

2023 elections and disinformation:

Analysis of the dissemination of misleading and deceptive content related to the 2023 Elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic



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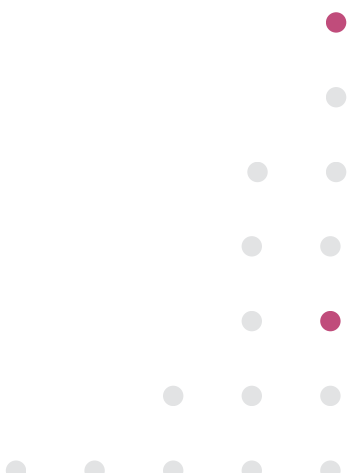
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Main findings and recommendations



— Main findings

False and misleading content about the transparency of the election processes, as well as the future results of the 2023 parliamentary elections, has been circulating in the information space since early 2023.

Such content had its greatest impact in the month of June and then shortly before the actual elections. This had the effect of diminishing the credibility of state institutions. The Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats at the Institute of Administrative and Security Analyses of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter “CCHT”) has long monitored narratives questioning the credibility of the elections and proposed recommendations to address the issue in regular analyses of the information space for the leadership of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. Awareness of the reality of this problem by the leadership of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic was reflected in intensified communication on the topic of election transparency, by conducting a special communication campaign, as well as by regularly publishing information about the elections on social media profiles.

Lack of communication from the State Commission for Elections on the course of the elections.

During the election day, the communication of the State Commission for Elections and Control of Political Party Financing (hereinafter “State Commission for Elections”) was limited to briefings, which took place several hours apart. In some cases (e.g., during the dissemination of disinformation which could go viral), the situation required a more prompt response, which in such cases was provided only by the Press Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic through its own communication channels. However, the cooperation between the State Commission for Elections and the Press Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic in communicating the evolution of the elections did not have clearly defined rules and division of competences and was carried out in an ad hoc and partly informal way.

Lack of cooperation between central government units.

The massive increase in the use of social media is also linked to the almost limitless possibilities for the dissemination of misleading and deceptive content about the elections. Such content has a high potential to mislead or alienate potential voters, call into question the credibility of the election results, as well as further deepen the socio-cultural divide in society. There is no working group within the central government authorities to systematically monitor and analyse the narratives disseminated about the elections and propose adequate measures. These measures would respond to possible activities threatening the course of the elections, the health and property of citizens, or the interests of the Slovak Republic. The monitoring of the information space during election day was based only on the personal initiative of central government employees. The absence of the working group has resulted in the fact that, if there was a need to verify the information captured, it was necessary to communicate with the State Commission for Elections indirectly through the Press Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. The lack of a direct communication channel slowed down and complicated the response of the competent authorities.

Lack of cooperation between social media and online platforms with state institutions.

Cooperation with social media and online platforms was insufficient given the increased intensity and severity of misleading and deceptive information disseminated just before and during the election day. This was reflected in a delayed and incomplete response to requests from the Council for Media Services to take action against misleading and deceptive content. The online platform Telegram did not even cooperate with the Council for Media Services.

— Recommendations

- **Before the next elections, ensure monitoring of the dissemination of narratives questioning the credibility of the election processes and respect the recommendations proposed by the monitoring unit.**

It is also important to communicate the credibility of elections regularly and transparently so that confidence in the election results is sufficiently high.

- **Ensure continuous and effective communication by central government units about the elections.**

As part of proactive communication with the public, the State Commission for Elections should create communication channels on social media and online platforms where it can not only keep the public informed about the current course of the elections, but also take suggestions and answer questions from the public. It could also use this channel for the pre-election information campaign in cooperation with the Press Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic. For the purpose of flexible communication it would be advisable to ensure the presence of a representative of the Press Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic at the State Commission for Elections during the election day. The Government Office of the Slovak Republic, as the strategic communication manager, should be an active amplifier of the communication of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic in real time at least during the election day.

- **Establish an interdepartmental working group to monitor and evaluate narratives related to the credibility of election processes.**

The establishment of such a group is based on [examples of good practice from abroad](#). The group should be equipped with the necessary tools to monitor the information space during the pre-election and election period and consist of at least members of the units dealing with hybrid threats, the State Commission for Elections, the Press Department of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic, the Police Force, the National Security Analysis Centre, the Council for Media Services (hereinafter "CfMS"), as well as the Strategic Communications Department of the Government Office of the Slovak Republic. It is essential to ensure cooperation with social media and online platform operators so that misleading and deceptive content questioning the integrity of elections is not disseminated in the information space. It is necessary to establish a continuous exchange of information between the units involved so that, in the case of notifications requiring an urgent response, the exchange of information is ensured without delay in real time. It is also necessary to set up mechanisms to ensure sufficiently flexible organisation of measures that would reflect possible activities threatening the course of the elections, the health, property of citizens, or the interests of the Slovak Republic.

> **Designate Digital Services Coordinator for the Slovak Republic as soon as possible.**

In view of the media coverage of the dissemination of content on social media during the election period, it is necessary to designate Digital Services Coordinator for the Slovak Republic. Taking into account the date of entry into force of the Digital Services Act (17 February 2024), it is important for the promoters of the regulation in question to designate a supervisory authority (Digital Services Coordinator) as soon as possible. This should be considered one of the legislative priorities of the new Slovak Government. In the future, the Digital Services Coordinator will also work with the supervisory authority designated under the Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising Regulation. This regulation should enter into force at European level before the European Parliament elections in June 2024.

Introduction

A pre-election campaign is an extremely sensitive period in any country and often becomes the target of various efforts to influence public attitudes or interfere directly in election processes by hostile foreign actors. In the recent past, there have been attempts in several countries to question the results of elections by spreading false and misleading information, sometimes leading to cases of physical violence (the attack on the United States Capitol Building or the occupation of government buildings in Brazil). In other countries there have been cyber-attacks on the election staffs of candidates or parties (France, Germany) and the subsequent publication of stolen documents, often altered in content so as to defame the candidate or cause public outrage (various "leaks" cases). For these reasons, the CCHT analysed the dissemination of narratives questioning the transparency and credibility of election processes, as well as attempts to interfere in elections through the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information intended to cause a specific consequence (disinformation).

At the same time, however, it was necessary to separate the legitimate activities of various entities promoting election participation (mobilisation campaigns) and informing the news media or individual political entities in the run-up to the elections from efforts to undermine the credibility and transparency of the elections or to manipulate public opinion by means of disinformation. The first group of activities is a legitimate part of political struggle in a democratic society, while the second falls into the category of deceptive and misleading content.

Therefore, the content of this analysis does not include activities related to the election campaign of individual political parties or their candidates, or media reporting on various social issues related to the programme and the election campaign. An exception is where such entities have also disseminated or adopted demonstrably false information aimed at undermining public confidence in the election process.

The 2023 elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic was also the first election during which the [EU Digital Services Act](#) (hereinafter "DSA") was in force; the Act entered into force on 25 August 2023. The DSA has imposed a set of obligations on so-called very large online platforms (online platforms with more than 45 million users in the EU) to prevent efforts to influence election processes and spread disinformation. The response of online platforms to efforts to influence elections through the dissemination of false and misleading information is therefore an important test of the functioning of the DSA as well as of the commitments contained in the [Code of Practice on Disinformation](#), to which almost all major online platforms are signatories.



The present analysis therefore includes both the response of central government units to the dissemination of misleading and deceptive information, as well as an analysis of the response of social networks and online platforms (META, YouTube, TikTok) to such incidents of disinformation dissemination. However, a particular problem remains the Telegram platform, which does not fall under the DSA and at the same time is not among the [signatories](#) of the Code of Practice on Disinformation.

Questioning the 2023 parliamentary elections



An increased number of posts questioning the credibility of the 2023 parliamentary elections have already been seen on the social network Facebook in early 2023. The spread of such narratives in society has also been reflected in opinion polls. For example, the [AKO survey](#) of 27 April 2023 shows that **41% of respondents fear that the upcoming parliamentary elections will be rigged**. In the [IPSOS survey](#) published on 29 May 2023, **as many as 53% of respondents expressed concern about election fraud**.

In the run-up to, during and after the elections, there have been various narratives questioning the integrity of the elections, their course, and even specific claims that these elections will be rigged just like the previous ones. In the reporting period from May to September 2023, the number of posts questioning the credibility of election processes, as well as their impact, increased significantly.

In total, more than 240 posts relevant to questioning the election **were recorded on Facebook**.



- > These were primarily posts giving the impression that the elections would be rigged.
- > False information about the elections also appeared to a lesser extent (8% of the recorded posts).
- > A small number of posts called for violence if the elections were rigged.
- > **Most of the posts on this topic were published in the months of May and June, when more than 250 posts were published on Facebook alone, with a total of more than 1.3 million views.**
- > In total, posts questioning the credibility of election processes **on the social network Facebook alone had more than 3 million views** in the period under review.

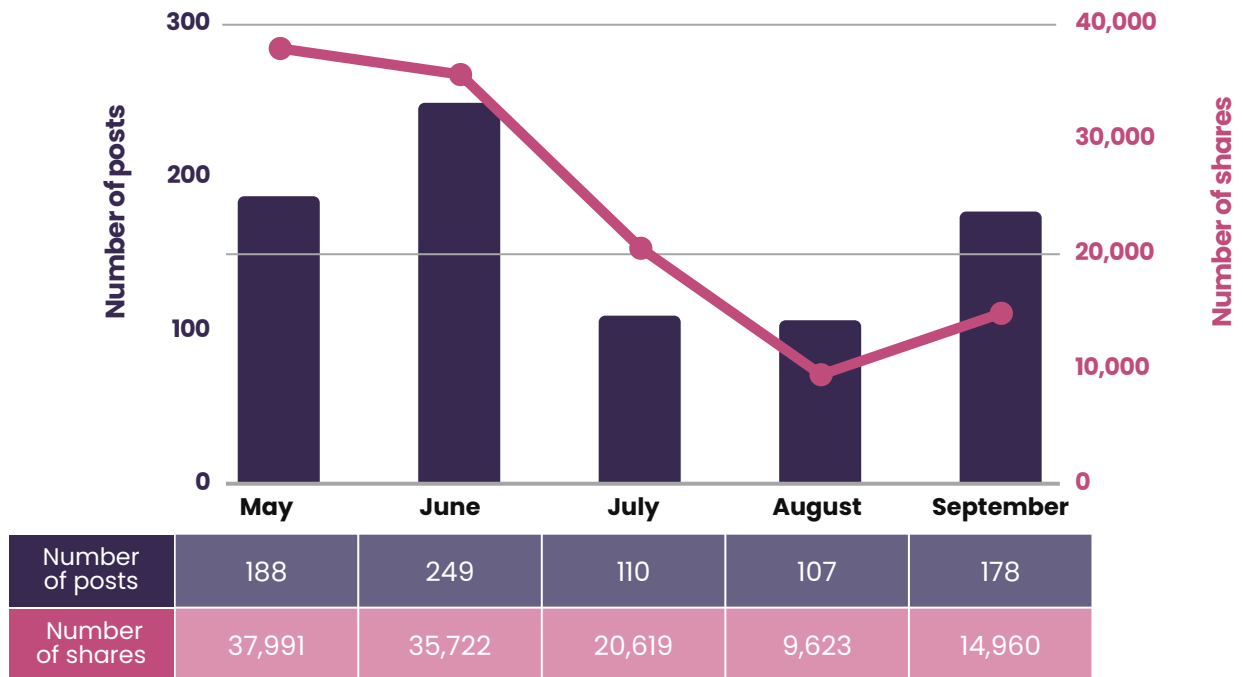
As of August 2023, there were over 270 posts and comments **on the online platform YouTube** that promoted these narratives.



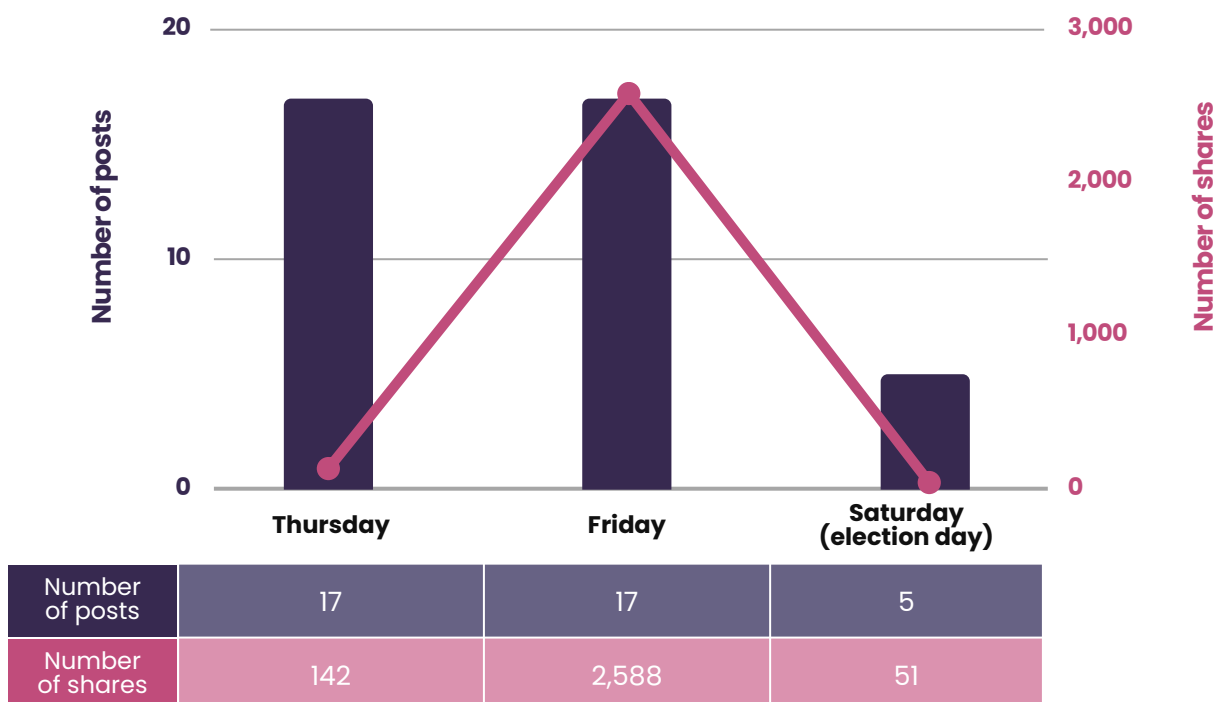
- > In the posts alone, narratives questioning the integrity of the elections were only minimally present, **but were especially prevalent in the comments below individual posts.**
- > The number of posts increased from time to time and their quantity did not change significantly, but most comments were recorded in the week before the elections to the National Council of the Slovak Republic.

Continuing to question the credibility of the elections were calls for a parallel vote count (during the monitoring period), which had over 120 thousand views. **Outside of social networks, the parallel count widely promoted and organised on [websites](#).** It should be added, however, that the parallel count activities were not brought to a successful conclusion; such a count was carried out only on a small scale and could not be organised on a nationwide level.

**Number of posts and total number of shares of posts
questioning the credibility of the election**
(before the elections)



**Number of posts and total number of shares of posts
questioning the credibility of the election**
(during the moratorium and on election day)



Most prominent misleading and deceptive content disseminated before and during the 2023 parliamentary elections



1 Deepfake Šimečka – Tódová

Significant impact
on the credibility of elections

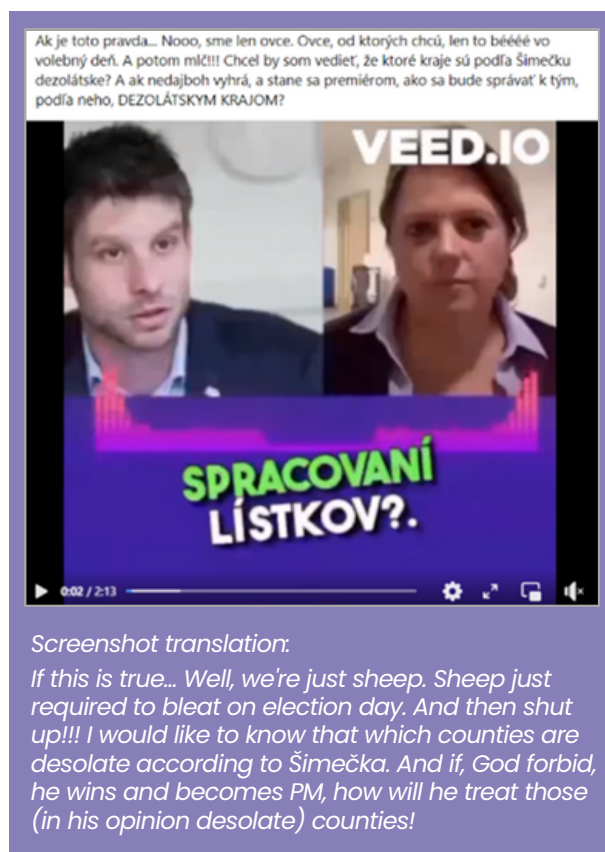
Shortly before the elections, there was a proliferation of so-called deepfake recordings, i.e., purposely edited videos, manipulated audio recordings and fake images generated by artificial intelligence. Manipulated videos or images have the potential to influence voter opinion.

On 28 September 2023, at approximately 12:00 (noon), a video began circulating on social media that purported to capture an alleged conversation between the chair of the political party Progresívne Slovensko (hereinafter "PS") and journalist Monika Tódová. **The subject of this conversation was supposed to be the manipulation of the elections** in favour of the PS through polling stations or the manipulation of votes in Roma settlements. However, this recording was a fake created by artificial intelligence, which was assessed by several experts on the basis of voice intonation or pauses in the interaction. The claim that the video was a fake was also frequently made in comments on social media, yet some of the population believed it.

The video went viral on Telegram in several Slovak groups and channels, from where it was subsequently shared on TikTok, Facebook and YouTube. The exact number of shares and views cannot be quantified, but **cumulatively the video has probably been shared more than 5,000 times.** In addition to being disseminated as a post, it was often added to the comments of other posts on the social network Facebook, for example. The video was disseminated and also shared as a printscreen. The transcript of the video was in turn disseminated in the form of chain emails.

The origin of the video, its author, or the time it was made could not be identified.

The aim of such a video was not only to defame a particular political party, but also to call into question the transparency and integrity of the parliamentary elections.



Response of the Slovak central government:

In monitoring the online space, CCHT identified the dissemination of the above deepfake video, which it sent as a notification to CfMS. CfMS informed social media and online platforms Facebook, YouTube and TikTok about posts with this content. They subsequently either blocked or deleted the content. However, the deepfake recording in question is still available on the online platform Telegram.

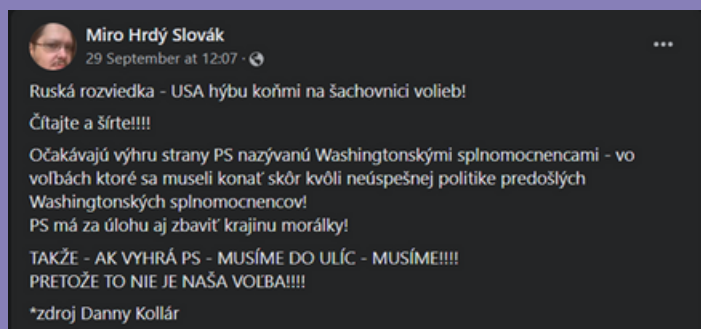
Table 1: Number of escalations sent to individual social networks and online platforms on the Šimečka-Tódová deepfake video in question, source CfMS

Social network and online platform	Deleted	Marked as false	Available online after 30 September 2023	Total
Facebook	13	13	22	48
TikTok	10			10
YouTube	1			1
X		1		1
Total				60

2 Report of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation SVR

**Significant impact
on the credibility of elections**

On 28 September 2023, at the time of the election moratorium, the information of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR) about the interference and influence of the elections by the United States of America began to circulate through social media. On 28 September 2023, the SVR published on its website a [press release](#), claiming that the US is trying to influence the course of the elections in the Slovak Republic in various forms (e.g., by intimidation, coercion, bribes) in favour of the PS, which the press release describes as an ally of the US. If successful, party chair Michal Šimečka was to be instructed by the US to form a government absolutely loyal to Washington, the aim of which would be to develop so-called Euro-Atlantic values. The report was picked up by several Russian state media and disseminated via social networks in Slovakia. **It was published at a time when there was an electoral moratorium in the Slovak Republic, during which the ability of parties or the media to respond to disinformation is severely limited.**



Screenshot translation:

Russian Intelligence – The US is the puppet master behind the elections!

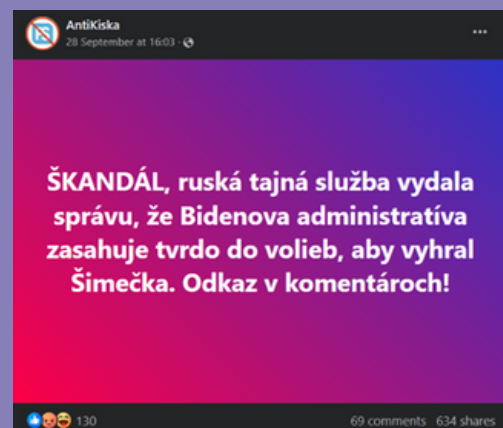
Read and spread the word!!!

Expecting a victory for the PS party called the Washington representatives – in the elections that had to be held earlier because of the failed policies of the previous Washington representatives!

The PS is also tasked with ridding the country of morality! SO – IF THE PS WINS – WE MUST TAKE TO THE STREETS – WE MUST!!!

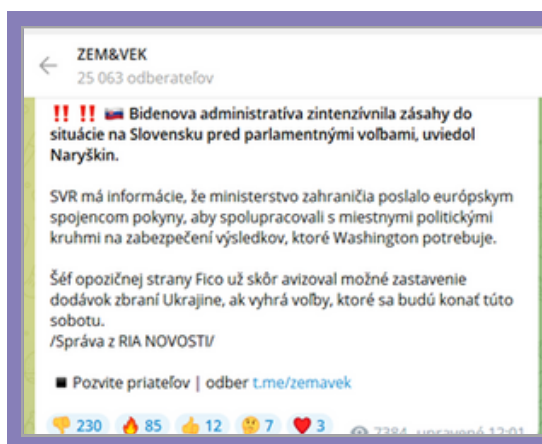
BECAUSE IT'S NOT OUR CHOICE!!!

**source Danny Kollár*



Screenshot translation:

SCANDAL, the Russian intelligence service has released a report that the Biden administration is intervening heavily in the election to make sure that Šimečka wins. Link in the comments!



Screenshot translation:

ZEM&VEK

25,063 subscribers

The Biden administration has stepped up interference in Slovakia ahead of the parliamentary elections, Naryshkin said.

SVR has information that the Department of State has sent instructions to European allies to work with local political circles to secure the results Washington needs. The head of the opposition party, Fico, has previously announced a possible halt in arms shipments to Ukraine if he wins the election, which will be held this Saturday. /Report from RIA Novosti/

Response of the Slovak central government:

According to the [statement of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic](#) for Aktuality.sk, the ministry of diplomacy registered the press release and evaluated its impact on the Slovak infospace during the moratorium. **On Monday, 2 October 2023, a representative of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Slovakia was summoned due to false statements made by Russian intelligence that call into question the integrity of free and democratic elections in Slovakia.** The Slovak Republic considers such deliberately disseminated disinformation to be **inadmissible interference in the election process.**

3 Deepfake of Šimečka on beer price hikes

Low impact
on the credibility of elections

On 25 September 2023, a deepfake recording of PS chair Michal Šimečka appeared on Instagram, in which he talked about the need to raise beer prices in Slovakia in order to fight alcoholism. The recording went on to go viral via WhatsApp, on Facebook and on Telegram. However, it is a fake – the recording was created by an artificial intelligence and its creator has not been identified. While artificial intelligence services have been used in election campaigns, namely the voices of other political leaders or the President of the Slovak Republic, the spreading recording was **the first incident of the use of artificial intelligence to reduce support for a particular political party, to spread disinformation, and to do so without possible attribution.**

Response of the Slovak central government:

CCHT has notified CfMS of the occurrence of posts identified as potentially damaging disinformation. CfMS subsequently escalated the posts to the relevant platforms with suspected violations of their terms of use. 3 posts on the TikTok platform were identified and subsequently deleted by the platform.



Screenshot translation:

THEY WANT BEER TO BE SEVERAL TIMES MORE EXPENSIVE!!!

EVERY SLOVAK MUST LISTEN, EVERYONE SHARE!!!

Did you know that Progresívne Slovensko wants to increase beer prices several times?

4 Narrative about red stamps

Low impact
on the credibility of elections

On 21 September 2023, in the run-up to the elections, social media started circulating messages stating that it was a **necessity to have the municipality's red stamp on the election envelope. Any other colour of stamp was deemed fraudulent and invalid**, with citizens being urged to call the police in such cases. This information was noted in 16 posts over the following days. Reports about the colour of the stamp are not based on the truth, as **the colour of the stamp is not regulated by law**. If the stamp is a colour other than red, this does not invalidate the envelope.

A number of citizens contacted the police on the basis of the dissemination of this narrative on the election day (e.g., in Bratislava, Michalovce, Levice, Žilina) on the grounds that the ballot envelopes did not have a red stamp.

Dôležitá správa /dostal som do komentárov/: "POZOR , pozor, pozor! hlavne poučte ľudí, nech skontrolujú, či obálka, ktorú idú vhodit' do volebnej urny, má červenú pečiatku! Každá iná farba alebo bez pečiatky, bude VYRADENÁ a hlas automatický neplatný!"

Screenshot translation:

An important message (I got it in the comments): "CAUTION, caution, caution! ... above all, instruct people to check that the envelope they are going to drop into the ballot box has a red stamp! Any other colour or no stamp will be DISCARDED and the vote automatically invalid!"

Response of the Slovak central government:

The [Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic](#) and the [Police Force of the Slovak Republic](#) published on 30 September 2023 posts on their Facebook profiles **explaining and refuting the false claims about the stamps**. These responses were shared only within the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, there was no collaboration with other ministries and offices, and therefore this communication did not have a large impact (306 interactions, 147 shares).

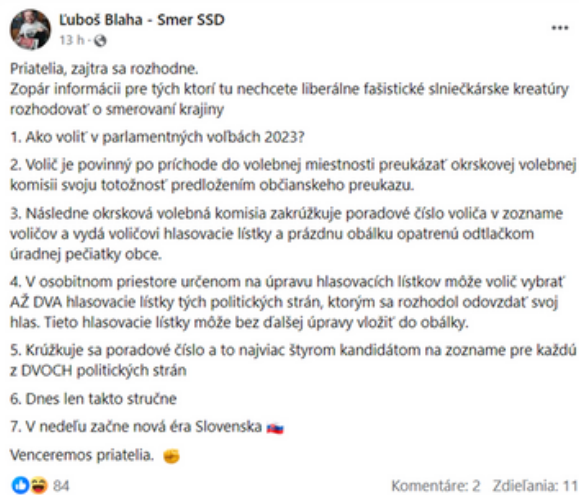
5 Misleading information about elections on a politician's fake profile

Low impact
on the credibility of elections

Several social media posts contained misleading information about the course of the elections. One of such posts was also a post on the profile of Ľuboš Blaha – SMER SSD, where it was stated that it was possible to cast your vote for two political parties. **This profile was, however, declared false and was subsequently cancelled by META**. There have been a number of such posts and they have been published from a number of profiles, often as satire.

Response of the Slovak central government:

The content was shared with CfMS, with the posts in question being escalated to the relevant platforms due to suspected breaches of the platforms' terms of use. The content in question was deleted on Facebook.



Screenshot translation:

Luboš Blaha – Smer SSD

Friends, the decision will be made tomorrow.

A few pieces of information for those who don't want liberal snowflake creatures to decide the direction of the country.

1. How to vote in the 2023 parliamentary elections?

2. Upon arrival at the polling station, the voter is obliged to prove his identity to the district election commission by presenting his identity card.

3. Subsequently, the district election commission circles the voter's serial number in the list of voters and issues the voter ballots and an empty envelope with an imprint of the municipality's official stamp.

4. In a special area designated for editing ballots, the voter can select UP TO TWO ballots of the political parties to which he has decided to cast his vote. He can put these ballots in an envelope without further modification.

5. A number is circled for a maximum of four candidates on the list for each of the TWO political parties.

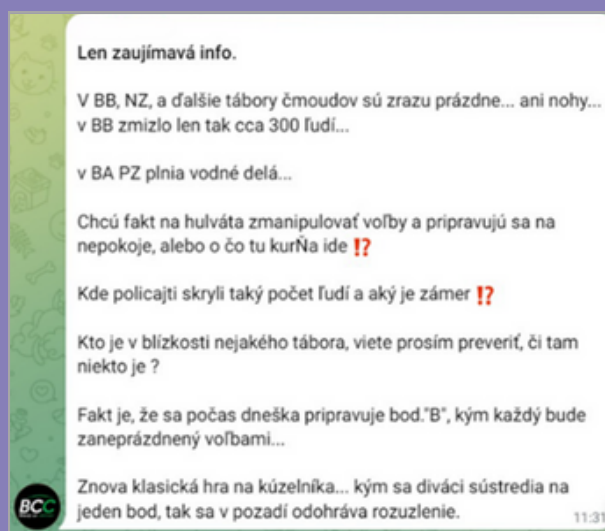
6. Today only briefly.

7. A new era of Slovakia will begin on Sunday
Venceremos, friends.

6 Government prepares for riots

Low impact
on the credibility of elections

On 30 September 2023, a post was published on the Telegram raising suspicions that the Police Force are preparing for riots sparked by the Slovak government's efforts to rig the elections.



Screenshot translation:

Just interesting info.

In BB, NZ, and other smokes camps are suddenly empty... no one's around... in BB, about 300 people just disappeared...

The police in BA are filling water cannons...

They really want to rig the elections like jerks and are preparing for riots or what the hell is this all about!? Where did the police hide such a number of people and what is the intention?

Who is near a camp, can you check if anyone is there? The fact is that point B is being prepared today, while everyone is busy with elections...

A classic magician's game again... while the audience is focused on one point, the unraveling takes place in the background.

Response of the Slovak central government:

Given the low level of dissemination, the above narrative was only monitored.

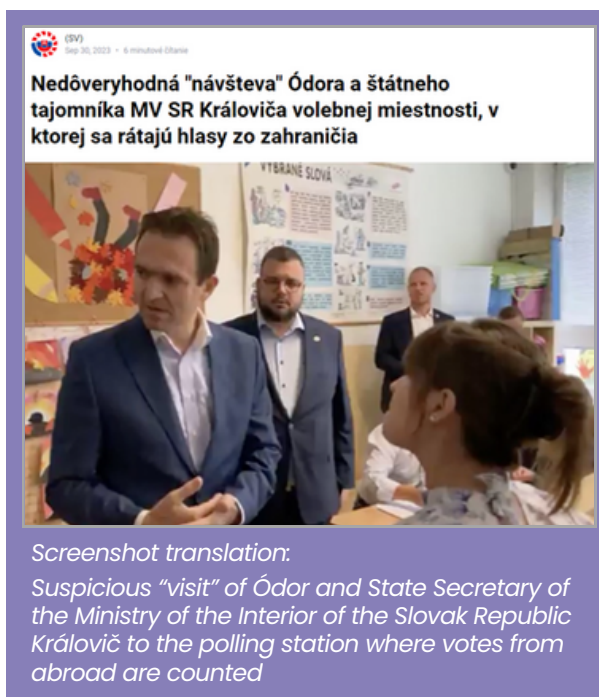
7 Vote rigging from abroad

Low impact
on the credibility of elections

Following the publication of photos of Prime Minister Ódor and the State Secretary of the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic visiting a polling station where votes from abroad were counted, there were several voices on the Telegram describing the visit as suspicious. According to them, the credentials and roles of the Prime Minister and the State Secretary in the room were not explained and the visit raised doubts about the integrity of the elections. The same concerns were expressed in an article published on the website [Slovenský večerník](#).

Response of the Slovak central government:

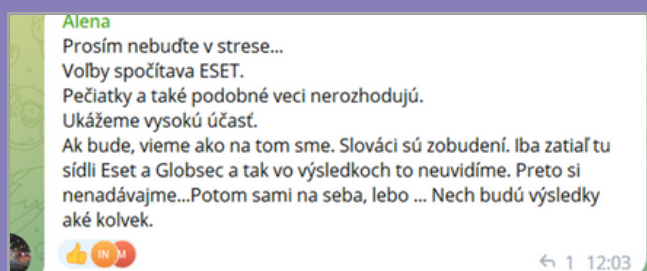
Due to the low level of dissemination, the above narrative was only monitored.



8 ESET rigs the elections

Low impact
on the credibility of elections

An ever-present narrative recurring in Slovak elections is the rigging of elections by ESET. This narrative was also present to some extent before the last elections, whether in connection with the CIA or Slovak government officials. **During the election day, however, the only major disturbance occurred when the moratorium was extended as a result of the events in the polling stations.** The extension of the moratorium was perceived by some social media users as a pre-arranged time to rig the elections.



Response of the Slovak central government:

The public was informed about the impossibility of rigging the elections through electronic counting in a speech by the Director of the Department of Elections, Political Parties and Referendum of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic on the current elections. Explanatory reports on the subject have been published by the Press Department of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, as well as the Police Force website.

9 Incidents at the polling station

**Low impact
on the credibility of elections**

In some cases, the above-mentioned misleading and deceptive information resulted in incidents at polling stations, which had to be dealt with directly by members of the election commissions or even by summoned members of the Police Force.

In a number of cases there were human errors that led to an incorrect number of ballot papers (e.g., ballot papers of some political parties were missing and others occurred twice). Some of this misconduct has been portrayed on social media as incidents of deliberate manipulation.

Doubts were also raised by other posts, particularly in the Telegram app, which described allegedly unsealed ballot boxes or the possibility of removing ballot papers from the box to be thrown away.

10 Narratives disseminated after the parliamentary elections

After the results were counted, narratives questioning the integrity of the election were very low, but none of the claims received more attention on social media.

Specifically, the collecting of votes of marginalised groups has been questioned, resulting in accusations of election corruption circulating in the information space.

Reaction of social media and online platforms

Despite declarations by representatives of social media and online platforms about their readiness to prevent the influence on elections by spreading disinformation, their response to the notifications sent was slow, ineffective and, above all, insufficient. Several online platforms (notably META) failed to remove posts containing demonstrably false and misleading claims (disinformation) in a timely manner, resulting in their further dissemination and sharing.

Inconsistency in access to the same content is also a major problem. As data from the Council for Media Services shows, the same content has sometimes been assessed as breaking the rules and removed, other times as not breaking the rules and left unchanged or just flagged as fake.

The fact that the online platform Telegram has demonstrably become a major source of the dissemination of misleading and false information with an impact on the course of the elections, but is not subject to the obligations under the DSA and is not a signatory to the Code of Practice on Disinformation, can also be considered a very serious problem. As this analysis has shown, the Telegram platform was the primary source from which disinformation was spread in the context of the elections. This situation will therefore require a more comprehensive solution at EU level.



Conclusion

In terms of the credibility of election processes, the past parliamentary elections confirmed, among other things, the great potential for misuse of social media to disseminate not only necessary relevant information, but also misleading and deceptive information. Such information can critically undermine the credibility of state institutions as well as confidence in the election results.

The response of the Slovak central government to the dissemination of misleading and deceptive content had its pros and cons before and during the elections. This is partly due to a lack of awareness of the importance of protecting the information space by central government authorities. This has meant that despite the fact that social media have been an important communication tool for the dissemination of information for almost a decade, it was not until 2022 that the Slovak Republic started to deal more seriously with the issue of hybrid threats (the establishment of specialised services on the basis of an EU project).

Basic documents such as the Strategy for Countering Hybrid Threats and the Concept for Building Public Administration Resilience to Hybrid Threats are currently being prepared at the central government level to contribute to a comprehensive solution to the issue of the general government's resilience to hybrid threats, including the protection of election processes and the credibility of elections.

