Furthermore, in early October 2023, the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak (ICJK) [posted](#) on its Facebook page a summary of the findings of an analysis of the communication of political parties and their representatives on Facebook. The analysis [showed](#), among other things, that attacks on journalists were used by several parties and politicians in the pre-electoral period. One of them was a deepfake recording of a fake phone call between M. Šimečka and M. Tódová, which appeared on social networks during the electoral silence period.

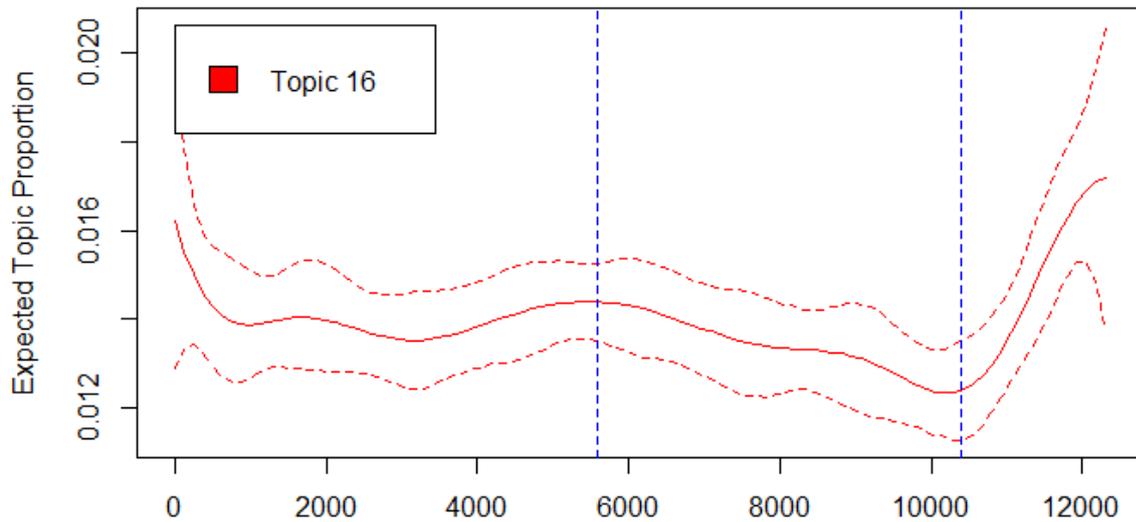


Figure 4: Prevalence of Topic 16 over time

As shown in the visualisation of the dissemination of this topic over time, content falling under this topic was significantly more prominent after the elections, showing a certain time lag from the first occurrence of the manipulated recordings.

B Context

During the last week prior to the elections, audio recordings generated by artificial intelligence were circulating on social networks and via email. On Tuesday 26 September 2023, a video appeared with a photo of M. Šimečka and a beer, accompanied by an audio recording featuring a voice resembling his: *“Raising the price of beer by 70 to 100% is an effective way to reduce alcoholism in Slovakia.”* In the recording, a person who appears to be M. Šimečka advocated this kind of government intervention in people’s privacy to limit their access to the harmful substance at a higher cost. *“A drastic increase in the price of beer is one of the key points of Progresívne Slovensko and it will be one of the first things introduced by the government led by Progresívne Slovensko,”* the recording says.

The recording was [labelled](#) by the analytical teams of *Demagóg.sk* and *Demagog.cz* as created by artificial intelligence (AI)(see below).

The second recording, which contained elements of tampering, did not appear until after the electoral silence period had begun, on Thursday 28 September 2023. It contained voices, allegedly belonging to M. Šimečka and the journalist M. Tódová, planning to rig the elections. Several experts on hybrid threats and artificial intelligence concluded that the recording is probably fake. Following a [fact-checking exercise](#) by AFP Slovakia, Meta labelled the recording as

potentially fake and restricted its dissemination. Nevertheless, it is estimated that at least 100,000 people had seen it.

A third similar recording was [allegedly](#) one of Pavlína Matovičová. In the recording, she allegedly discussed the priority payment of claims against the Arca group, which had gone bankrupt. *Lead Stories* in cooperation with Jakub Šuster from *ELV.ai* evaluated it as false and created by AI.

Synthetically created recordings were also used by *Republika*, which published two audio [recordings](#) with voices resembling those of M. Šimečka and President Z. Čaputová, albeit pointing out that they were not authentic. *Kulturblog* published a recording of the President allegedly recommending voting for Milan Mazurek, the 150th candidate on *Republika's* list.

On 28 September 2023, the *SITA* news agency reported on the warnings against cases of misuse of artificial intelligence issued by the Police Force. *Denník N* pointed out that such videos were disseminated mainly during the electoral silence period, when only a limited response was possible. It also reported that the Council for Media Services had detected a total of 37 cases of deepfake videos and fake recordings in the week prior to the elections. After the elections, the question of whether the Slovak elections might have been influenced by artificial intelligence was also addressed by foreign media such as [WIRED](#) or [The Times](#).

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

On 27 September 2023, *Demagóg.sk* analysed an [audio recording](#) in which M. Šimečka allegedly announced his plan to increase prices of beer by 70 - 100%. According to *Demagóg.sk's* [findings](#), it was, in fact, an artificially created recording using voice cloning. The statements about the intention of *Progresívne Slovensko* to drastically increase prices of beer did not correspond to any public statement made by the party chairman. M. Šimečka personally denied the authenticity of the recording and described it as a product of artificial intelligence. Similarly, [ElevenLabs' AI Speech Classifier](#), a tool for detection of artificially generated speech, showed with 98% certainty that the recording was [inauthentic](#). The programme of *Progresívne Slovensko* does not refer in any way to increasing prices of beer, although the movement's [ideological documents](#) do mention raising taxes on alcohol.

Boris Kollár and his alleged assault on his partner (Topic 17)

A Facebook posts

Topic 17 entails mainly reactions to the media coverage of the case of Boris Kollár and the physical conflict with his partner Barbora Richterová. There was a wide range of posts reacting to this situation. The most associated posts included, for example, a post by Eduard Chmelár, a political reporter and, at the time of writing this report, the advisor to Prime Minister R. Fico, which went viral at the end of September 2023. In this post, Chmelár responded to the publicized case. E. Chmelár criticized B. Kollár for saying that he “*does not feel guilty and would do the same in the*

future". He also stated that "under rule of law, the leader of the legislature cannot take justice into his own hands. A responsible statesman must lead by example."

This topic was also linked to a commentary [published](#) by the journalist Arpad Soltész in the beginning of July 2023 on the Facebook page [noviny.sk](#) of TV JOJ. In this commentary, he stated that "hitting a woman, even if it occurs after throwing a baby, is a particularly despicable act, but establishing which of Boris Kollár's publicly known acts was the most despicable would require an honest and broad public debate". The author continued, suggesting that removing B. Kollár from the office would be a cheap gesture, but it would be "at least a signal to the society that the government has a monopoly on violence and not even Boris Kollár is allowed to hit women".

B Context

In the months preceding the parliamentary elections, B. Kollár faced criticism from his former partner B. Richterová, mother of two of his children. B. Richterová posted critical [videos](#) and posts, and on 22 June 2023, she [filed](#) a complaint for a physical assault that occurred in 2012. She also claimed that B. Kollár was being [followed](#) by the Slovak Information Service (SIS). B. Kollár confessed to the assault; claiming that B. Richterová did get "a few slaps".

In September, B. Kollár's ex-partner Eva Ferusová posted several [videos](#), claiming that she had had two abortions because of Kollár. B. Kollár responded with a [recording](#) that was supposed to prove that E. Ferusová was offered EUR 40 000 for this anti-campaign by the businessman Zoroslav Kollár. Furthermore, B. Kollár accused Z. Kollár of collaborating with B. Richterová. On 26 September 2023, Z. Kollár posted a [video](#) in which he accused B. Kollár of screening B. Richterová via SIS.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

The incident between B. Kollár and B. Richterová was briefly mentioned in political debates. In the beginning of September 2023, *Demagóg.sk* [analysed](#), for example, the TV JOJ debate *Na hrane* between B. Kollár, at the time the Speaker of the Parliament, and Peter Pellegrini, chairman of *Hlas-SD*.

B. Kollár misleadingly stated: "Yes, but he [Tomáš Rajecký] is already known for doing the same to Mr Kiska. This is exactly the kind of discredit he brought to Mr Kiska, and for that he was also rightfully convicted." According to examination by *Demagóg.sk*, Tomáš Rajecký [disclosed](#) tax secrets in the tax affairs case of former President Andrej Kiska. This act can be considered a purposeful political discredit, even if T. Rajecký denies it. However, he was legally convicted for the actual disclosure of the tax secret, and not for its political implications. In the case of B. Kollár, he discusses the alleged violence against B. Kollár's partner, which he claimed to have witnessed. However, testifying about it is not a criminal act regardless of its motivation. B. Kollár [filed](#) a complaint against T. Rajecký and Z. Kollár for setting up a criminal organisation. According to B. Kollár, at the time the Speaker of Parliament, T. Rajecký and Z. Kollár spread disinformation and led an anti-campaign against *Sme rodina* prior to the early elections. This is supposed to have started after B. Richterová had [accused](#) the Speaker of Parliament of physically assaulting her in

2012. B. Kollár [claimed](#) that B. Richterová was acting under the instructions of Z. Kollár. Later in 2016, T. Rajecký [stated](#) that he was aware that this had not been the only time B. Kollár had hit his partner. In an interview for Aktuality.sk he [described](#) an incident from his holiday in Cuba, which he and B. Kollár and T. Rajecký allegedly spent together with Monika Péter, at the time B. Kollár's partner. According to T. Rajecký, during this holiday B. Kollár allegedly hit and beat M. Péter up. Both M. Péter and B. Kollár [denied](#) the incidents described above.

Food safety and food prices (Topic 20)

A Facebook posts

Topic 20 represents posts which address the issue of food in Slovakia. Several narratives emerged within this topic, including, for example, the safety of food sold in our country and the promotion of our own food production and marketing. Many of these posts can be considered a part of the election campaign of several politicians.

A significant response was provoked by the Facebook [posts](#) of Patrik Linhart, a former member of *Sme rodina*, discussing the need to fight for cheap groceries in Slovakia. P. Linhart, who was running in the 2023 elections as a candidate of [Hlas-SD](#), also announced on 10 September 2023 that he commissioned [testing](#) of "products with the frog", probably referring to products labelled with the Rainforest Alliance certificate. On 1 August 2023, he posted a [video](#) criticizing supermarket chains for not disclosing their profits. Another politician who addressed the issue of groceries was Miroslav Suja from *Republika*. He shared a [video](#) about supporting livestock farming in Slovakia.

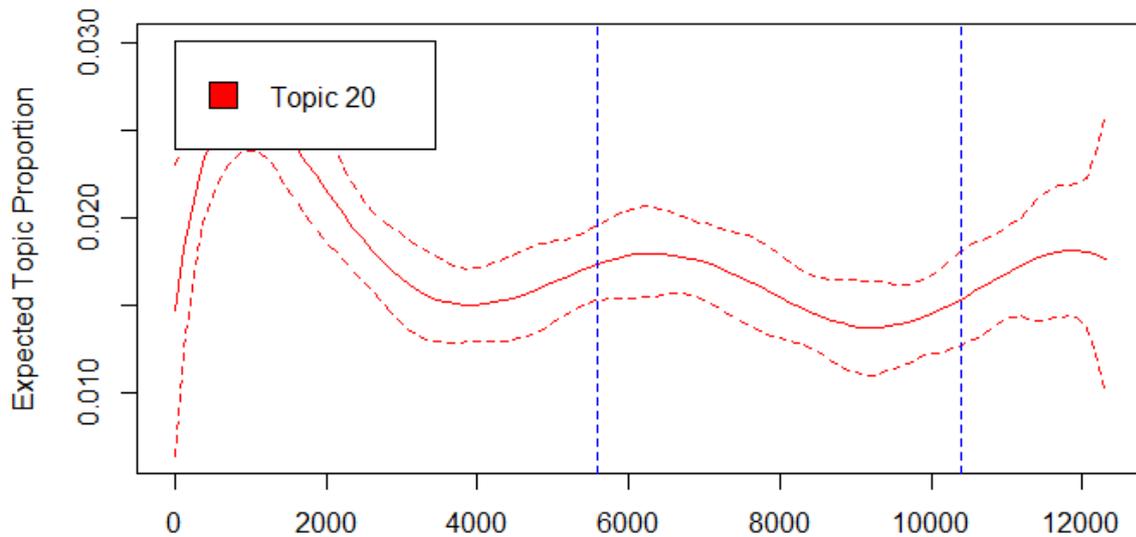


Figure 5: Prevalence of Topic 20 over time

The figure shows that the issue of groceries resonated especially in the beginning of the pre-election period. Subsequently, its prevalence rapidly decreased, and apart from the first half of September, it only started to rise shortly before the elections. This upward trend continued after the elections.

B Context

In March 2023, food prices were [predicted](#) to reach a 22-year peak. Compared to 2022, Slovak people [were](#) to pay 30% more for their Easter shopping basket, with prices of eggs increasing by 80%. These were some of the reasons why political debates included the issue of increasing food prices. SMER-SSD repeatedly informed about having initiated extraordinary meetings due to increasing food prices, including those in [March](#), [June](#) and [September](#).

The issue of increasing food prices was so relevant to the Slovak society that it was included in the election slogans of politicians. Andrej Danko from SNS, for example, promised on a billboard that *“together we will stop the price increases”*, Peter Pellegrini from Hlas-SD asked voters if they wanted cheaper groceries.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

Demagóg.sk briefly [addressed](#) the issue of cheaper food in June 2023 when [examining](#) the claim of B. Kollár about the profitability of Slovak supermarket chains compared to supermarket chains in Western Europe. The examination showed that when it comes to revenues, large multinational chains have higher profits in Slovakia than in Germany, France or Austria. For example, Lidl and Kaufland had a profit-to-revenue ratio of 8% and 6.24% in Slovakia, while in Germany it was only 1.27% and 1.2% respectively. In 2021, the largest Slovak chains had an average profit-to-revenue ratio of 5.43%. The highest revenue, profit and the best profit-to-revenue ratio were achieved by [Lidl](#) – 8.9%, followed by its sister company [Kaufland](#) with a ratio of 6.24%, [Tesco](#) with 5.02%, and finally [Billa](#) with 1.38%. In 2021, the year subject to comparison, the largest players on the German market included Edeka, Aldi Nord and Aldi Süd, REWE (parent company of Billa s.r.o.), Kaufland and Lidl. Their average profitability as a share of net profit on revenues was 1.39%, which was significantly less than in Slovakia. In 2021, Aldi Süd [reached](#) a profit-to-revenue ratio of 1.97%, while Edeka [turned](#) 1.36% of revenues into profit, [Lidl](#) had a net profitability of 1.27%, Kaufland 1.2%, with [REWE](#) having the lowest profit-to-revenue ratio of 1.13%.

In July 2023, there was a Facebook [post](#) claiming that products labelled with the “little frog”, i.e. the Rainforest Alliance certification, contained “hormone warmers”. The image of the post in Czech claimed that the tropical rainforest frog is one of the most poisonous animals in the world, which is why its symbol proves that products labelled with it constitute a health risk. According to the findings of *Demagóg.sk*, it was a hoax. The little frog symbol in a circle on food packaging does not mean that the products contain “hormone warmers”, as claimed by the post disseminated on social media. It is a [label](#) signifying that the product meets the Rainforest Alliance criteria related to sustainability, environment and human rights. In spite of that, the symbol is repeatedly associated with debunked conspiracy theories, such as the theory that European Union is allegedly secretly adding insects to groceries.

Climate crisis and environmental protection (Topic 21)

A Facebook posts

Another relevant topic emerging from the analysis is Topic 21, involving posts related to the climate crisis and its risks. It was addressed in the election campaign mainly by *Progresívne Slovensko*. Its members communicated that the party considers this topic to be important, as well as the proposed solutions. For example, they shared the results of the [evaluation](#) of electoral environmental programmes by the *Klíma ťa potrebuje* (The climate needs you) initiative. Similarly, *Demokrati* [shared](#) their nature conservation programme.

B Context

The issue of potential overpopulation of bears resonated within this topic since the beginning of 2023. Confirmed and unconfirmed stories of bear encounters began to appear in various parts of Slovakia. In January, a video of bears running around behind houses in the village of Borinka near Bratislava [appeared](#) on the internet. In reality, the recording was [made](#) by hunters during a joint wild boar hunt in Komjatná in the Ružomberok district. In May, a video of a bear [chasing](#) people in a Roma settlement in the village of Smižany in the Spiš region began circulating on social networks. However, the National Nature Protection Authority of the Slovak Republic [pointed out](#) that it was a hoax and the video originated in China. In July, a photo of a bear in a town's inner city [appeared](#) in a Slovak Facebook group for exchanging information about bears. This post was also [shared](#) by former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture Gabriela Matečná, who commented: "A sturdy bear 'on a walk' in Martin – Priekopa yesterday. My friends from Martin sent me the photo." In reality, it [was](#) a photo montage.

On 27 July 2023, researchers from Charles University published the results of a [study](#) that, based on the collection of bear DNA samples, estimated the total population of brown bears in Slovakia at approximately 1,056 specimen, with a confidence interval between 1,012 and 1,275 specimen.

Forest managers and hunters objected to this figure, which had already been cited as the result of the study before its publication. On 21 July 2023, the [National Forest Centre](#) published a report in response to a study by Charles University, estimating the number of bears in Slovakia at 2,500 to 3,000. This figure was based on a 2014 study by Professor Paule from TU Zvolen, to which the estimated increase was added. However, the 2014 study used a similar methodology to examine DNA samples as the 2021 Charles University study. In 2023, the Slovak Hunting Chamber reported the estimated number of bears in Slovakia of "[up to 3,000](#)".

This figure was also [cited](#) by B. Kollár in his appeals to solve the bear problem.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

In terms of climate and environmental protection, politicians tended to point out the wasting of funds in support of NGOs. A. Danko, for example, falsely stated in *TV Markíza* show *Na telo* on 15 October 2023: "I understand the concerns of some people who have been financially relying on various projects, ground squirrel control and others, I understand the concerns of the third sector, the NGOs who were observing the ground squirrels and receiving millions of euros for it." The ground squirrel [conservation project](#), which involves the NGO *BROZ* as well as three other Slovak public institutions, received EUR 5.4 million from the European Commission over seven years in EU-wide competition. However, *Demagóg.sk* established that the statement of A. Danko was false, as the project does not focus on observation of ground squirrels, but on the restoration of more than 200 hectares of agricultural landscapes in 25 locations. The project money is used to clear the neglected land of self-seeded trees, to build fencing and to provide for livestock, as the ground squirrel [needs](#) pasture to survive.

The topics mentioned in the show included the nomination of Rudolf Huliak to the position of Minister of Environment. M. Šimečka [stated](#) that R. Huliak "was the mayor of Očová and [...] how

does that predestine him to be a good Minister of Environment, apart from the fact that he rejects climate change and has a pro-Russian attitude?" According to the findings of *Demagóg.sk*, this statement contains true facts. The mayor of Očová, R. Huliak, claims that the climate crisis is an invention of the elites, denies its existence and supports pro-Russian [attitudes](#). He said his first foreign [mission](#) would be to Moscow, where he planned to ask Russia's forgiveness for Slovakia's military aid to Ukraine.

Conflict between Richard Sulík and Igor Matovič (Topic 35)

A Facebook posts

Topic 35 represents a conflict between two former coalition partners. The controversy over private communications in the form of SMS messages publicized by Igor Matovič elicited a significant response before the elections. The spread of this topic is owed to the fact that the narrative surrounding the conflict between the two actors was also mentioned by politicians from other parties. For example, on 24 September the *SMER-SD Zlaté Moravce* page [published](#) a text by *SMER-SSD* MP Ľuboš Blaha saying that I. Matovič allegedly convicted his own government of working for the mafia. *"Matovič produced SMS messages against Sulík today which confirm that Sulík served Penta during Matovič's government. Bittó acted as a liaison,"* the comment said.

The profile of MP Darina Mosná, who was running as a candidate of *SNS*, also contributed to the topic. On 24 September 2023, she shared a [video](#) of the press conference of I. Matovič about R. Sulík's SMS messages exchanged with Jaroslav Haščák, commenting that *"Matovič, whose medical agenda was prepared by Penta member Špirko and whose list of candidates for the elections, according to the testimony of Eugen Korda, was managed by another member of Penta, reveals how Sulík and Jana 'panties' Cigániková communicate and fulfil the tasks of Haščák"*.

B Context

On 24 September 2023, I. Matovič [disclosed](#) SMS messages between the chairman of SaS, R. Sulík, and Jaroslav Haščák, one of the partners of the financial group Penta who is associated, among others, with the *Gorila* case. In a communication from October 2020, J. Haščák allegedly provided R. Sulík with arguments on the financing solutions for health insurance companies. The SaS chairman [admitted](#) to the communication, but added: *"I am in touch with Mr Haščák. The communication which was disclosed was manipulated."*

Attempts at challenging institutions

Exercise of power by President Zuzana Čaputová (Topic 1)

A Facebook posts

Posts on a topic that can be summarised as the exercise of power by President Zuzana Čaputová posted during the examined period focused on her activities in various areas, while spreading criticism directed against her, mainly by Slovak politicians. As it encompasses several different narratives, it is impossible to characterise this topic in a coherent manner.

In mid-June 2023, there were numerous [reports](#) that Z. Čaputová will not run for President of the Slovak Republic again. For example, the newspaper *Štandard*, [described](#) by [Konšpirátori.sk](#) as a website with problematic content, [published](#) a commentary about the so-called liberal media saying goodbye to President Z. Čaputová and their “*political kitsch doing her a disservice*”.

In August and September 2023, President Z. Čaputová appealed to the public on Facebook in relation to the upcoming parliamentary elections. Together with Ľudovít Ódor, at the time interim Prime Minister, she first [appealed](#) to people to vote from abroad, and then she [called](#) for “*the last month before the parliamentary elections to be a political contest, not a political war*”. Finally, in late September, her speech appealing to the citizens to vote in the elections was [broadcast](#) on RTVS.

In late September, content referring to the comments made by Prosecutor General Maroš Žilinka about the President was widely shared. The author of the original post was Ľ. Blaha. This status was shared, for example, on the Facebook pages of [Smer-SD Zlaté Moravce](#), [Požiadavky občana na vládu](#) (Citizen Demands to the Government of the Slovak Republic), [Blog investigatívnej žurnalistiky](#) (Blog of Investigative Journalism), and [Ľuboš Jakobín Blaha mi dal ban](#) (Banned by Ľuboš Jacobin Blaha). According to the post, Z. Čaputová should go to prison for “*lobbying for the former President of the Police Force Kovařík in an ongoing case in 2021*”. Z. Čaputová was also mentioned by I. Matovič, who [stated](#) after the elections that her attitude was one of the things which contributed to the victory of SMER-SSD.

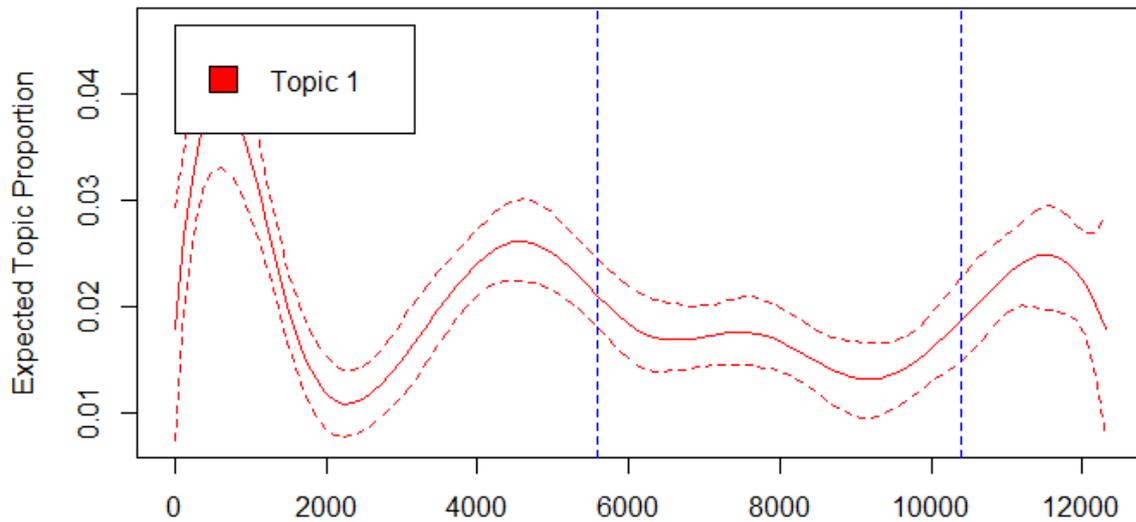


Figure 6: Prevalence of Topic 1 over time

The figure shows that the predominant narrative in the topic regarding the President’s activity was the one about her decision not to run in the upcoming presidential elections. This narrative was most prevalent at the beginning of the analysed period, which corresponds with the announcement of this decision. Subsequently, the topic concerning the President declined sharply, except for an increase in August and during and shortly after the elections.

B Context

In June 2023, Z. Čaputová announced that she [will not](#) run in the 2024 Presidential Elections. In the same month, she also [announced](#) that she was considering initiating disciplinary proceedings against Prosecutor General M. Žilinka for using Section 363 of the Criminal Code. In March, she had [requested](#) the Prosecutor General’s Office to share all decisions issued under this section. As the Prosecutor General’s Office did not comply with this request, the President asked the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic to interpret the Constitution of the Slovak Republic. M. Žilinka described the move as [theatrical](#). Regarding the President, he also [said](#) that in their discussion of 30 August, she had inquired about the status of an ongoing case involving former President of the Police Force Peter Kovařík, who had been charged with misconduct in public office. Z. Čaputová denied Žilinka’s statement. On 23 September 2023, *SMER-SSD* [announced](#) that it intended to take legal action against the President for this after the elections.

Ľ. Blaha and R. Fico from *SMER-SSD* repeatedly accused the President of acting in line with the American interests and called her an American agent and traitor. This was subject to a complaint filed by President Z. Čaputová against Ľ. Blaha. In March 2022, a district court [ordered](#) him to stop spreading false information about the President. In November 2022, the Constitutional Court

[dismissed](#) the complaint filed by the MP. R. Fico called Z. Čaputová an American agent, for example, on 10 July 2023, when he criticised her for not having a mandate to attend the NATO summit in Vilnius. On 9 September 2023, the President [announced](#) that she is considering taking legal action against Fico as well.

The fact that this narrative elicited a response among Slovak citizens is proven by the [CEDMO](#) survey from May 2023. According to this survey, up to 46% of respondents considered the statement that the Slovak President is following the instructions of the United States of America and thus promoting foreign interests on the territory of Slovakia to be completely credible or quite credible.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

For the purposes of this analysis, *Demagóg.sk* examined the widely circulated [post](#) of Ľ. Blaha from mid-September 2023 in detail. The analytical model identified this post as one of the most associated posts with the identified topic, and thus can be considered an example representing one of the narratives disseminated within this topic. Ľ. Blaha wrote:

"THAT CALLS FOR PRISON, MRS ČAPUTOVÁ, THAT CALLS FOR PRISON.

No one has ever ridiculed President Čaputová as much as the Prosecutor General did today. I myself really tried.

1. The Prosecutor General told the truth about Zuzana Čaputová today. She has zero expertise, but excessive pride and arrogance.

2. What is worse for Čaputová, though, is that Maroš Žilinka basically accused her of having lobbied for the former President of the Police Force Kovařík in an ongoing case back in 2021.

3. Kovařík was accused of preventing a police raid on mafia members used by the office of Lipšic for dirty political work.

4. Lipšic then ran to the Presidential Palace to tell Čaputová to lobby for Kovařík with Žilinka. Žilinka told her to go to hell.

5. But today he described how amused he was when the professionally incompetent Čaputová cited what Lipšic had written for her from some "notebook". What a shame.

6. Žilinka didn't listen so the war against him was on. Media, NGOs and so on... And Čaputová is behaving like Lipšic's lackey in this war.

7. I guess that Lipšic and Kubina are writing her complaints against Žilinka and she's just doing whatever these gentlemen dictate. Every mafia has its useful idiot, doesn't it?

8. The Prosecutor General is right that, despite our respect for the Office of the President, it is impossible to respect President Čaputová, who demeans the Office to such an extent.

9. How can she resolve a constitutional dispute with the Prosecutor General's Office at the Kremnické gagy satirical festival? That just confirms that on a mental level she is just a lowly comedian.

10. How is it possible that she did not even reply to the Prosecutor General's letter requesting a meeting and attacks him like this instead?

11. And for God's sake, how is it possible that she, a politician, wants to interfere with open files? She wants to get to determine who should or shouldn't be charged.

12. After today, we know why she's doing all that. As the Prosecutor General Žilinka said at today's press conference, she is just an extension of Lipšic and Kubina.

13. That's why she fights so hard for the Čurilla group, that's why she is attacking Robert Fico and the opposition, that's why she's so hysterical about Maroš Žilinka.

14. After this, Zuzana Čaputová should resign from her post in disgrace. Immediately. Right now, in New York, where she went to get advice on what to do about the Slovak elections.

15. I know the New Yorkers won't want to let her go. But this is a terrible revelation.

I repeat – a progressive politician abused her position to lobby for a guy belonging to Lipšic and Mikulec. That calls for prison, dear lady. That calls for prison.

Ľuboš Blaha, SMER-SSD"

The status of Ľ. Blaha is based only on the claims of Prosecutor General M. Žilinka that the President allegedly inquired about an ongoing case of former President of the Police Force P. Kovařík. Zuzana Čaputová, however, denied any interest in ongoing cases, and since the meeting was in camera, the case remains an allegation against allegation by nature.

Ľ. Blaha claims that P. Kovařík was accused of "stopping a police raid on mobsters". While it is true that the former President of the Police Force was accused of stopping the police action lead by investigator Diana Santusová, Kovařík [defends](#) this step, explaining that the deployment of the intervention unit was [beyond](#) the competence of the investigator of the Bureau of Inspection Service. After consulting the matter with the interim Director of the Bureau of Inspection Service, he instructed the intervention to be resumed. At the time of preparation of this report, the decision on the indictment of P. Kovařík was still pending.

Furthermore, there is no public information or court rulings supporting the part of the claim that "mobsters used by Lipšic's office for dirty political work" were to be arrested. In August 2021, two teams of intervention units from Sobrance were to [arrest](#) a trio belonging to the former Takáč gang – Csaba Dömötör, Petr Petrov and Matej Zeman – on the grounds of suspected perjury. Dömötör was arrested, but P. Kovařík called the superior of the Sobrance intervention unit and ordered him to withdraw his men. This action was led by the investigator of the Bureau of Inspection Service D. Santusová.

Finally, at the *Kremnické Gagy Festival of Humour and Satire*, Čaputová [participated](#) in the political talk show *Naživo* with the presenter Braňo Závodský and the former Prime Minister of the

Slovak Republic, Iveta Radičová, visiting several Slovak cities in the summer of 2023. When asked whether she was considering a disciplinary action against M. Žilinka, she replied that she would first request the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic to interpret the Constitution in terms of one of the competences of the Prosecutor General which is closely linked to whether or not he “acted in accordance with his disciplinary rights” (in the video from 57:35²⁴). The President did not comment any further on the dispute with the Prosecutor General at the festival.

In June 2023, *Demagóg.sk* [examined](#) the statement of R. Fico, who said in the show *Na telo*: “It’s not true [that Robert Fico repeatedly referred to the President as an American agent]. Once again. This was said in defence of Ľuboš Blaha, who, as you know, ended up in court because of this statement.” This was untrue, as Fico [referred](#) to the President as an American agent or servant more than once. This included circumstances other than the defence of MP Ľ. Blaha in the case of spreading false allegations about the President, which had legal consequences.

In July 2023, *Demagóg.sk* also examined a [petition](#) calling on President Z. Čaputová not to sign the agreement presented at the NATO summit in Vilnius. According to the [post](#), Z. Čaputová did not have the right to sign the agreement because she allegedly had not discussed the content of the agreement with the National Council of the Slovak Republic nor with the government. R. Fico, chairman of *SMER-SSD*, [used](#) a similar narrative, [claiming](#) that the President did not have a mandate to travel to Vilnius and had not consulted with anyone. “The President, as an American agent, is already suing me anyway, it doesn’t matter if I repeat it a hundred or a thousand times, she runs off to Vilnius without talking to anyone. And we’ll see what she’s up to, what she votes for,” Fico said.

According to *Demagóg.sk*’s [analysis](#), these are false claims, as the President acted in accordance with the Constitution – her role is to [represent](#) Slovakia abroad without the need of any authorization. Furthermore, priorities and positions underlying the mission of Z. Čaputová in Vilnius were [discussed](#) and taken into consideration by the government in early June 2023.

Criticism of the former leadership of the Ministry of Interior (Topic 12)

A Facebook posts

This topic concerns the issue of migration and the departure of the former interim Minister, Ivan Šimko. It was the issue of migration, especially in the context of its alleged mismanagement, that served as an election-related topic, with various actors criticising the previous governments of Igor Matovič and Eduard Heger. In addition, the content that represents this topic also focused on the criticism of I. Šimko in the context of his relations with the leadership of the Police Force.

On 20 July 2023, a statement concerning I. Šimko appeared on the Facebook [page](#) of the former President of the Slovak Police Force Jaroslav Spišiak and [Progresívne Slovensko](#) that in spite of previously having criticized the caretaker government *HLAS-SD* and *SMER-SSD* support I. Šimko:

²⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7q--BDUQvVQ&ab_channel=Bra%C5%88oZ%C3%A1vodsk%C3%BDNa%C5%BEivo.

"It's enough for them if ex-Minister Šimko, with his unfortunate statement, expressed their political belief – that the police should act under political control beyond the current legal possibilities."

One of the most widespread narratives about Šimko's activity as Minister of Interior concerned his dispute with the leadership of the Police Force. The most associated [posts](#) on this topic (as of 19 July 2023) included the post by President Z. Čaputová on the removal of the Minister from his office: *"The fact is that the task of each member of the government was to calm down the situation in their department. I regret that this has not been the case in recent weeks in the Police Force, which is such an important segment of the Ministry of Interior. Given the relatively short time before the elections, the Prime Minister and I consider the stability of the Police Force to be crucial."* Z. Čaputová, however, [highlighted](#) that I. Šimko *"has done a lot of useful things, especially when it comes to managing migration currently faced by Slovakia."* In this context, reports appeared in media outlets such as eReport in August about the "(in)dependent law enforcement authorities" and [President Z. Čaputová](#), who *"after public threats from Hamran and the Čurilla group dismissed former Minister of Interior Ivan Šimko. Plus, she agreed, in violation of the law, to have one of them, Mr. Ďurka, promoted and transferred to the Bureau of Inspection Service."*

It is possible that the dismissal of the Minister of Interior had an impact on dealing with the migration flow transiting Slovakia. On 23 September 2023, former Minister of Interior Denisa Saková from *Hlas-SD* and, at the time of preparation of this report, Minister of Economy, [announced](#) that permanent border controls on the border with the Czech Republic and Poland were to be reintroduced due to the challenging migration situation. She expected that *"the Czech Republic's response will be to reintroduce border controls on the border with Slovakia. May the elections be over already."*

B Context

I. Šimko [became](#) Minister of Interior again in May 2023, after more than 20 years. One of his key tasks in the caretaker government of Ľ. Ódor [was](#) to organise the elections and to handle the increased migration rate, as cases of [transit migration](#) in Slovakia increased at the end of 2022. After his dismissal, the department was taken over by the interim Prime Minister Ľ. Ódor.

The dispute between Šimko and the leadership of the Police Force started in the wake of the brutal murder of a young woman in Dubnica nad Váhom. On 1 July 2023 I. Šimko posted a [status](#) on Facebook saying he was sorry the police did not take citizens' concerns seriously. It was his next post, published two days later, that attracted more attention, in which he [stated](#): *"In a democratic society, law enforcement must be covered by a framework of a closely regulated but effective control of the political power. It is not the police officers but politicians who regularly appear before their constituents and take ownership of their actions. The moment politics stops playing this role, officials may become afraid to take unpleasant, albeit necessary decisions, regular public procurement ceases to function, pluralistic political competition turns into criminalizing the opponent, and the fear of the police gradually exceeds the fear of criminals. The best indicator of such a dangerous development is observing that this armed force is unable to admit to its evident failures. When it loses the restorative capability stemming from feedback. No, my friends, people with guns and handcuffs cannot act with complete freedom. They fall under the control of politics."*

The important thing, especially in elections – all elections including these – is for them to be regulated by good politics. Politics reflecting this responsibility.”

Following these statements, a public dispute broke out between Šimko and Štefan Hamran, at the time the President of the Police Force, which resulted in Šimko’s removal from the office of Minister of Interior on 19 July 2023. Ľ. Ódor, at the time Prime Minister, [stated](#) in this regard: “The trust between Minister of Interior Ivan Šimko and the broader leadership of the Police Force has eroded so much over the past weeks that despite the best efforts of the President and myself, and despite intense negotiations, it has not been restored. A major role was played by the dysfunctional communication between the parties, which have in just two months become a major obstacle to further cooperation.” He also [confirmed](#) that more than 20 leading police or inspection officers were threatened with dismissal. According to Ľ. Ódor, it was not only due to I. Šimko’s statements on social networks: “That was not how the story began, but rather the end, the last straw.”

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

In the beginning of 2023, *Demagóg.sk* covered the topic of migration in connection with the analysis of a discussion between the Slovak Prime Minister E. Heger and Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala. Czech Prime Minister P. Fiala [said](#): “We have been facing a sharp increase in illegal migration to the Czech Republic after we had already received the largest number of refugees from Ukraine per capita in the entire Europe.” This was a true statement, as according to the Czech Ministry of Interior, illegal migration [increased](#) by 132% in the third quarter of 2022 compared to the same period a year earlier. Also, the Czech Republic was the country which [received](#) the largest number of refugees from Ukraine per capita.

In September 2023, *Demagóg.sk* [analysed](#) R. Fico’s statement from a pre-election debate on TA3, saying that if he became part of the government, border controls and the protection of the green border with Hungary would be reintroduced. His claim was allegedly based on his past experience: “During our government, the border was not crossed by a single illegal migrant.” ([video](#), from 8:10). According to *Demagóg.sk*’s analysis, illegal migration also existed under Fico’s government. Relevant [statistics](#) are recorded by the Border and Foreign Police. In 2012 – 2020, the police registered between 1,000 and 2,000 cases of illegal migration per year, with hundreds of people illegally crossed the border of the Slovak Republic every year.

Commenting on the activity of the Police Force (Topic 32)

A Facebook posts

Another election-related topic constituting attempts at criticising or challenging public institutions is “Commenting on the activity of the Police Force”. The most representative selected posts often addressed conflicts between representatives of political parties and representatives of the Police Force and the public administration. The topic of conflicts in the Police Force resonated on Facebook especially in the second half of June 2023.

On 27 June 2023, for example, R. Fico [shared](#) on Facebook: *“The President’s moaning won’t stop us from speaking out about her two faces and double standards when it comes to her political supporters and rivals, and we won’t tolerate the abuse of the Office of the President for the benefit of selected political parties and to cover for criminals in the NAKA and the Specialized Prosecutor General’s Office who are afraid of justice being done after the September elections.”*

Later on, a post by [Infosecurity.sk](#) drew attention to the misleading statements regarding the arrest of the former President of the Slovak Police Force Tibor Gašpar and the former investigator of the National Criminal Agency Roman Stahl. This post highlighted, for example, the manipulation in case of the interpretation that the accusations rely on the testimony of one cooperating person alone. In fact, the Police Force also had documentary evidence at their disposal and relied on the transcript of the *Threema* application.

On 7 August 2023, the Prosecutor General’s Office [dropped](#) the charge of bribery against the former Minister of Interior from *SMER-SSD*, R. Kaliňák (the so-called salary top-up for František Imrecze, at the time the Director of the Financial Administration) under Section 363 of the Criminal Code. In one of the most associated posts on this topic, Juraj Šeliga from *Demokrati* [commented](#) on the situation as follows: *“It’s a lot of extra work for the Prosecutor General’s Office. But what can you do, the elections are coming up and the Prosecutor General’s Office knows it.”*

B Context

After the murder of Ján Kuciak and Martina Kušnírová and the subsequent civil protests, the public called for a thorough investigation of corruption. I. Matovič won the elections in February 2020 promising, among other things, to “untie the hands of the police” and investigate corruption cases.

In September 2021, NAKA [accused](#) the investigators surrounding Ján Čurilla of misconduct in public office. On 1 October 2021, the Regional Court in Bratislava decided to release them from custody and warned that the charges against them were [unfounded](#).

In the months preceding the elections, Fico shared wiretapped recordings of the “Čurilla group” and repeatedly claimed they manipulated investigations of cases of corruption. However, a longer version of the recording was [broadcast](#) on the show *Na telo*, clearly showing that R. Fico used a purposefully edited version.

Z. Čaputová [requested](#) the Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic to review the constitutionality of the use of Section 363. The Court [ruled](#) in June that this practice is in line with the Slovak Constitution.

On 11 August, NAKA [arrested](#) the former President of the Police Force T. Gašpar on suspicion of corruption in the case *Očistec* (Purgatory). Norbert Bődör, a businessman from Nitra, described by several media outlets as affiliated with *SMER-SSD*, and former NAKA investigator [R. Stahl](#) were accused as well. T. Gašpar’s lawyer, Marek Para, described the accusation as revenge of the investigators, while representatives of *SMER-SSD* Gašpar was running for [said](#) it was *“an attack on the opposition by the state authorities”*. On 13 August, both T. Gašpar and R. Stahl were [released](#)

and at the time of preparation of this report, they were still prosecuted without being taken into custody.

Another one of the election-related topics was the [future of the Specialized Prosecutor General's Office](#), specifically of the Specialized Prosecutor General Daniel Lipšic.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

In relation to this topic, *Demagóg.sk* analysed, for example, the repeated misleading statements made by R. Fico regarding the leaked recordings of police officers. Discussions often featured Fico [claiming](#) that the leaked recordings confirm that the investigation of certain cases was “commissioned” for political purposes. However, he failed to add that several of the recordings in question turned out to be manipulated and had a different, often opposite, meaning when put in context. In other cases, there was no context whatsoever. An internal SIS [report](#) claimed that certain investigations were allegedly manipulated. However, former SIS Deputy Boris Beňa, who cooperated with law enforcement authorities, [challenged](#) this content. The Specialized Prosecutor General stated that he had [not](#) seen any evidence of manipulation. On the contrary, several recordings that were supposed to confirm influence or “commissioning” of the investigations for political purposes [proved](#) to be tampered with. The Bureau of Inspection Service made a transcript of the recording made by NAKA investigators with the following text: “[...] *the resolution of commencement [unintelligible], you write what you want.*” These words give the impression that the investigators are thinking about what to write in the resolution. However, what the recording actually said was: “*I was told by the director that the resolution of commencement was not like a letter to Santa where you write what you want.*”

Electoral bribery in settlements and alleged manipulation of elections (Topic 44)

A Facebook posts

Topic 44 is represented by various posts commenting on the alleged manipulation of the elections. On one hand, the public authorities and NGOs tried to raise awareness and warn against unsubstantiated claims concerning the elections. On the other hand, there were also narratives about rigging of the elections by various actors.

For example, the page *Hoaxy a podvody* (Hoaxes and Fraud) of the Slovak Police Force [shared](#) the status of the National Security Authority in early August, warning of an increased risk of cyberincidents in connection with the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic. “*You may encounter more disinformation or phishing attacks on the internet than usual. Verify your information. Do not provide your personal data to anyone,*” the Police Force warned.

On this topic, *SMER-SSD* [posted](#) a video with its nominees T. Gašpar and R. Takáč, saying they had information about intended electoral bribery in Roma settlements and requesting the police leadership to closely monitor the conduct of the upcoming elections. “*We’ve received important*

information including detailed plans. We call on the police leadership to closely monitor the conduct of Saturday's elections," the post reads. In addition to SMER-SSD's page, the video was shared on the Facebook [profiles](#) of R. Takáč and T. Gašpar, as well as the Facebook page [Blog investigatívnej žurnalistiky](#).

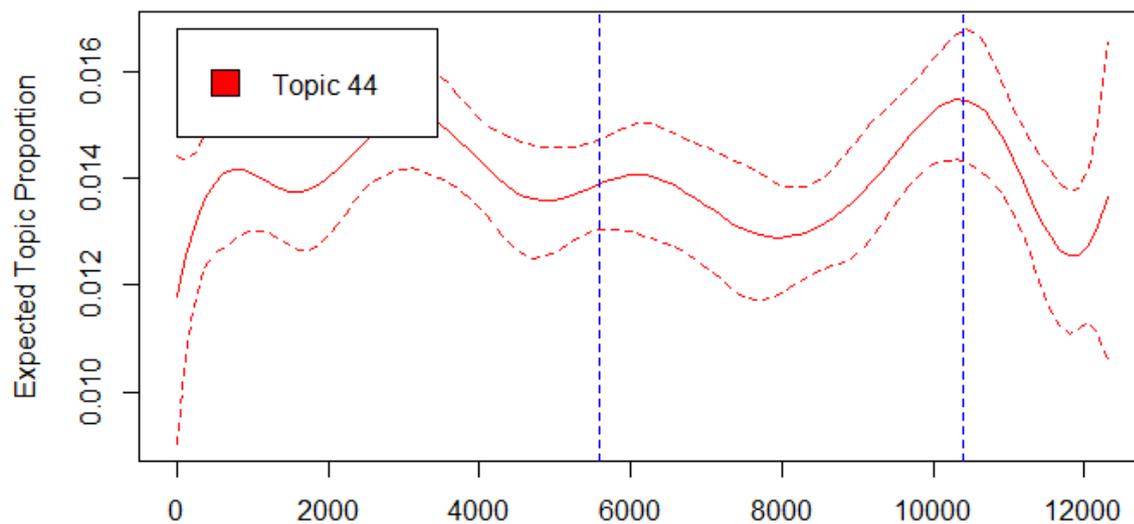


Figure 7: Prevalence of Topic 44 over time

The figure shows that the most articles on the examined topic were published in the summer months and in the last days of September, shortly before the elections.

B Context

Concerns about potential rigging of the upcoming parliamentary elections appeared on social media already in the first months of 2023. The Slovak Police Force had already warned against this on their page *Hoaxy a podvody* in February. In spring, the Ministry of Interior, the department responsible for the conduct of the elections in Slovakia, [responded](#) similarly. The Ministry repeatedly highlighted on social media (e.g. in [May](#) 2023, [June](#) 2023 and [September](#) 2023) a number of surveillance elements based on the applicable legislation.

In mid-May 2023, a [law](#) was adopted by the Parliament based on a proposal of MP Eduard Kočíš from *Republika*, under which municipalities and the Statistical Office would be required to publish election minutes on the internet. 95 MPs voted [in favour](#) of this law.

Initially, it was E. Heger's resigning government which was accused of the potential rigging of the elections by the opposition parties. After the appointment of the caretaker government of Ľ. Ódor

Progresívne Slovensko and the software company ESET became the target of these claims. In the past, the court [found](#) allegations of election rigging against ESET to be false.

On 29 May 2023, former Minister of Defence Jaroslav Nad' [said](#) that he had been informed that funding was provided by Russia to influence the elections in favour of *SMER-SSD*. However, he did not provide any evidence. Concerns about electoral bribery in marginalised Roma communities were also raised in the public discourse. This was addressed in a [video](#) of 27 September, for example, by the *Smer-SSD* candidates R. Takáč and T. Gašpar.

On Thursday 28 September, when the electoral silence period had already begun, a recording created by artificial intelligence appeared featuring the voice of M. Šimečka discussing the election rigging with the journalist of *Denník N*, M. Tódová. This recording was widely shared on Facebook by Peter Marček, a former MP of *Sme rodina* who helped found *Republika*. Also, it had been previously disseminated on the Telegram account of the former President of the Supreme Court of the Slovak Republic Štefan Harabin. The Investigative Centre of Jan Kuciak [revealed](#) that Štefan Harabin shared the recording originating from the private account of Gabika Ha, who had shared posts from the life and public appearances of Š. Harabin in the past.

On the day the recording emerged, Russian intelligence service SVR [issued](#) a statement saying that the US was trying to influence the Slovak elections.

Following the elections, none of the political parties mentioned election rigging any more. [Republika](#), which did not make it to Parliament with 4.75% of votes, acknowledged the election results. The election results were [not contested](#) by the winning party *SMER-SSD* either. None of the candidate parties indicated an intention to appeal to the Constitutional Court or contest the election results in any way.

NAKA also investigated the alleged cases of electoral bribery in marginalized Roma communities, where Roma candidates of the *OLaNO* coalition [gained](#) more than 90% of the vote in several districts. There were also voices that described the *OLaNO* campaign, promising that each voter would receive a reward amounting to EUR 500 after the elections, as electoral bribery. Police eventually [charged](#) three people with bribery in Roma settlements.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

In September 2023, *Demagóg.sk* [analysed](#) a [post](#) claiming that the 2022 local [elections](#) were rigged. According to this post, the parliamentary elections in September 2023 were about to be rigged as well. According to the author of the article, this was caused by “progressives” who were allegedly threatened with prosecution. ESET was also allegedly involved in the fraud. In reality, the Statistical Office, responsible for counting votes in Slovak elections, does not use any ESET products. The allegations of rigging of the local elections were equally unfounded. There was a number of errors during the elections, which were addressed by both Slovak courts and media. However, there is no evidence of extensive election rigging in favour of one of the parties. Similarly, the allegation that ESET interfered in the vote counting is unfounded, as previously [confirmed](#) by the District Court Bratislava II.

Police Force and prosecution of government nominees (Topic 49)

A Facebook posts

This topic focuses on the prosecution of several political leaders by the Police Force. The topic concerns mainly the conflict between several representatives of the Police Force and political representatives of *SMER-SSD*. Regarding the arrests of government nominees, the page of *SMER-SSD* [featured](#) the status of Ľ. Blaha, claiming that *Progresívne Slovensko* was using Š. Hamran, at the time the President of the Police Force. Ľ. Blaha accused Š. Hamran of not doing policing but politics. According to the author of the status, the prosecution of the former government's nominees was an effort to destroy *SMER-SSD*. Below the status, there was also a photograph of Š. Hamran together with the *Progresívne Slovensko* candidate Michal Truban, [published](#) by *SME* in November 2019. The status was also [shared](#) on local Facebook profiles of *SMER-SSD*.

Another piece of content belonging to this topic was a post of the current Minister of Interior, Matúš Šutaj Eštok. In the beginning of August, he [posted](#) on his profile a photograph from the Police Trade Union newspaper, which wrote about a dispute between Š. Hamran and I. Šimek, at the time Minister of Interior. In the status, M. Šutaj Eštok mentions statements made by the Head of the Police Trade Union, Miroslav Litva: "*Miroslav Litva, founder and former President of the Police Trade Union, is asking himself whether the Police Force is ruled by the mafia or just an organised group.*" M. Šutaj Eštok also claimed that the real reason for I. Šimko's departure was the transfer of the prosecuted Pavel Ďurka from NAKA to the Bureau of Inspection Service.

In the first half of August, the page *Podporujeme predsedu vlády Igora Matoviča* (Supporters of the Prime Minister Igor Matovič) [featured](#) a report on the arrest of *SMER-SSD* nominee T. Gašpar with the description "*NAKA MAKÁ*" (NAKA working hard). According to the post, he was arrested on corruption charges. The Police Force also arrested another former high-ranking police officer, R. Stahl. In early September, the same page [published](#) a list of nearly 60 names with the description "*list of prosecuted officials, government nominees and oligarchs (SMER/HLAS/SNS)*". The same status was also [shared](#) in the Facebook group entitled *Podporujeme Igora Matoviča* (Supporters of Igor Matovič).

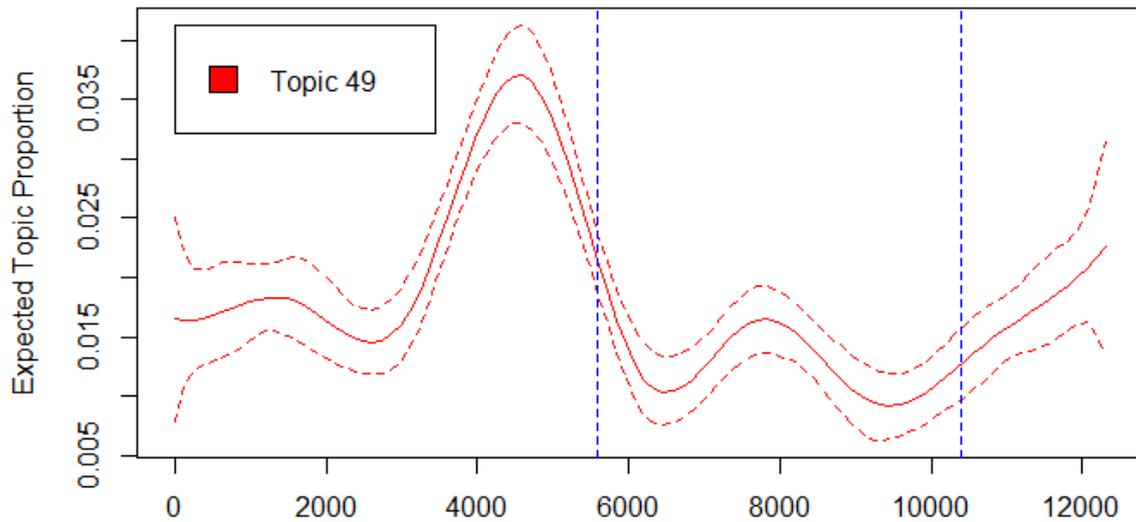


Figure 8: Prevalence of Topic 49 over time

As the figure shows, this topic was most prevalent throughout August and then declined sharply. Its increased prevalence was only observed from the end of the pre-election period, when the topic started gaining popularity again, growing steadily until the end of the examined period.

B Context

A recurring narrative before the elections involved cases of corruption surrounding *SMER-SSD* nominees. This topic resonated especially at the end of August 2023, after an [article](#) had been published by *Denník N* summarizing these cases. Subsequently, various politicians cited the figure of 42 convicted and around 100 accused persons in the pre-election debates.

Denník N summarized the cases of convicted persons and pointed out that not all of them were conditionally sentenced and only some of them “repented”, i.e. cooperated. The convicted were members of the Police Force, the Financial Administration, the Prosecutor General’s Office and the SIS, as well as judges and other officials. Entrepreneurs, lawyers and people associated with the mafia were also convicted of corruption.

In mid-August 2023, NAKA [charged](#) several people with forming a criminal group to obstruct investigation, including SIS Director Michal Aláč and the Director of the National Security Authority Roman Konečný. The President subsequently [removed](#) M. Aláč from the office on a proposal of the Government.

Ľ. Blaha, whose Telegram statuses are shared by *SMER-SSD*’s Facebook profiles, had already [criticized](#) the behaviour of the Police Force and law enforcement authorities on 16 August,

referring to Š. Hamran as “owned by *Progresívne Slovensko*”. Moreover, P. Pellegrini [described](#) the accusation of the SIS and NSA leaders as an attempt of the Police Force to influence the elections.

Awareness-raising campaigns and reporting on the conduct of the elections

Reporting on the elections, election polls and electoral scrutiny (Topic 4)

A Facebook posts

Topic 4 includes posts focusing on reporting on the conduct of the elections, presenting and commenting on election polls, and describing situations which occurred or problems which were addressed during the elections. Regarding reporting on the conduct of the elections, on the day of the elections, a “blind exit poll” for *TV Markíza* was [shared](#) on Facebook. The Police Force of the Slovak Republic [commented](#) on interventions, for example, during a mass brawl in the Prešov region, but also on the fact that “*police officers in Piešťany were called to a polling station in Piešťany where a 49-year-old woman received an envelope with a missing national emblem. The notifier was interviewed by the police and the event was documented as an offence against the public order in public administration.*”

eReport also contributed to this topic, [informing](#) in July 2023 about the function of election observer, explaining that it can be performed by anyone, as long as certain rules are observed.

B Context

On 1 June 2023, the Ministry of Interior launched an [awareness-raising campaign](#) on the parliamentary elections to be held on 30 September 2023, [aimed](#) at combating disinformation related to the conduct of the elections and their potential rigging. The Ministry regularly issued [press releases](#) on all important aspects of the elections, created an informative [website](#) and communicated via social media – on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [LinkedIn](#). For example, the Ministry said that the colour of the stamp on the ballot envelope or the way the [electoral commissions](#) work is not [important](#).

The events at the polling stations on the election day were covered by most media. TASR reported mainly on the conduct of the elections in different [regions](#) and [districts](#). The news agency described the conduct elections as regular and peaceful and [reported](#) an increased voter interest in some districts.

JOJ news portal reported on several incidents at polling stations. The most notable incidents included one [death](#), a damaged ballot box and allegedly [erasable pens](#) at polling stations.

Transparency of election campaigns (Topic 22)

A Facebook posts

Topic 22 was represented by posts addressing the transparency of political parties before elections. The main identified contributor to this topic was the non-governmental organisation Transparency International Slovakia (TIS), which also analysed the transparency of the election campaigns of individual parties prior to these elections, highlighting the issues it encountered during its research.

TIS [shared](#) on its Facebook page, among other things, that *“Smer is ignoring the idea of transparent accounts promoted by it in the past. Although its election campaign is one the largest ones, it provides almost no information about it.”* SMER-SSD transferred large amounts of money to its own company, *Agentúra Smer*, which provided the election campaign, and thus avoided disclosing details.

TIS also pointed out a [loophole in the law](#), which was exploited by György Gyimesi, a candidate running for *Aliancia*, who ordered billboards amounting to tens of thousands of euros shortly before the beginning of the official campaign. *“Such a massive (and seemingly legal) violation of the rules shows that it was a mistake to completely remove the possibility of third-party campaigning, which had been provided by the law,”* TIS stated.

On 25 August, TIS reviewed the [interim status](#) of campaigning transparency and reported that only four campaigns could be described as transparent. *“Prior to the early elections, the most transparent campaign is run by Progresívne Slovensko, while Smer is at the bottom,”* the NGO reported.

On 27 September, the organisation reported that the [most expensive campaign](#) was run by the trilateral coalition *OLaNO a priatelia – Kresťanská únia – Za ľuďi*: *“It is now clear that the trilateral coalition will run the most expensive official election campaign in history, the total expenditure of which, according to our calculations, could reach up to EUR 4.5 million, which is half of the EUR 9 million threshold for the three parties combined.”*

TIS's evaluation was based not only on data published by the candidate parties. These were also compared to data obtained from advertising agencies to check the actual costs of billboards, for example. In this regard, however, TIS [encountered](#) a lack of transparency and unwillingness to cooperate.

B Context

Transparency International Slovakia is the Slovak branch of Transparency International, a global network of organisations which monitor the transparency of institutions and fight corruption. It has been monitoring the [transparency of election campaigns](#), donors of individual parties and compliance with the law since 2019.

During the examined period, media focused mainly on the assessment of the parties' campaign funding transparency, which was published at the end of September. *TASR* [reported](#) that according to TIS, campaign transparency of most parties was lacking.

In the article, the news agency reported which parties performed the best and the worst. TIS also highlighted that up to half of campaign spending could be privately funded and that transparent accounts do not show all party donors.

TASR also [shared](#) the response of *SMER-SSD*, which objected to this assessment and described TIS as a politically active non-profit organisation.

Voting from abroad (Topic 36)

A Facebook posts

Topic 36 was one of the most consistently identified topics, represented almost exclusively by posts informing about voting from abroad. It can therefore be concluded that the campaign to motivate people to vote by mail from abroad was fairly extensive and, in terms of prevalence, successful. Foreign voters were encouraged to vote by a number of civic initiatives, state institutions, political parties, and individual candidates.

The most associated posts included the one from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [informing](#) citizens in late July that the time to register to vote from abroad was running out. In early September, the Ministry [shared](#) guidance on how to proceed when voting from abroad again.

Several civic associations drew the attention of their followers to the fact that the time to apply for voting from abroad was limited. *Post Bellum SK* [warned](#) its followers that the time for submitting applications would soon be over; the *Srdcom doma o.z.* (At home at heart) initiative [provided](#) guidance for students. This initiative also [urged](#) its followers to contact friends from abroad to remind them of this option. A video with the same message was also [shared](#) by the *Sebavedomé Slovensko* (Confident Slovakia) initiative.

The [OLANO](#) movement, [OKS](#) and candidates [Mária Šofranko](#), [Krisztián Forró](#), [Romana Tabak](#) and [Erika Jurinová](#) also informed citizens about voting by mail.

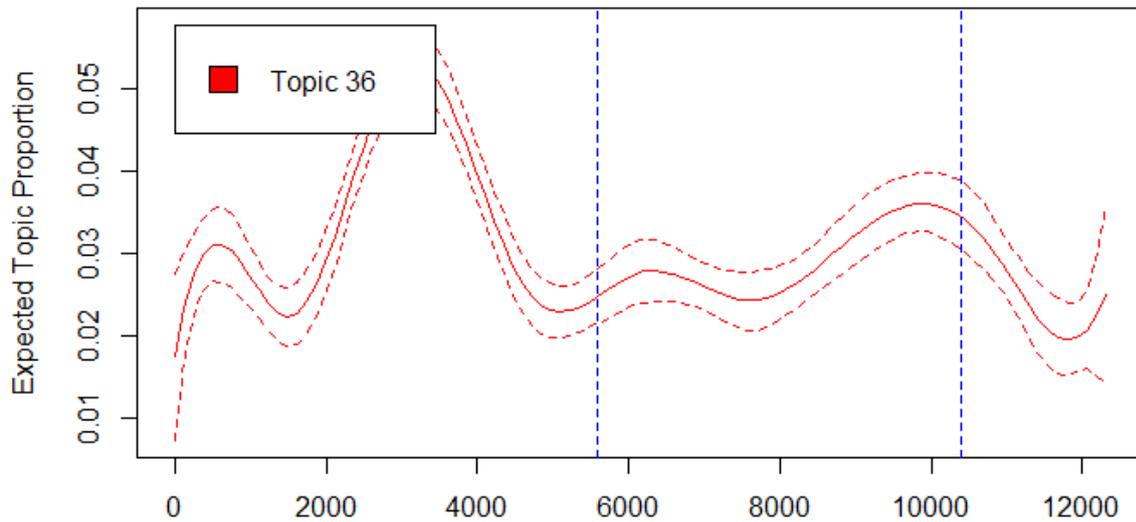


Figure 9: Prevalence of Topic 36 over time

The figure shows that this topic was prevalent especially in July and early August when the awareness-raising campaign was still ongoing. The prevalence of the topic subsequently dropped sharply, and voting from abroad was not discussed on Facebook again until shortly before the elections.

B Context

Several civic initiatives, particularly [Srdcom domq](#), [Chcem tu zostať](#) (I want to stay here) and [Sebavedomé Slovensko](#), focused on informing Slovak citizens living abroad about how to vote by mail from abroad and why it is important to do so. This topic was prominent on social media particularly in the days preceding 9 August, the deadline for registering with the Ministry of Interior.

Slovak citizens could [vote](#) by mail for the first time in the 2006 Elections for the National Council of the Slovak Republic. The 2023 parliamentary elections [were](#) thus the sixth ones with this possibility. In the 2020 election, 48,925 voters [voted](#) by mail. In 2023, 58,779 citizens [voted](#) from abroad, while 14,214 registered but did not exercise their right to vote.

Preferences of younger voters (Topic 43)

A Facebook posts

Topic 43 is mainly represented by various specific surveys that targeted young voters, or posts that commented on and described these surveys. The content that best describes the topic, and was thus identified as the most associated in the analysis, includes surveys of voting preferences among secondary and higher education students.

On 23 September 2023, [Denník Postoj](#) published the results of a survey among secondary education students, commenting that the results mainly reflect the preferences of grammar school students who participated in larger numbers, even though vocational schools prevail in Slovakia. According to the survey conducted among secondary education students, *Progresívne Slovensko* would clearly win the elections, with 48% of votes. The survey conducted among higher education students brought similar results. These results were contested by [Milan Kuriak](#), claiming that the results of the survey were misleading, without justifying his claim. The SNS candidate and, at the time of preparation of the report, Minister of Environment [Tomáš Taraba](#) described the survey as an internet poll and contested its representativeness.

In September, the [Chcem tu zostať](#) initiative published the results of a survey conducted among young voters concerning their support for Slovakia's NATO membership. Up to 64% of the young respondents are in favour of remaining in NATO while 21% are in favour of leaving. These results show that their attitude to Slovakia's membership in the alliance is more positive than that of the general population.

In July, SMER-SSD candidate [Zuzana Plevíková](#) criticized the involvement of *Chcem tu zostať* in the *Pohoda* festival and accused it of being supported by "Soros's NGO". Facebook page [Čo Vy na to, občania?](#) (What do you think, citizens?) also verbally attacked one of the NGOs – *Post Bellum* – and warned against its visits to Slovak secondary schools.

B Context

In August, *Focus* agency published the results of a [survey](#) which showed that young people under 30 would vote mainly for *Progresívne Slovensko* while SMER-SSD would barely make it to Parliament.

From 18 to 22 September, simulated [student elections](#) were held, organised by a national team of students with the support of the Bratislava Regional Youth Council. More than 21,000 students participated. The results differed from the public opinion polls conducted on national level at this time: among students, *Progresívne Slovensko* performed the best, with 48% of secondary education students who participated in the simulated elections saying they would vote for it. [Denník Postoj](#) [pointed out](#) that 39 grammar schools and 21 vocational schools participated in the elections, although there are more vocational schools than grammar schools in Slovakia, which is why the results cannot be generalized.

Young people were targeted by several campaigns, such the one of *Zmudri* and its guide for first-time voters, [Politika polopate](#) (Politics explained), or the joint campaign of *TV Markíza* and *Refresher* entitled [Nerozhoduj za mňa](#) (Don't Decide for Me). [Several SMER-SSD members](#) protested against these campaigns; Erik Kaliňák, for example, advocated for the right of young people not to be interested in politics and not to understand public governance.

The [issue](#) of lowering the voting age was also raised prior to the elections, as voting from the age of 16 in certain types of elections is now common in [some EU countries](#).

Geopolitical background

The influence of Hungarian actors on the elections (Topic 24)

A Facebook posts

Topic 24 represents one of the two identified geopolitical topics. It addresses the relations between Slovak and Hungarian representatives shortly before the elections. This topic was shaped by Slovak politicians from various parties, with the predominant narrative of criticising Hungarian government representatives for their statements about “seceded territories” or efforts to “influence the outcome of the elections” in Slovakia. Politicians from across the spectrum reacted to the statements and actions of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his Minister of Foreign Affairs Péter Szijjártó. These concerned both the Hungarian-speaking minority in Slovakia and the foreign policy situation.

SaS was one of the parties which contributed to this narrative, warning on Facebook in mid-August 2023 that it was [unacceptable](#) for the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs to defend former President of the Police Force T. Gašpar. T. Gašpar was [arrested](#) by NAKA on 11 August and charged with corruption. “This is over the line, which is why Juraj Droba asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs today to summon the Hungarian ambassador, who must explain and justify these actions.” In the week preceding the elections, politicians criticised Minister P. Szijjártó’s [visits](#) to several towns in southern Slovakia on Tuesday and Wednesday 26 and 27 September 2023.

Former Minister of Defence [Jaroslav Nad](#) from *Demokrati* also objected to the visit: “We consider it very unfortunate and unacceptable that literally a few days before our parliamentary elections, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary Péter Szijjártó is to visit the Slovak Republic (26 – 27/9) without prior consultation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, and actively participate in pre-election events in person.”

During the examined period, Orbán’s statement of 24 July 2023, referring to Slovakia and Romania as to seceded territories, was also criticised. R. Fico [responded](#): “I respect Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orbán as an excellent politician who rigorously defends Hungary’s national interests. We share the same opinions on the importance of the V4, on the vital importance of the veto in the EU, and on the war in Ukraine.” He described the controversial statement as a sign of Slovakia’s weakness, showing that foreign partners dare to use “similar vocabulary”. This is how statements of V. Orbán had been [explained](#) and defended by Igor Melicher from *SMER-SSD*.

At the end of July 2023, Miroslav Heredoš from *Republika* [addressed](#) in a video the Gábor Bethlen Foundation, used by Orbán to finance culture, sport and various events in southern Slovakia. He argued that politicians should be criticised and not blindly followed or admired. “This is also true of Viktor Orbán – politicians are subject to scrutiny and the webs of their economic or national interests should be publicly untangled!”

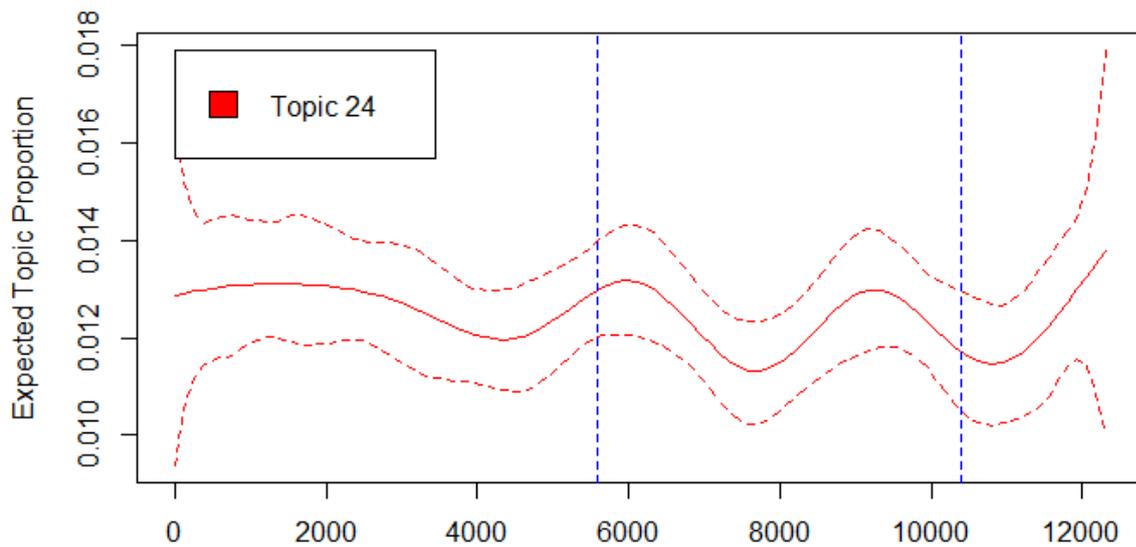


Figure 10: Prevalence of Topic 24 over time

An examination of the prevalence of this topic in the examined corpus shows that it is a relatively stable topic. Only two minor drops followed by subsequent increases were recorded – around mid-September and shortly before the elections.

B Context

Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the position of Hungary and V. Orbán, especially his relationship with Vladimir Putin as well as Hungary's decision not to supply arms to Ukraine, featured in public debate in Slovakia. Politicians from *Republika* and *SMER-SSD* referred to V. Orbán's attitude to the war as promoting peace and cooperation between East and West. Politicians also commented on fuel prices and inflation in Hungary.

In a speech in Romania on 24 July, Orbán [described](#) the territories in southern Slovakia predominantly populated by Hungarian population as "seceded parts of the country". The Ministry of Foreign Affairs subsequently summoned the Hungarian ambassador. Politicians from across the political spectrum objected to this statement.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

In March 2022, *Demagóg.sk* [analysed](#) the statement by Milan Uhrík, chairman of *Republika*, saying that "Slovakia, as opposed to Hungary's neutral stance, has become an active part of the US-Russian conflict in Ukraine." This is a false statement which was repeated many times in public discourse. Both Slovakia and Hungary are acting identically in respect of the war – as part of the European Union – they support Ukraine and are not neutral, but they have not actively

participated in the war. Hungarian [Prime Minister](#) V. Orbán and [Minister](#) of Foreign Affairs P. Szijjártó condemned Russian invasion and expressed solidarity with Ukraine. Although Hungary has [refused](#) to supply arms and military material to Ukraine and to [transport](#) them through Hungarian territory, it is participating in humanitarian, financial and military aid to Ukraine through the European Union. The ongoing war in Ukraine cannot be described as a conflict between the US and Russia, as the US [does not](#) carry out military interventions in the conflict, but provides assistance in form of weapons, financial aid, humanitarian aid and medical supplies. [Nor](#) did it support the declaration of a no-fly zone over Ukraine.

In October 2023, *Demagóg.sk* [analysed](#) a statement by M. Šimečka, who said in a discussion with A. Danko in the show *Na telo* on TV Markíza: “So Mr Danko is saying that today everybody is racing to be the first to go to Moscow because of some business contracts. Today, no one from the West, i.e. from EU Member States and the North Atlantic Alliance, goes to Moscow, except for the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs.” After the launch of the Russian military invasion in February 2022, many, especially Western states, tried to put the Russian Federation in international isolation. Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orbán is the only high-level [ally](#) of the Russian Federation in the European Union. In addition to V. Orbán, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs P. Szijjártó, who has [visited](#) Moscow five times since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, also maintains positive relations with Russia. At high level, V. Putin [met](#) only with the Austrian Chancellor who, however, was rather critical of the Russian President at this meeting. Of all NATO leaders other than the Hungarian Prime Minister, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is the only one willing to [meet](#) with V. Putin; however, many experts describe their relationship as a love-hate relationship.

Foreign policy orientation as illustrated by the war in Ukraine (Topic 41)

A Facebook posts

The last topic described and analysed in detail in this report concerns Slovakia’s foreign policy orientation, primarily illustrated by the war in Ukraine. However, this topic does not only deal with the war, but overlaps in a broader sense, for example, with issues related to Slovakia’s membership in NATO. Among the social network posts that shaped this topic, the status of Ľ. Blaha of June 2023 elicited a strong [response](#), stating that the “former Head of NATO” was considering sending troops to Ukraine.

In his status Ľ. Blaha asks whether it would result in Slovak people dying, answering this question in a later part of the status, stating: “Our fathers will die, our children will die.” This status was shared by several pages and groups, such as [Jednotné nezávislé Slovensko](#) (United Independent Slovakia) and [Ľuboš Jakobín Blaha mi dal ban](#).

In June 2023, a [post](#) concerning the NATO summit in Vilnius appeared. The author of the post claimed that the meeting was a trap for Russia and warned against war: “There’s a great war on the horizon, not only visible but also tangible. The developments surrounding Ukraine are heading in a very dangerous direction for all of us.”

In connection with this topic, the posts of *InfoVojna*, described by *Konšpirátori.sk* as a media outlet website containing problematic content, generated considerable engagement. One post [said](#) that an Italian diplomat had proven that the West is guilty of hypocrisy in relation to its activities in Ukraine. In other posts of September and October, the website [shared](#) statements that Slovakia is a key global player in the gradual disintegration of US influence in the West and in other parts of the world, or a [statement](#) by the Kremlin spokesman that Western fatigue with the conflict in Ukraine is bound to increase.

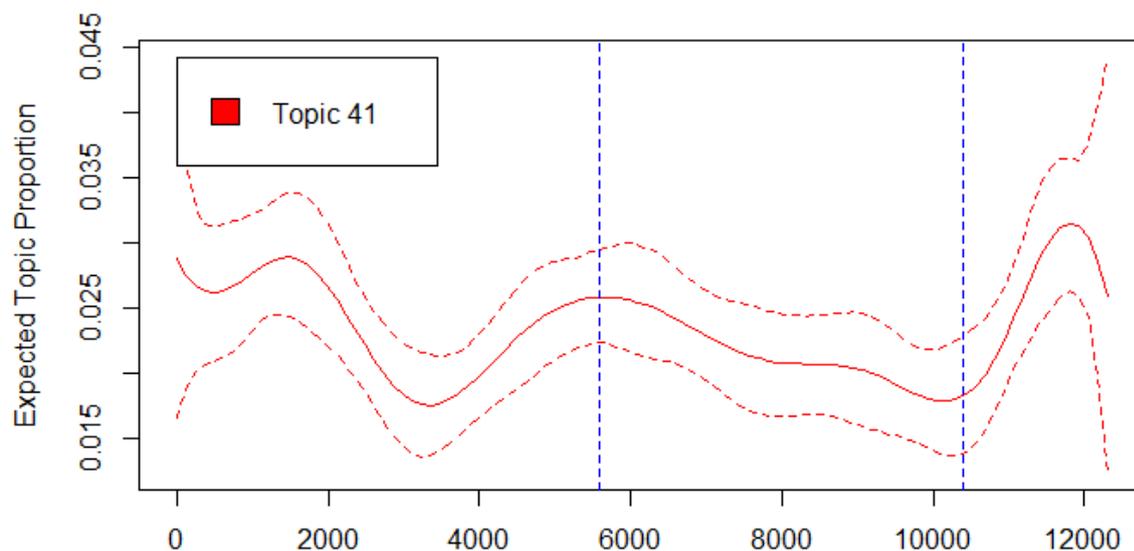


Figure 11: Prevalence of Topic 41 over time

This topic's development in the context of the examined dataset was rather surprising. One of its most notable periods was the first half of the summer. Subsequently, there was a sharp drop, followed by a surge of renewed interest in the topic. It reached its peak in early September. Eventually, the prevalence of this topic gradually declined until the day of the elections. This may be explained by the fact that it was overshadowed by other issues which warranted more attention in the month leading up to the elections. However, around the time of the elections and shortly after the elections, the prevalence of the topic increased again sharply.

B Context

One of the most prominent topics of the election campaign was the foreign policy orientation of the candidates and their opinion on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While a part of the political spectrum, especially the parties of the former coalition and *Progresívne Slovensko*, continued to promote robust support for Ukraine and sending military and humanitarian aid, *SMER-SSD* repeated that if it became a part of the government, it would not send a single [bullet](#) to Ukraine. *Republika* announced its [intention](#) to initiate referendums on withdrawal from the EU and NATO.

SITA [reported](#) in April 2023 that the war in Ukraine could affect the Slovak elections. According to the news agency, the war was bound to be an important topic especially for the opposition, which objected to the aid to Ukraine. SITA recalled that Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orbán used this topic in the elections to secure his office.

C Verification of the topic by *Demagóg.sk*

In February 2023, on the first anniversary of the launch of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, TA3 hosted a discussion in the show *Pozrime sa na to*. *Demagóg.sk* examined the factual statements of the chairman of SNS Andrej Danko, Ondrej Dostál from SaS, and the political reporter, Eduard Chmelár, at the time of preparation of this report advisor to the Prime Minister, and former SaS MP Martin Poliačik.

Two statements of A. Danko were identified as misleading. In the first one he [stated](#): “The same situation [as the invasion of Ukraine] happened in 1974 in Cyprus. Operation Attila, where the Turks arrived from one day to the next, occupied the territory, and a solution was found: a demilitarized zone.” However, these situations are not comparable. They differ not only the context but also in the scale of the conflict. In July 1974, a coup d’état supported by Greece [began](#) in Cyprus, with the National Guard [overthrowing](#) the government of President Makarios and appointing a new President. The goal was for Greece to annex Cyprus. There was fighting in Nicosia and Limassol, Cyprus’s second largest city. After five days, Turkey [launched](#) an invasion, invoking the treaties of 1960. It [justified](#) the invasion as an attempt to bring peace to the Turkish and Greek Cypriots. The annexation of Cyprus to another state would be contrary to the [treaties signed](#) by Greece, Turkey, the United Kingdom and representatives of the Turkish and Greek Cypriots. Moreover, the situation in Cyprus cannot be described as resolved, as the conflict is still ongoing, albeit frozen.

In another misleading statement, A. Danko [said](#): “Why does Zelensky have the Edelweiss military unit, why are they bringing Bandera back?” In February 2023, the Ukrainian Mountain Brigade was [awarded](#) the honorary title Edelweiss by President Volodymyr Zelensky for its merits. The unit was brought to [attention](#) of the public by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a social media post attempting to link it to the Nazi unit *Abwehrgruppe 218*, which [used](#) the name Edelweiss as a code name. In reality, edelweiss a symbol frequently [used](#) by elite mountain units. Throughout history, it was [used](#) not only by the above-mentioned Nazi unit, but also by a unit of the Russian army between 2011 and 2016. This title is also used by various national security and mountain rescue services in Croatia, Switzerland and Poland, among others. A. Danko is misleadingly questioning this unit as something non-standard which can only be found in Ukraine. By doubting the legitimacy of naming the unit after the mountain plant, A. Danko is attempting to manipulate his audience. Furthermore, A. Danko is probably [referring](#) to the commemoration of Stepan Bandera’s birthday by the Ukrainian Parliament in January 2023. S. Bandera is generally a highly controversial figure in Ukrainian history. Although he is considered a national hero by the Ukrainians, both Poland and Israel consider him a war criminal. In response to criticism, the Ukrainian Parliament [removed](#) the post commemorating S. Bandera’s birthday.

E. Chmelár [responded](#) to this with a false claim in a debate: “Anyone can look up the statement of former Israeli Prime Minister Bennett. Ten days after the beginning of the invasion, by mid-March,

peace talks had already been completed based on the Ukrainian proposal but were forestalled by the Americans and the British." In February 2023, former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett [gave](#) an [interview](#), a part of which was [disseminated](#) by several [media](#) outlets and Russian propaganda, suggesting that Western countries may have been the cause of the termination of peace talks between Ukraine and Russia in the previous year. However, N. Bennett denied it and said that the reason for the termination of the peace talks was the discovery of the massacres and mass graves in Bucha.

Results and conclusion

On Saturday 30 September 2023, Slovakia held early parliamentary elections, which were accompanied by an intense election campaign both online and offline. The aim of the report was to analyse and describe the narratives related to the Slovak parliamentary elections disseminated on Facebook from 10 June (the day of the announcement of the elections) to 15 October (two weeks after the elections). The present report aimed to analyse topics relevant for the elections based on statistical software and statistical modelling using unsupervised machine learning, as well as to provide a qualitative description of the selected election narratives. In order to obtain the necessary data and to preserve the objectivity of the CMS while strengthening the coordination with the civil sector, the non-profit organizations *Demagóg.sk* and *Infosecurity.sk* were involved.

The report suggests that quantitative content analysis of the posts can identify a wide range of topics shaping the public discourse. It is therefore a suitable tool for improving the understanding of the information environment, for example for the purposes of further systemic oversight by the regulator. The analytical tool used in our case identified 57 topics, providing us with a comprehensive overview of the diversity of discussion on Facebook.

Subsequently, 16 of the topics were selected for a detailed qualitative analysis. The remaining topics were excluded from the analysis due to their inconsistency, neutrality, lack of relevance to the parliamentary elections or because they constituted political campaigns. In order to improve the clarity of the report, the topics analysed in detail were divided into four categories. The “Attempts at challenging institutions” category contained five topics aimed at challenging or criticizing the activities of public institutions. These included, for example, the Ministry of Interior, the leadership of the Police Force and the Office of the President. In addition to more or less objective criticism of institutions, there was also a relatively high proportion of false and misleading information. This type of problematic information permeated, to varying degrees, about half of the topics examined in detail.

The next category was “Reporting on the activities of political parties affecting election-related topics”, which included five topics. The third category was entitled “Awareness-raising campaigns and reporting on the conduct of the elections” and included four topics. The fourth and last category, “Geopolitical background”, covered two topics. Due to the selected type of analysis, combined with the volume of data, it was impossible to detect unambiguous disinformative topics. The identified topics included posts which can be labelled as disinformative or misleading along with objective information.

The posts belonging to the most viral ones during the examined period are addressed in the report only to a limited extent. Due to the small sample size of the analysed viral content, it is not possible to draw clear and general conclusions. However, an evident trend can be observed showing that the prevalent posts were not automatically the most viral ones. Yet, some of the topics could be classified as both prevalent and viral. These include particularly posts which challenge public institutions and their activities, such as the Office of the President, the NAKA, the Specialized Prosecutor General’s Office and the Police Force. In addition to these, topics related to foreign policy orientation, primarily illustrated by the war in Ukraine, and migration-

related issues belonged to the viral and prevalent topics. The topics which had a high virality rate, but did not appear among the most prevalent, included vaccination, the rights of the LGBTI+ community, and criticism of the media and NGOs. These findings suggest that in order to gain a better understanding of the characteristics and nature of the information environment, it is necessary to examine not only the virality of posts, but also their prevalence. This is particularly important in a situation where there is no way for regulators to obtain more accurate data on the actual reach of individual posts on digital platforms, beyond the number of interactions.

An interesting finding beyond the predefined objectives of the report is the presence of content produced by individuals whose accounts were suspended due to repeated violations of Facebook's terms of use. A prominent example is the *SMER-SSD* MP Ľuboš Blaha, whose posts published on other platforms also tend to reach Facebook in large numbers. The content he produced was shared by other users and thus shaped four of the 16 analysed topics. This raises the question of whether the platform is able to effectively and adequately enforce its own measures regarding the adaptation of terms and conditions, their enforcement and content moderation.

The methods presented in this report can serve media regulators and other entities as a model for further research to understand the dynamics of social media discussions, both at national and supranational level. This can inform the development of effective tools for regulating and monitoring digital platforms. Given the transnational nature of social media, it is crucial to monitor how political topics are disseminated and interconnected across different EU Member States. In addition, given the entry into force of the EU's DSA, intermediary service providers are required to *"also focus on the information which is not illegal, but contributes to the systemic risks"* and to *"pay particular attention on how their services are used to disseminate or amplify misleading or deceptive content, including disinformation"*.²⁵ The potential dissemination of disinformation, manipulative information or other problematic content may indicate platform failures which, however, need to be exposed in the first place. This report can thus serve as guidance and impetus for further studies and research addressing specific aspects of digital policy in the European context.

Furthermore, this report can serve as a pilot large-scale collection and evaluation of election-related data. This also creates opportunities for further research in this area which could focus, for example, on topics related to the upcoming European Parliament Elections and the influence of content disseminated on content-sharing platforms on their integrity.

Like any other analysis, it has its limitations and must be read in the context of the rapidly changing social media landscape. However, we believe that our findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the way elections are communicated and discussed in Slovakia through Facebook. The report has also shown the potential benefits of cooperation between the media regulator and non-profit NGOs. This cooperation facilitated an enriching fusion of experience and knowledge from these two seemingly diverse environments. We would like to continue in similar

²⁵ Regulation 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act)(OJ L 277, 27. 10. 2022, p. 23).

efforts in the future in order to provide valuable insights for researchers, regulators and the general public interested in political communication in the digital age.

About the Council for Media Services:

The Council for Media Services is the Slovak national regulatory authority that oversees compliance with legislation governing broadcasting, retransmission, and the provision of audio-visual on-demand services and content-sharing platforms. The mission of the CMS is to promote public interest and exercise state regulation in defined areas, as well as to protect freedom of expression, the right to information, and the right of access to cultural values and education.

On the basis of Act No 264/2022 Coll. on media services, the CMS has the competence to prevent the dissemination of illegal content and to cooperate with digital platforms in the effective, proportionate and non-discriminatory application of their community rules and standards. The CMS has powers of systematic supervision and assessment of the appropriateness of public protection measures adopted by digital platforms with a presence in Slovakia.

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Collaboration with:

Demagóg.sk has been verifying the statements of politicians in public debate since 2010 and points out their false and misleading claims. Since 2023, when the project was certified IFCN (International Fact-Checking Network), it has also been working on debunking misinformation on social media networks.

Infosecurity.sk is a project aimed at controlling the information space regarding disinformation and security on social networks, in opposition to the activities of disinformation actors. The aim is to expose and refute dangerous and false content, enhance the information space, and build awareness of important societal issues.