

EUROPEAN ELECTIONS IN THE V4

From disinformation campaigns to narrative amplification



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METHODOLOGY

Data were collected between 10.4.2019 and 29.5.2019 from 15 relevant Facebook pages in each V4 country based on the following criteria: local experts and publicly available sources (such as blbec.online) identified Facebook channels that often publish disinformation content. In the selection of Facebook pages, those openly affiliated with a specific political party were omitted, including the Facebook pages of individual candidates. The data were filtered using different forms of the term “election” in local languages and the term “euro”, and then labelled based on the sentiment toward relevant political parties and the most prevalent narratives identified.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The main finding of this research is related to an observed tactical change in information operations on the monitored channels in the V4 states. Although disinformation content still plays a non-negligible role in the region, the general trend is a shift to a new technique—the deployment and amplification of divisive narratives. Such narratives framing “migration as an existential threat to Europe” and depicting the EU through the lens of a “Brussels dictate” directly support the agendas and worldview of many extremist political parties in the region. Their interests are thus promoted without having to explicitly mention them. The same applies to direct foreign interference in the pre-election debate on social media. Instead of using foreign state propaganda and obvious disinformation, a more subtle approach is being used. Narratives such as a weak EU, restrictions of freedoms, nations and traditional values under threat, etc. are created, nurtured and amplified in line with the strategic interests of hostile state actors.

The method of narrative amplification consists of choosing a divisive subject and selectively framing the facts around it within a constant stream of one-sided posts to suggest an alarming development that is allegedly deliberately being overlooked by mainstream media. In this manner, the narrative of “migration as a threat” has played a dominant role across the V4 region, with the sole exception of Poland. This narrative was promoted by selective reporting of alleged criminal acts carried out by migrants of African or Arab origin or simply of a different skin colour. The inflammatory posts then generalise this individual behaviour to apply a characteristic of “natural criminality” to whole populations. This tactic is very effective because it does not represent a clear-cut disinformation practise that can be easily disproven.

Czechia

In Czechia, the Russian state-owned outlet Sputnik.cz has been the most influential throughout the monitoring period. With more than 41,000 followers, it has actively promoted anti-EU narratives and given space to promote the interests of the extreme far-left (KSČM) and far-right (SPD) parties.

In both Czechia and Hungary, the results of the EP elections were interpreted by the monitored channels as a clear win for the Eurosceptic parties, although in the official results the liberal group ALDE (Renew Europe) gained the most in these elections, with 37 additional seats in the EP, followed by the Greens/EFA group, with 23 new seats.¹ This is another example of factual manipulation aiming to portray the influence of populist nationalistic parties as beyond their actual scope.

Hungary

Hungary is the outlier in the region, as the EP election period was characterised by intense disinformation campaigns and the spread of conspiracies among other channels, even pro-government mainstream media. They played a large role in the EP campaign, portraying the ruling Fidesz-KDNP coalition in a positive light while, unsurprisingly, the opposition parties were attacked and criticised.

Poland

Unlike in Hungary, the portrayal of the ruling Law and Justice party in Poland was much more negative than positive on the monitored channels while the far-right Confederation Korwin group was portrayed the most positively of all the parties. This confirms the general trend across the V4 region in which the politics of division are promoted on the monitored channels to cause further polarisation and fragmentation on the national as well as European levels.

Slovakia

In Slovakia, the recipient of the most positive treatment on the monitored Facebook channels was the extreme far-right Kotleba-ĽSNS, which campaigned on a strong anti-immigration agenda despite the fact that migration

¹ <https://www.election-results.eu/tools/comparative-tool/>

to Slovakia is a non-existent issue.² Interestingly, in the recent Slovak presidential election, Kotleba-ĽSNS's party leader was often criticised on the monitored channels while another populist candidate with a higher chance of succeeding in the presidential election was actively promoted. In the EP elections, Kotleba-ĽSNS was promoted at the expense of Boris Kollár's Sme rodina party, which ran a campaign with a very similar anti-migration agenda. The likely explanation for this is that the monitored channels that often publish disinformation or controversial content arbitrarily support the extreme political representative with the higher chance of succeeding in a given election.

² <https://www.iom.sk/en/migration/migration-in-slovakia.html>

ACTIVITY OF THE MONITORED CHANNELS ACROSS THE V4 REGION

Intensity of the campaigns

The activity across the monitored Facebook channels differed significantly between the countries. While Hungary experienced an intense information campaign in relation to the EP elections, with almost 4,000 relevant posts, in Czechia, the activity of the monitored channels was much milder, with only 262 relevant posts. During the monitoring period, 272 and 501 posts in Poland and Slovakia, respectively, were related to the EP elections.

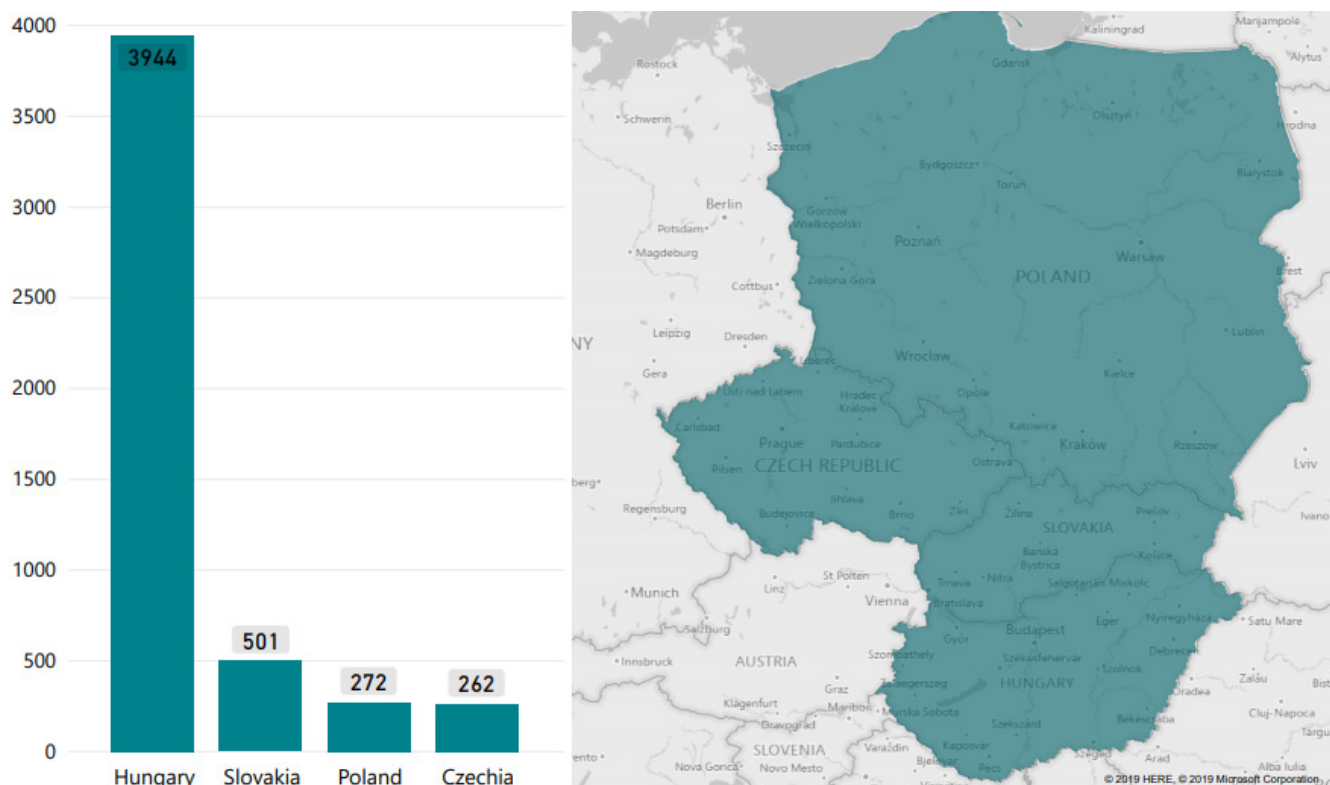


Figure 1: The number of posts published in each country in relation to the EP Elections

The most recurring narratives

Even though the monitored channels across the V4 region also published and promoted country-specific narratives, such as those related to Fidesz's membership in the European People's Party (EPP) or the JUST Act in Poland,³ the majority of the narratives overlapped the V4 countries. The most dominant one in relation to the EP elections was "migration as a threat", which was resuscitated as an existential issue in each country, perhaps with the exception of Poland, where it played a limited role. The second most recurring narrative was a general sustained negative portrayal of the EU and its institutions, as well as the effort to portray the EU as "foreign" and "antagonistic" to the interests of the respective countries.

³ <https://www.ft.com/content/c47fcb02-749d-11e9-bbad-7c18c0ea0201>

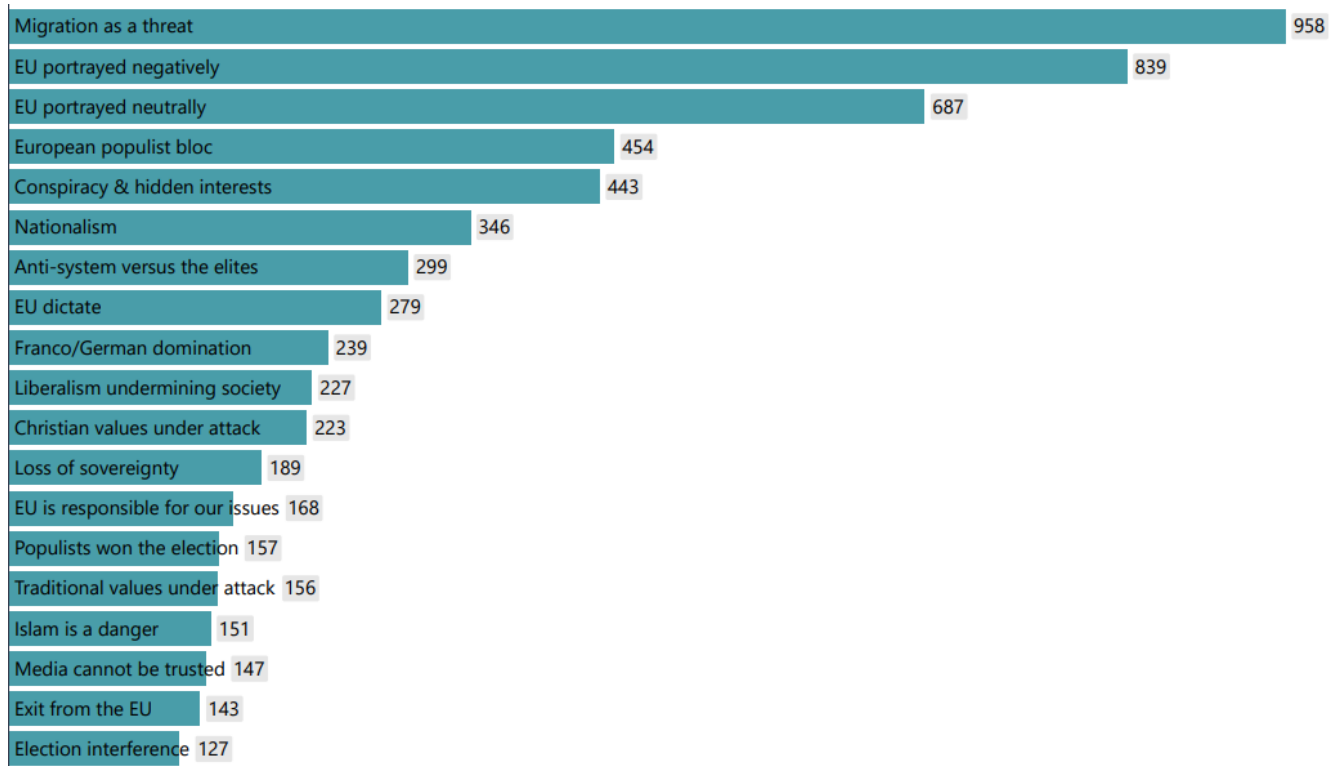


Figure 2: Sum of the most frequently utilised narratives across the V4 region

The negative portrayal of the EU played an important role on the monitored channels in each country. In Slovakia, the EU was portrayed more often in neutral terms rather than negatively. In Poland, the “conspiracies and hidden interests” narrative also played an important role, followed by its use in Hungary and Slovakia. In Slovakia, this narrative began occurring only later in the campaign when, for example, the monitored channels shared suggestions about private companies interfering in political processes and claiming that the EU is a project aimed to create “one centralised empire“. Interestingly, conspiracy theories played almost no role in the Czechia.

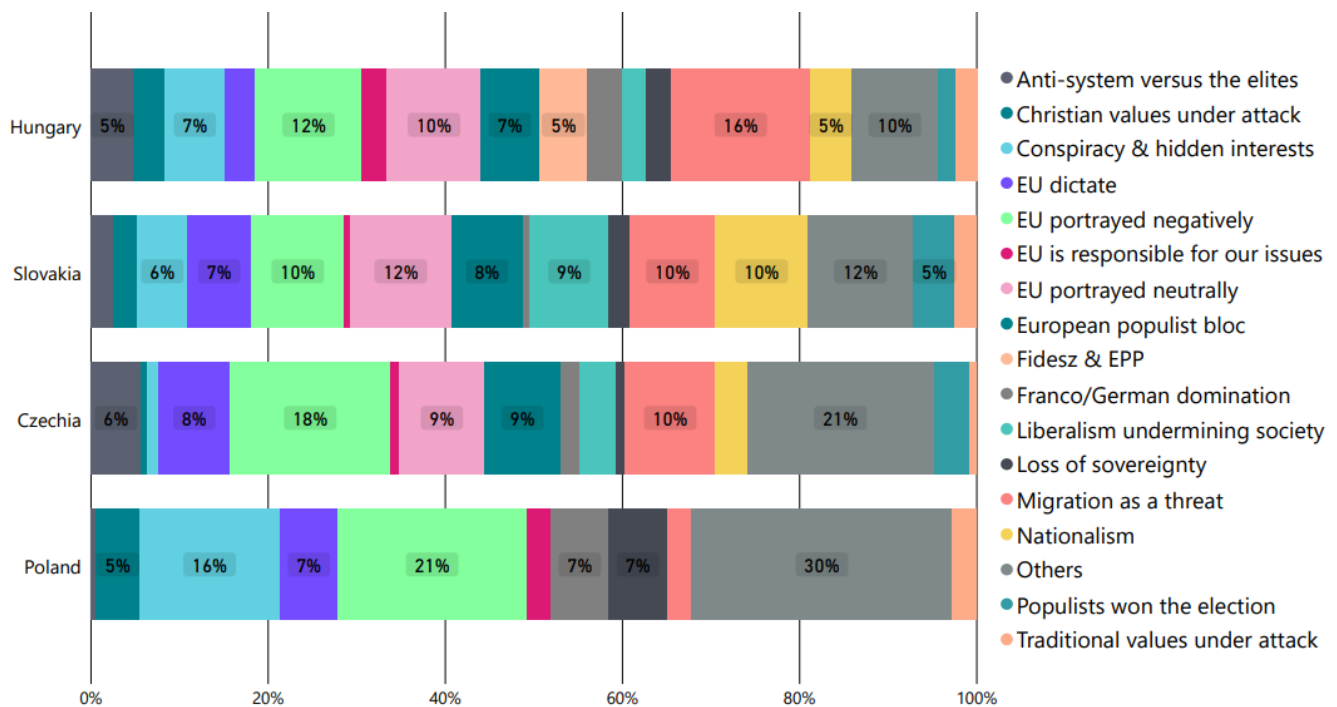


Figure 3: Narratives occurring on the monitored channels by country

CZECHIA

Prior to the EP elections in 2019, there were significant concerns related to disinformation campaigns that might influence the course and the outcome of the elections⁴ because of not only the recent experience of foreign states' interference in other elections in Western states but also purely domestic factors that enhanced such fears. In the Czech case, the significant level of Euroscepticism in the country,⁵ the low level of knowledge about EU-related topics, even among policymakers and journalists, and the circulation of various myths about the EU in the mainstream information space are the most noteworthy domestic factors of concern.⁶ Moreover, the right-wing extremist party, SPD, began to collaborate directly with websites spreading disinformation by naming the editor of the notorious website Nová Republika as the leading candidate.⁷ Therefore, the concerns were very much justified.

However, in the end—as this and other research⁸ show—no significant disinformation campaign occurred in the Czech Republic prior to and during the EP elections in 2019. This fact, however, should be seen in the overall context of the generally low public interest in this election, illustrated by the low voter turnout (less than 29% of voters participated in the elections).⁹ Also, media paid only limited attention to it, including those known to spread manipulative content. For instance, in looking at the Facebook pages analysed in this research, only a fraction of the posts that were published was related to the elections. Out of 5,110 posts published within the observed period of almost two months, only 262 (meaning around 5%) were in some way related to the EP elections.

Similar to other EU member states, the possibility that political extremists would receive more of the votes was discussed. In relation to this topic, two parties are relevant in the Czech context: the aforementioned SPD and the extremist left-wing communist party (KSČM). However, both of these parties entered the race with unfavourable conditions, since their electorate is usually not very interested in the EP elections and the opinion polls did not predict significant gains for them.¹⁰ Even though the SPD received certain support from Facebook pages and websites known to spread disinformation, in the end, they performed as expected. SPD received 9% of the votes and 2 MEPs while KSČM won 7% of the votes and 1 MEP.¹¹ So, it is possible to conclude that there was no significant rise in Czechia in populist parties' representation in the European Parliament.

Activity of the monitored channels

As noted above, the EP elections were mentioned in 262 posts published during the observed period. The distribution of Facebook posts within the analysed period makes it possible to see the public's increased interest in the elections as voting day approached. For example, in the week before the elections (May 20-24), 50 posts related to the elections were published. However, the peak interest in the topic occurred on May 27, when 26 posts reacting to the final results were published. This reactive approach shows once again that the elections were not a significant topic for the analysed platforms.

The elections were most frequently mentioned by the Facebook pages of the Russian state-owned information agency Sputnik CZ (66 posts), the right-wing opinion platform Právý prostor (58 posts), the Facebook news portal Český Zpravodaj (33 posts), the news portal Parlamentní listy (33 posts), and the conspiracy website Svobodné noviny (23 posts).

4 https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/evropske-volby-bis-michal-koudelka-dezinformace_1905031106_ogo

5 <https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2019/>

6 http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/656_the-most-popular-myths-about-the-eu-in-the-czech-republic.pdf

7 https://www.idnes.cz/volby/evropsky-parlament/2019/david-spd-evropske-volby-kandidatka.A190227_084215_domaci_kop

8 <http://www.pssi.cz/russia-s-influence-activities-in-cee-volby>

9 <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/505901-nejvetsi-volebni-ucast-by-la-v-praze-a-strednich-cechach.html>

10 https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/volebni-potencial-ucast_1905090900_pek

11 <https://www.volby.cz/pls/ep2019/ep?xjazyk=CZ>

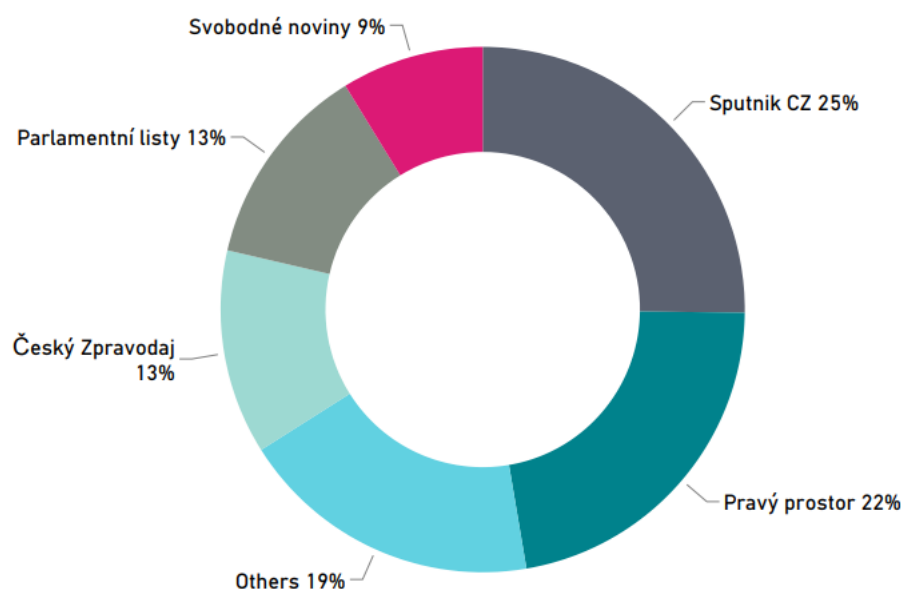


Figure 4: Activity of the monitored Facebook channels in the Czech EP election

Sputnik CZ

The Czech branch of Sputnik, the Russian state information agency, has more than 41,000 followers on Facebook and published 66 posts related to the EP elections during the observed period. Anti-EU narratives were quite widespread within the published posts. The negative framing of the EU was mainly based on an emphasis of the EU's incompetence, criticizing the "EU dictate", or portraying EU membership as disadvantageous.^{12 13 14} Sputnik CZ thus provided space mainly for narratives promoted by extremist political parties, namely the KSČM¹⁵ and the SPD.¹⁶ Usually, the posts related to the EP elections were not original but based on statements of various (mostly Eurosceptic) individuals, such as former Czech President Václav Klaus or SPD leader Tomio Okamura.

Právý prostor

The right-wing opinion platform Právý prostor, which has around 15,000 followers on Facebook, published 56 posts related to EP elections during the observed period. The published posts generally refer to the reflections of the individual authors about the EU or the electoral process, primarily with a negative connotation. The rhetoric was usually quite vivid, including comparisons of the EU to a "beast", a "European cancer", or calling it the "Eurotitanic".^{17 18} Some posts were devoted to alleged mainstream media manipulation (the dominance of the presentation of certain political parties, thus discriminating against others)¹⁹ and election interference (the manipulation of public opinion poll results).²⁰ Other posts pointed to negative consequences of EU membership for the Czech economy.^{21 22} Právý prostor was also one of the promoters of the various "Czexit" narratives, especially right before the elections.²³

Český Zpravodaj

The Facebook news portal Český Zpravodaj, with more than 11,000 followers, published 33 posts related to the EP elections during the observed period. Since this platform is not connected with any website, it only republished content from other news portals of varying quality. Therefore, neutral articles could also be found that only described

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2305243272847804>

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2279159012122897>

¹⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2256600021045463>

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2255596144479184>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2303690199669778>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2496627013714760>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2469131836464278>

¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2470196499691145>

²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2446603055383823>

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2443320845712044>

²² <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2460622903981838>

²³ <https://www.facebook.com/protiproud.cz/posts/1236655143182683>

the current situation (14 of 33 published posts) next to posts originating on platforms spreading manipulative content that portrayed the EU negatively. Such posts presented the EP elections mainly as a vote about migration²⁴ and a fight between European elites and “enlightened” national politicians such as Viktor Orbán.²⁵

Other sources

The news portal Parlamentní listy is a well-known, established media outlet in the Czech information space, and so it is not surprising that it also has a significant follower base (more than 47,000 accounts) on Facebook. This website published 33 posts related to the EP elections that mostly covered the election campaign in Czechia. Even though the headlines were often in the form of emotionally loaded clickbait,^{26 27} Parlamentní listy was not found to support any particular party.

On the other hand, conspiracy website Svobodné noviny, with 17,000 followers on Facebook, published 23 EP election-related posts that favoured domestic and foreign populist parties.²⁸ The predominant topic of this Facebook page was migration, which was portrayed as either a failure of or an intentional act by the EU.²⁹

The level of activity of the other analysed sources was rather low. Another noteworthy mention belongs to the conspiracy website Protiproud, which regularly accompanied its posts with expressive, graphic collages that were supposed to underline the main message of the text.³⁰

Portrayal of political parties

Czech political parties participating in the EU parliamentary elections were only mentioned in less than half (122 posts) of the Facebook posts published by the analysed pages. Extremist parties were mentioned more often and were portrayed more positively than the other participants in the elections.

The extremist right-wing SPD was mentioned most often (30 posts), and in one-third of the posts (10 posts), its portrayal was positive. The analysed Facebook pages also gave the SPD space to present its platform for the EP elections, which focused mainly on issues of migration and criticized the “EU dictate” or the Union’s ineffectiveness.³¹

32

The extremist left-wing party KSČM was mentioned less often (15 posts) than the SPD. A significant portion of the posts mentioning this party was based on statements by its leading candidate, Kateřina Konečná, who was often quoted by Sputnik CZ.^{33 34}

Of the mainstream parties, the populist party ANO was mentioned most often (18 posts), which corresponds to the party’s strong position, eventually winning the elections. The majority of the texts that mentioned the ANO was neutral.³⁵ On the other hand, the coalition of liberal parties, TOP 09/STAN, the left-wing ČSSD, and the Pirate Party, were the subject of critical posts, also in relation to their involvement in older political scandals, which was revealed before the elections.^{36 37} The right-wing ODS and the conservative KDU-ČSL were mentioned even less often.

24 <https://www.facebook.com/zpravodaj.info/posts/1013319482207844>

25 <https://www.facebook.com/zpravodaj.info/posts/1014617785411347>

26 <https://www.facebook.com/parlamentnilisty.cz/posts/2370855279626017>

27 <https://www.facebook.com/parlamentnilisty.cz/posts/2402158369829041>

28 https://www.facebook.com/240233692807752_1268835863280858

29 https://www.facebook.com/240233692807752_1274191046078673

30 <https://www.facebook.com/protiproud.cz/posts/1239719509542913>

31 <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2240523435986455>

32 <https://www.facebook.com/parlamentnilisty.cz/posts/2353373654707513>

33 https://www.facebook.com/340208672684617_2279159012122897

34 https://www.facebook.com/340208672684617_2290497644322367

35 <https://www.facebook.com/parlamentnilisty.cz/posts/2400699899974888>

36 <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2468673209843474>

37 <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/226763826327497>

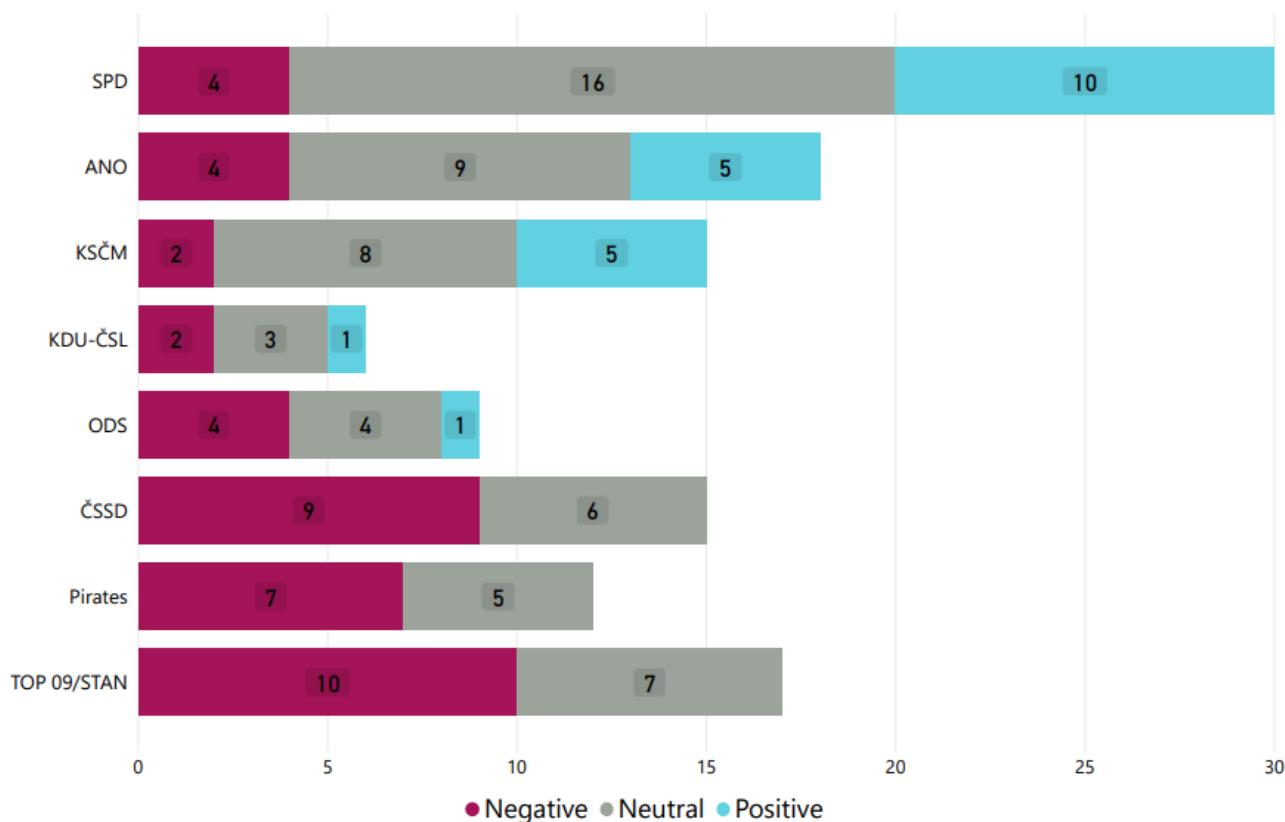


Figure 5: Portrayal of Czech political parties on the monitored Facebook channels

Most popular narratives

With regard to the fact that the analysed Facebook pages predominantly praised extremist parties that present themselves in opposition to the EU (thus criticising parties perceived as sympathetic to the EU), it is not surprising that the narratives that framed the EU negatively ultimately prevailed.^{38,39} The overall assumption of “the EU is bad” can be further divided by the individual arguments, such as the “EU is non-democratic”, the “EU elites just dictate the rules” and even want to “dictate how we should think and make decisions” (especially in relation to measures taken against disinformation),⁴⁰ and the “EU is dysfunctional” and “tries to destroy national identities by supporting migration”.⁴¹

The recent EP elections were portrayed as a “battle for Europe” fought between patriotic politicians (such as the SPD and other parties in the political group Europe of Nations and Freedom) and the EU elites.^{42,43} Given such a perception, it is not surprising that it was possible to see not only an increased number of articles in the week running up to the elections but also a sharpening of their rhetoric and demands. For example, Právý prostor advocated leaving the EU as the only rational option for the Czech Republic.⁴⁴ The argument was then also strengthened by assertions regarding British Prime Minister Theresa May as hindering the Brexit project, “the withdrawal from the Eurotitanic.” The post, therefore, disseminated the idea that Britain leaving will serve as a positive example for the Czech Republic.⁴⁵

After the elections, mainly neutral informative articles regarding the results were published first, taken from mainstream media. However, just a few days later, various interpretations and commentaries also started to emerge.

38 <https://www.facebook.com/parlamentnilisty.cz/posts/2391541130890765>

39 <https://www.facebook.com/zpravodaj.info/posts/1011820859024373>

40 <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2470143939696401>

41 <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2255752287796903>

42 <https://www.facebook.com/ceskoaktualne/posts/2339670486312816>

43 https://www.facebook.com/240233692807752_1268835863280858

44 <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2498382366872558>

45 <https://www.facebook.com/Pravyprostor/posts/2503588339685294>

The election results were put into a wider EU context and portrayed as a victory of Eurosceptic parties^{46 47} rather than applied just to the Czech Republic, where the extremist parties did not significantly succeed.

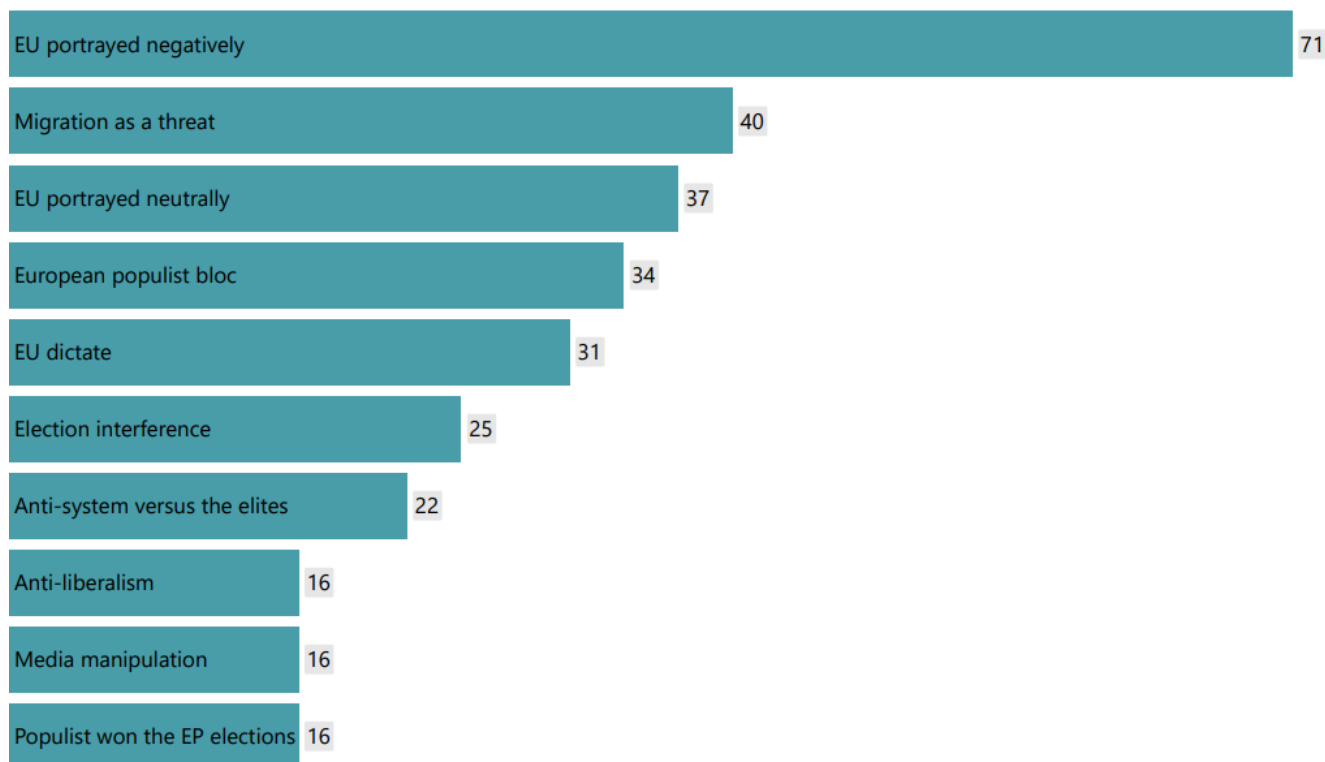


Figure 6: The most frequently deployed narratives in the context of the EP election in Czechia

⁴⁶ https://www.facebook.com/240233692807752_1278017972362647

⁴⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik/posts/2306584619380336>

HUNGARY

The 2019 European elections in Hungary proved to be another uneven playing field for the ruling Fidesz-KDNP over the opposition. Fidesz-KDNP, led by PM Viktor Orbán, not only vastly outspent the opposition during the campaign in every possible way,⁴⁸ public media under the control of the government ran political messages and reporting that was almost indistinguishable from the ruling coalition's campaign.

Moreover, the government has established clear dominance in the Hungarian media space due to the pro-government media conglomerate, the Central European Press and Media Foundation, composed of more than 500 outlets,⁴⁹ which made conspiracy theories about George Soros or the EU supporting illegal immigration, etc. and pro-Russia disinformation a daily staple of media consumption in Hungary.^{50 51 52} Fidesz, therefore, faced off against a weak and divided opposition of the far-right (Jobbik, Mi Hazánk), leftist (MSZP-P, Demokratikus Koalíció), liberal (Momentum), and green (LMP) parties supported by only a dozen or so independent media, mostly online news. For these reasons, we list mainstream pro-government sources, such as the main state channel, hirado.hu, or the leading commercial online news media, origo.hu, among the top Hungarian disinformation outlets monitored. Our data show that the activity of pro-government media is on par with other far-right and pro-Russia fringe/disinformation media in the campaign leading up to the European Parliament election, as shown in Figure 7 below.

Activity of the monitored channels

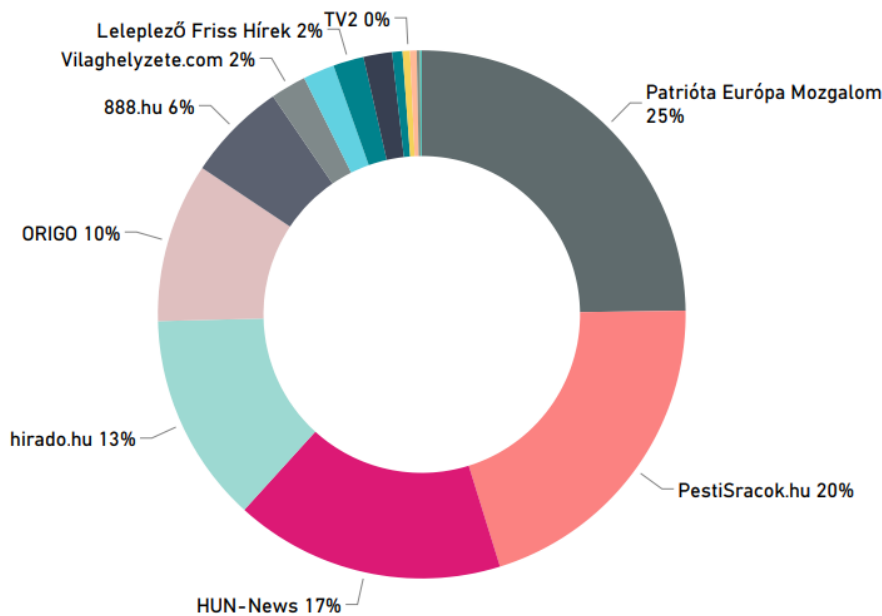


Figure 7: Activity of the monitored Facebook channels in the EP election in Hungary

The top five media outlets monitored during the period remained unchanged from before and included the fringe, anti-immigration Patriotic Europe Movement (Patrióta Európa Mozgalom), the main pro-government mouthpiece, PestiSracok.hu, the far-right and xenophobic HUN-News, and the pro-government public hirado.hu and private origo.hu (ORIGO). It is important to note that the activity of the far-right and/or pro-Russia fringe pages closely followed and echoed the official messaging of the Hungarian government, so the ruling Fidesz-KDNP party coalition could significantly benefit from disinformation activities in the Hungarian media space, either owing to these pro-Russia fringe accounts or to the disinformation disseminated by pro-government media. Overall, Hungarian disinformation outlets significantly contributed to the political campaign and we could observe overall 3,944 relevant articles (out of 5,093 occurrences) or 77.4% of the messages discussing the European elections in the period between April 10 and May 29, 2019.

48 'Csak az elmúlt egy hét alatt húszmillió forintot költött Facebook-hirdetésekre a Fidesz', https://azonnali.hu/cikk/20190524_csak-az-elmult-egy-het-alatt-huszmillio-forintot-koltott-facebook-hirdetesekre-a-fidesz, accessed 3 June 2019, http://azonnali.hu/cikk/20190524_csak-az-elmult-egy-het-alatt-huszmillio-forintot-koltott-facebook-hirdetesekre-a-fidesz.

49 'Infografika: Mától Így Nézi a Kormányparti Média Tulajdonosi Szerkezetét', Adatújságírás (blog), accessed 6 February 2019, <https://adatujsgiras.atlatszo.hu/2018/11/28/infografika-matol-igy-nez-ki-a-kormanyparti-media-tulajdonosi-szerkezetet/>.

50 'Larger than life - Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia?', accessed 15 May 2019, https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_ee/research_results.php?article_id=2391.

51 https://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/FES_PC_Tanulmany_DeinformacioStrategiak_publikacioa_171207.pdf

52 <https://hungarianspectrum.org/2018/03/22/russian-propaganda-in-hungarian-government-media/>

Portrayal of political parties

Since pro-government mainstream media streamlined anti-opposition disinformation and conspiracy theories⁵³ during the campaign, political parties were featured heavily on the Hungarian disinformation outlets, with 50.3% of the Facebook posts addressing them in one way or another. Given the Hungarian disinformation scene's positive bias towards Fidesz-KDNP, it is no wonder that more than a third of the posts (32.8%) dealing with parties expressed positive sentiments towards the ruling coalition, while only 0.4-1.1% of the messages mentioned opposition parties in a positive context at all.

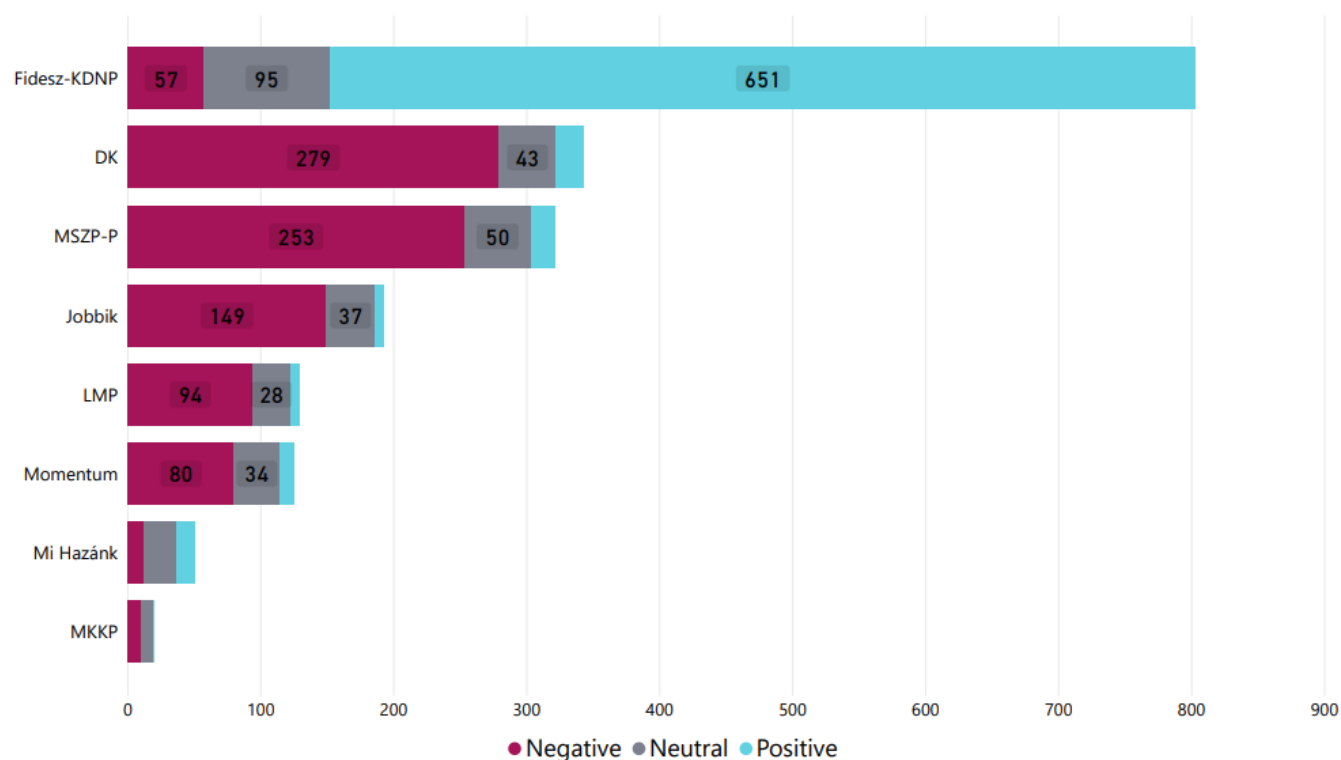


Figure 8: Portrayal of the Hungarian political parties on the monitored Facebook channels

In contrast, the outlets disproportionally attacked the opposition parties, mostly the leftist-liberal Democratic Coalition (DK) led by former PM Ferenc Gyurcsány (14.1% of the negative messages), the leftist MSZP-P (12.8%) and the populist, rightist Jobbik party (7.5%). However, we could observe a significant change of the disinformation type concerning parties given the somewhat unexpected election results.⁵⁴ While every opinion poll precisely predicted a landslide victory for the ruling Fidesz-KDNP, which ultimately received 52.33% of the votes of the Hungarian electorate (13 seats in the European Parliament), Fidesz failed to grab two-thirds of the seats allocated to Hungary, an expectation often voiced by pro-government pundits, and its position became unstable within the EPP. More importantly, the largest surprise was a reshuffle of the opposition parties, which could lead to the largest changes in the Hungarian political scene since 2010. The leftist-liberal DK (16.19%) and the liberal Momentum (9.89%) came out on top, whilst the leftist MSZP-P (6.66%) and the populist, rightist Jobbik (6.41%) could barely outperform the 5% election threshold. The green LMP essentially disappeared (2.18%) and the far-right Mi Hazánk's result (3.31%) only managed to successfully weaken Jobbik and eat away some of its far-right electoral base.

Consequently, disinformation favouring Fidesz-KDNP had to change course to (1) explain the “weaker”-than-expected performance of the ruling coalition and (2) the failure of similar anti-immigration rightist parties' electoral breakthrough in Europe, as well as (3) attack the unexpected “winners” among the opposition. In the runup to the election, the Hungarian disinformation outlets' main line of criticism against the Hungarian opposition was mostly based on Fidesz's political campaign, centred on immigration, claiming that MSZP wants to abolish European borders in order to “flood the continent with (illegal) migrants” in tandem with the “pro-immigration bureaucrats of

⁵³ <https://www.facebook.com/VilagHelyzete/posts/2232974623459480/>

⁵⁴ 'Fidesz's EP election dreams did not come true', accessed 3 June 2019, https://politicalcapital.hu/library.php?article_id=2425.

Brussels and all the other pro-immigration parties.”⁵⁵ This tactic lumped together all the opposition parties on the same charge: that they work against the very interests of the Hungarian nation or Europe by supporting the alleged “pro-immigration policy of the Soros network.”⁵⁶

During and after the election, the monitored channels tried to emphasize a Fidesz “towering” or “record-breaking” victory over the opposition and downplay any gains made by the opposition parties, claiming that Hungarians have decided to “replace the opposition.”⁵⁷

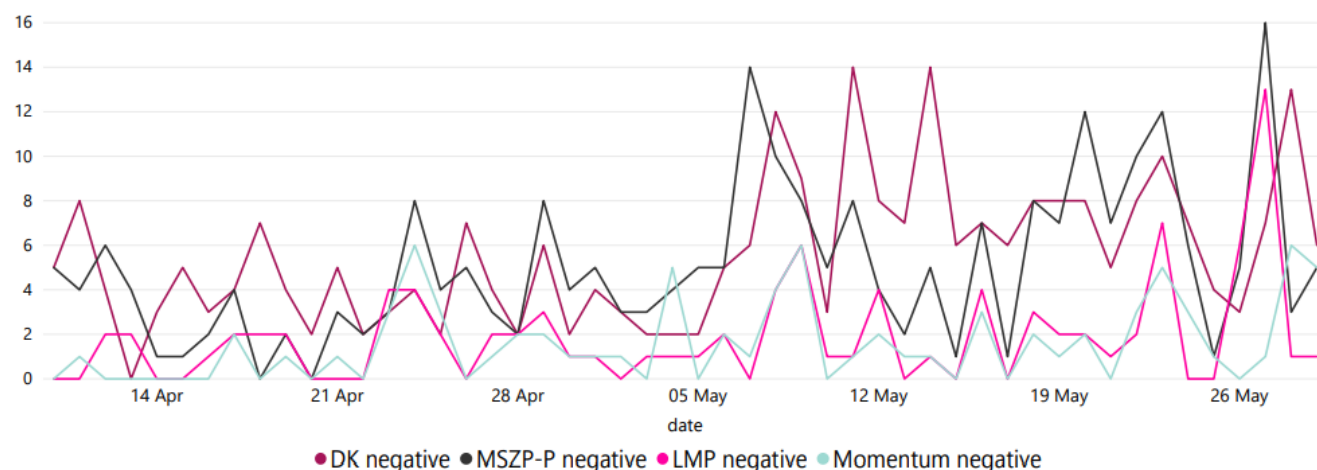


Figure 9: The number of negative messages about selected Hungarian parties

As seen above, the frequency of negative portrayals of certain political parties changed suddenly after the day of the election. The number of messages targeting LMP and MSZP-P dropped on May 28 while anti-DK and anti-Momentum communication started to rise significantly with the realisation of their electoral success. The main messages, however, remained the same: Fidesz retained the moral high ground against them by receiving a “strong mandate” from the electorate to continue defending Hungarian traditions, sovereignty, and the “European Christian civilisation” against “pro-immigration” Hungarian parties and Brussels.⁵⁸

Most popular narratives

The most prevalent narratives pushed by the analysed Facebook disinformation pages also reflected the election results. Before the day of the election, the outlets detailed a simple, yet dangerous conspiracy theory. According to this storyline, anti-immigration and pro-sovereignty parties are battling pro-immigration forces, the “Soros network”, and the current EU elite, hell-bent on creating a federalist “United States of Europe”. The stakes of the current European election were, thus, a decision about the future of European civilisation and that of nation-states, so a new “European populist bloc” of Eurosceptic, far-right parties needed to be established to replace the incumbent European political elite. Therefore, Eurosceptic, nativist, and anti-EPP narratives dominated the disinformation discourse in Hungary, amounting to almost 90% of the articles under the scope, as seen in the table below.

55 ‘Fidesz: Európát a Bevándorláspártiak Veszélyeztetik’, PestiSracok.hu, accessed 16 May 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/pestisracok.hu/posts/2197203273701348>.

56 ‘Az Ellenzék Összetartóelemei: A Gyűlölet És a Nemzetrombolás!’, Patrióta Európa Mozgalom, accessed 16 May 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/patriotaeuropa/posts/2050710995047709>.

57 ‘Orbán: „Rekordrészvétel Mellett Rekordgyőzelmet Arattunk”’, 888.hu, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/888ponthu/posts/2110448785749786>.

58 ‘A Magyarok Azt Üzenték Brüsszelnek: Váloztassatok! – Mondta Orbán Viktor a Győzelem Után’, PestiSracok.hu, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/pestisracok.hu/posts/2240533762701632>.

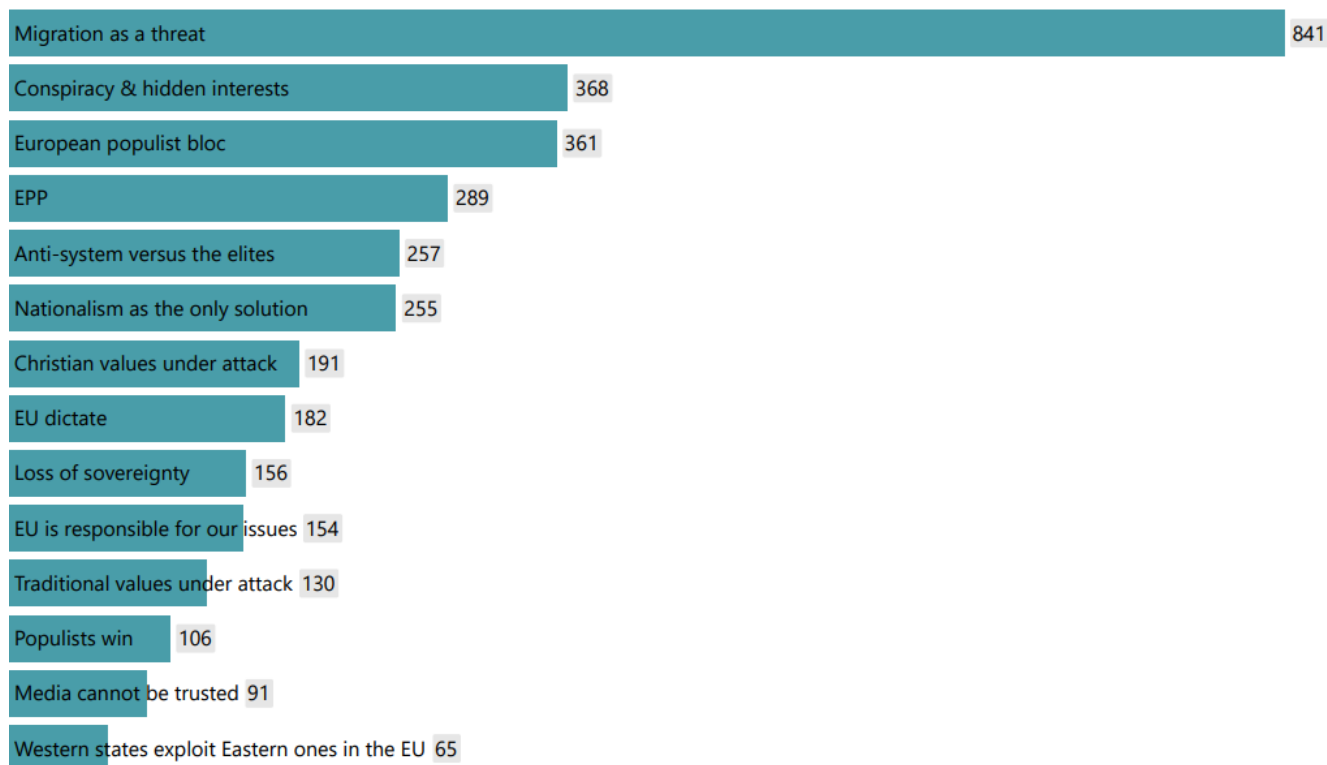


Figure 10: The most often deployed narratives in the context of EP Election in Hungary (as a % of relevant posts)

However, these Eurosceptic arguments somewhat backfired because the Eurosceptic, anti-immigration forces made only modest gains in the European elections and Fidesz can no longer count on a surge of support from them in its bid to create a more nationalistic political platform within the EPP or leave and join the new far-right “European Alliance of Peoples and Nations” group led by Italian Foreign Minister Matteo Salvini.⁵⁹ Instead, the narratives pushed by the monitored channels either tried to cautiously mend fences between Fidesz and the EPP⁶⁰ or just claimed victory for the Eurosceptic bloc. The number of articles of the “populists’ win” narrative, as seen below, surged especially on May 27, with such titles as “The Poles also want change in Europe,”⁶¹ “Czech Prime Minister: the European Union needs to be transformed,”⁶² or “Hungary supports only the anti-immigration lead-candidate” (for the next Commission president).⁶³

59 Nick Squires, ‘Orban Shuns Salvini’s New Nationalist Group in European Parliament’, The Telegraph, 30 May 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/05/30/hungary-shuns-salvinis-european-parliament-populist-group/>.

60 ‘Ma Egy Kicsit Kiderül, Kik Lakják Európát’, PestiSracok.hu - Posts, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/pestisracok.hu/posts/2240161969405478>.

61 ‘Lengyelországban Is a Nemzeti Jobboldal Győzött’, ORIGO, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/OrigoHirek/posts/2397926136924964>.

62 ‘Cseh kormányfő: Át kell alakítani az Európai Uniót’, hirado.hu (blog), accessed 3 June 2019, <http://www.hirado.hu/kulfold/cikk/2019/05/27/cseh-kormanyfo-at-kell-alakitani-az-europai-uniot/>.

63 ‘Dömötör Csaba: Magyarország Csak Bevándorlásellenes Jelölteket Támogat’, PestiSracok.hu, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/pestisracok.hu/posts/2244334505654891>.

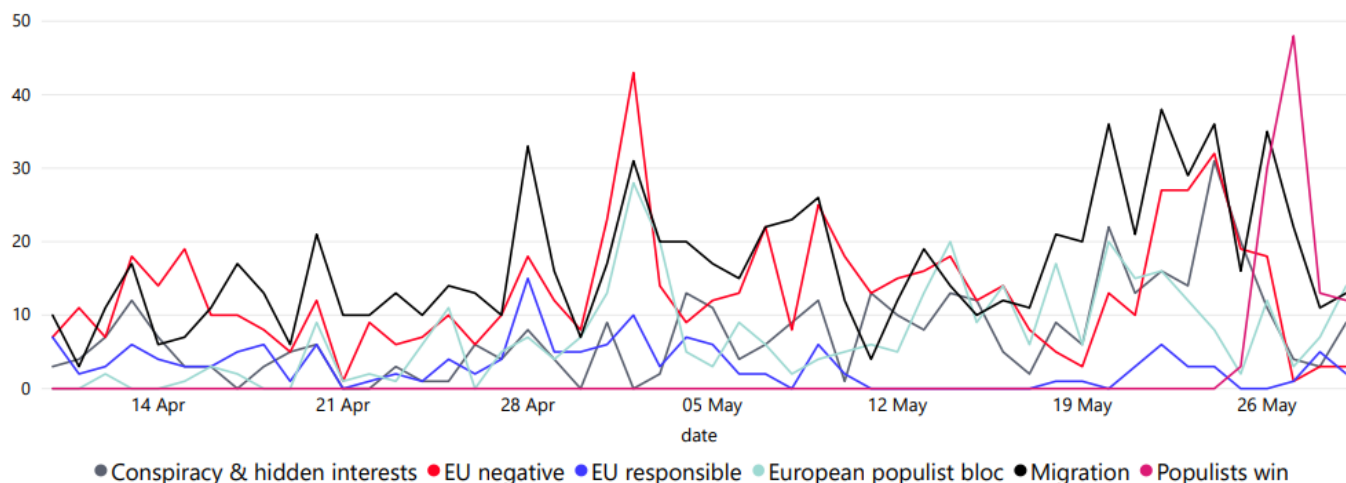


Figure 11: The occurrence of some of the main Eurosceptic narratives in Hungary over the monitoring period

Despite the aforementioned political changes and political manoeuvres, Eurosceptic narratives and anti-Western conspiracy theories remained very strong throughout the election campaign. The first major Eurosceptic peak could be observed on May 2 when PM Orbán received Salvini in Budapest in the hope of joining forces after the elections. The “European populist bloc” narrative had another peak on May 14, the day US President Donald Trump and PM Orbán met in the White House. Posts on the monitored channels claimed Orbán’s ambition to become Europe’s leader of the “anti-immigration” grouping, blocking the “George Soros network”⁶⁴ and the European political mainstream, was legitimised by the US president.⁶⁵

Conspiracy theories involving the European Commission and the political mainstream, especially ones targeting French President Emanuel Macron, flooded the campaign in the last days before the election. One of the main Hungarian conspiracy theorists, János Drábik, simply declared that “the stakes are about the dissolution of nation-states, the Islamisation of Europe and the introduction of Sharia law.”⁶⁶ The anti-immigration site Patriotic Europe Movement accused Marcon of supporting “illegal” immigration for the sake of globalisation.⁶⁷ Vilaghelyzete.com detailed a “secret study” by the European Commission about “importing” 3,800 million foreigners into Europe.⁶⁸ Despite the ridiculousness of these conspiracy theories, they apparently feed into the general “EU negative” narrative by reasserting the European Union’s “responsibility” and “hidden interests” concerning regular or irregular immigration.

64 ‘A Washingtoni Látogatás Idején a Fake News CNN Újra Interjút Készített a Magyar Külügyminiszterrel’, Vilaghelyzete.com, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/AWAKENINGtheWORLD/posts/2194635863954185>.

65 ‘Orbán Nem Csupán Egy Miniszterelnök a Sorban’, Patrióta Európa Mozgalom, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/patriotaeuropa/photos/a.186555484796612/2191646580954149/?type=3&theater>.

66 ‘Mi a Tét’, Drábik János, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/drabikjanos/posts/2815778678495497>.

67 ‘Végre, Világos Beszéd!’, Patrióta Európa Mozgalom, accessed 3 June 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/patriotaeuropa/photos/a.186555484796612/2053691064749702/?type=3>.

68 <https://www.facebook.com/VilagHelyzete/posts/2232974623459480/>

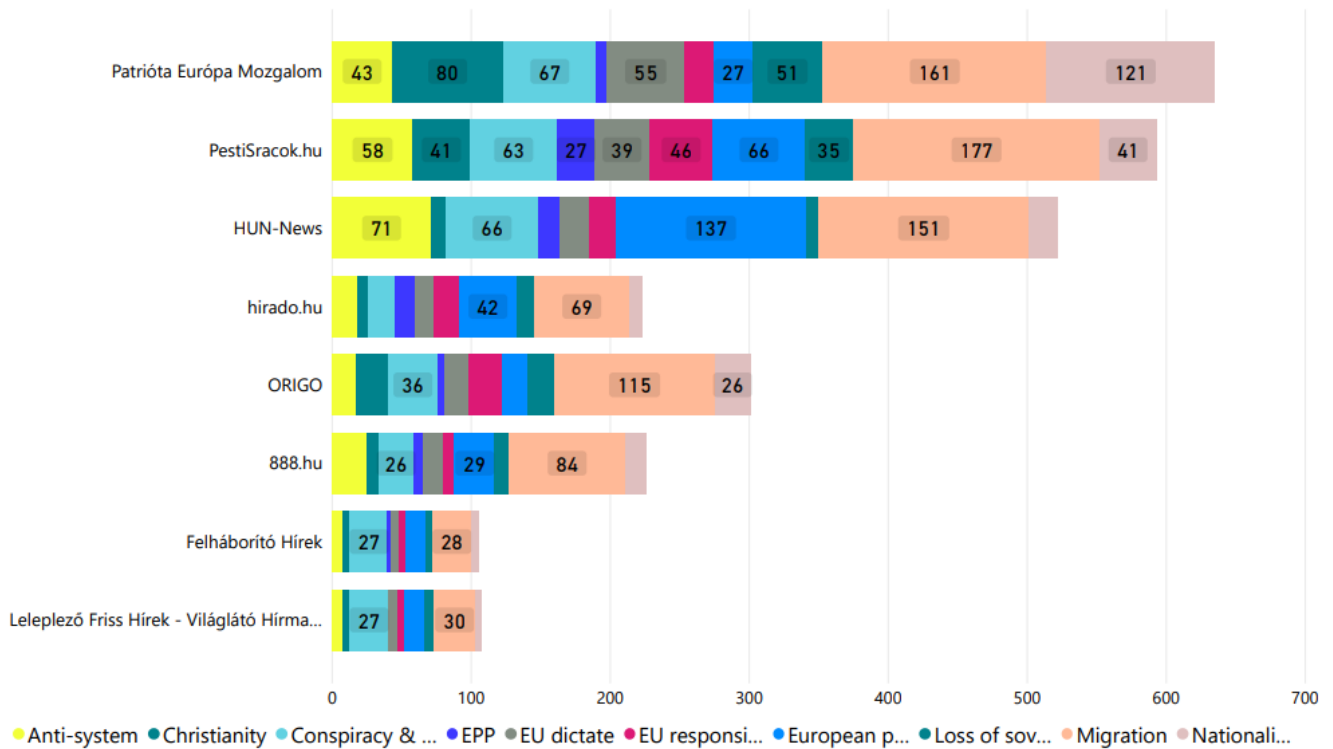


Figure 12: The top narrative occurrences in Hungary by source

If we look at the spread of the main narratives along mainstream and fringe media in Hungary, it is obvious that the three main types concerned migration, conspiracy theories, and the European populist bloc. The mainstream and fringe Hungarian disinformation outlets differed in two main aspects. First, mainstream outlets such as PestiSracok.hu, hirado.hu, and ORIGO could produce many more articles compared to other fringe media. Second, nationalism was more prevalent on fringe sites such as Patrióta Európa Mozgalom or HUN-news, reflecting their being embedded in the Hungarian far-right subculture. Still, the narrative structure of the main pro-government and fringe, pro-Russia sites resemble each other, which confirms the results of our previous discourse analysis.

Ultimately, these Eurosceptic and anti-immigration narratives and conspiracy theories are destined to live on even after the end of the European elections because the Hungarian government and its media conglomerate have made immigration-related disinformation a mainstay of the Hungarian political discourse to win elections since 2015.

POLAND

Activity of the monitored channels

Based on data from ZoomSphere, the 15 most relevant channels on Facebook that align with identified pro-Kremlin disinformation messaging were analysed in Poland. Some of them are known for previous disinformation activities, reported among others by the East Stratcom Task Force.⁶⁹ They include Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny, Kresy.pl, Polska Niepodległa, Sputnik Polska, Wolna Polska Wiadomości, Alternews, Wolne Media, zmianynaziemi.pl, Xportal.pl, alexjones.pl, Parezia.pl, namzalezy.pl, Superdziennik.pl, Anonymous Info Army Poland, and Neon24.

Page Storytellers (PTAT)

The number of people talking about your Page, by story type

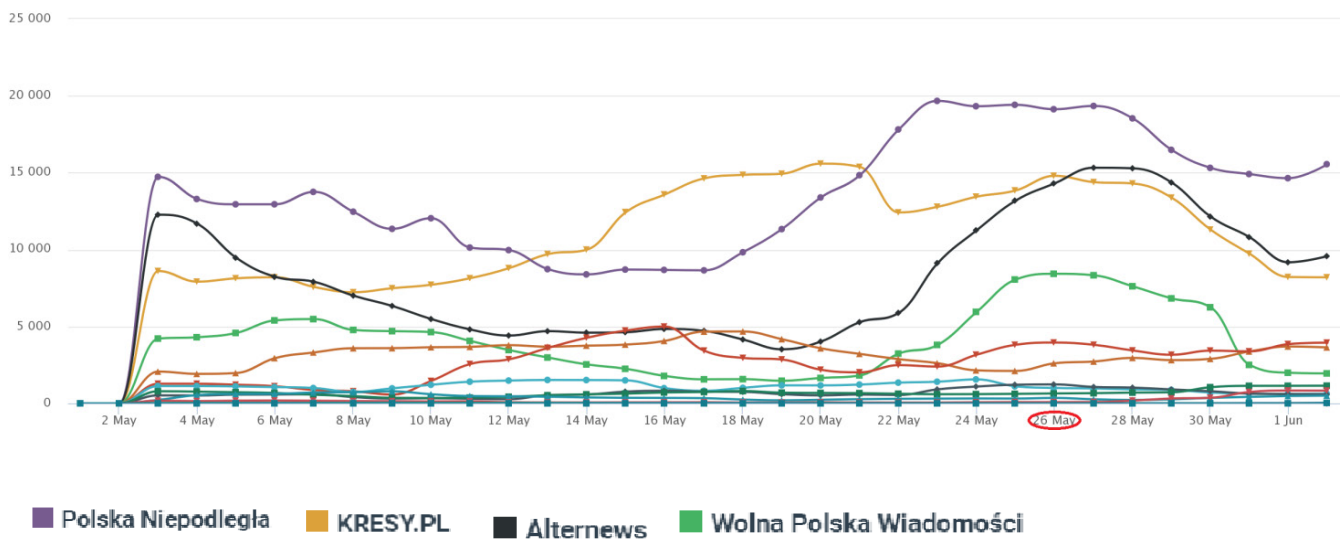


Figure 13: The most influential Polish pro-Kremlin outlets on Facebook, by page storytellers (the number of people talking about the page), source: Zoomsphere.

In terms of the number of people talking about the page, four profiles stand out (Polska Niepodległa, Kresy.pl, Alternews, and Wolna Polska Wiadomości). The popularity of their pages on Facebook peaked around the election date (see above). After the elections, they experienced a sudden decrease in popularity.

Portrayal of political parties

Altogether, 978 posts were analysed between April 10 and May 29, out of which 272 posts were relevant to the European Parliament elections in Poland (all posts were filtered with key words related to the election campaign, such as “election” and “euro”). Despite numerous examples of election meddling in the campaign,⁷⁰ the relatively small number of relevant posts suggests that, as far as the analysed channels are concerned, the foreign interference in the election campaign was either absent or insignificant.

There were two major competitors in the campaign leading to the European Parliament elections in Poland: the Law and Justice (PiS) party (currently in power) and the multi-party European Coalition, which consists of 5 parties (Civic Platform, Polish People’s Party, The Left Democratic Alliance, Modern, and the Greens). The two were neck and neck in polls until the last day of the election campaign. Eventually, Law and Justice won overall with 45.38% of votes to the European Coalition’s 38.47%. The left-liberal Spring (Wiosna) party received 6.06% of votes. The far-right Confederation Korwin and the Left Together did not win enough votes to cross the electoral threshold of 5%.⁷¹

69 See: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>

70 <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/komisja-europejska-o-probach-manipulacji-przed-wyborami-do-pe/nm7d8hv>

71 <https://www.pap.pl/en/news/news%2C459738%2Cruling-party-wins-polish-ep-elections-results-9925-pct-polling-stations.html>

The majority of posts about the two main political blocs were either negative (Law and Justice: 59 negative posts; European Coalition: 45 negative posts out of 66 in total) or neutral (33 and 19, respectively). While the portrayal of Spring and Kukiz '15 was almost not present at all, the far-right Confederation Korwin was the most positively covered out of all the analysed parties (23 positive posts). The high number of anti-Law and Justice posts may be surprising, as this party is considered to be Eurosceptic. However, during the campaign, we could observe an intense rivalry for the far-right electorate (especially for the young and male⁷²) between PiS and Confederation Korwin. This struggle was also observed in media supporting the ruling party (including public media, which directly attacked Confederation Korwin during the campaign.⁷³).

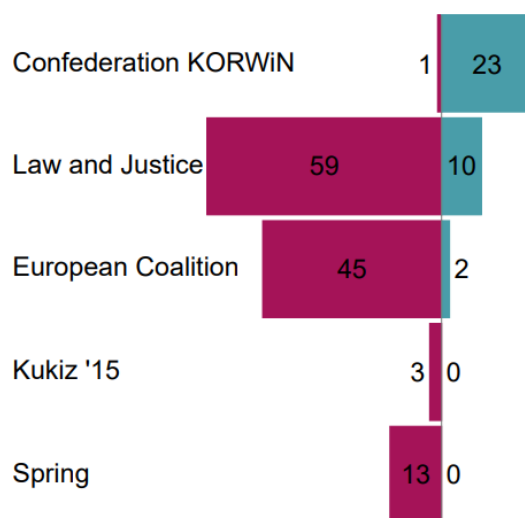


Figure 14: Positive and negative portrayal of Polish political parties/coalitions.

Most popular narratives

The top 4 most popular channels in the analysed period were Polska Niepodległa, Kresy.pl, Alternews, and Wolna Polska Wiadomości (Fig. 13). As presented below (Fig. 15), apart from posts which targeted particular candidates or party leaders (personal attacks – 46 posts), the “EU portrayed negatively” was the most popular narrative in the analysed timeframe (39 posts of all the analysed channels), followed by conspiracy/hidden interests (29 posts). What is worth noting is the significant usage of the Just Act narrative (26 posts). In this context, it should be mentioned that Confederation Korwin focused its election campaign on the issue of protests against restitution for Jewish property, which is related to the U.S. law on the restitution of Jewish property seized during or after World War Two.⁷⁴ As much as the “lost sovereignty” narrative is used by dodgy channels like Alternews to stoke anger against the EU and NATO, the trending story of the Just Act was a perfect tool to ignite anti-American opinions and to present the US and Israel as an external threat to Poland. This issue culminated when hundreds of far-right supporters marched on May 11 in Warsaw against the Just Act.⁷⁵

Polska Niepodległa distinguished itself from the other channels by focusing on discrediting specific MEP candidates or party leaders (15 posts). It targeted politicians Róża Thu,⁷⁶ Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz⁷⁷ or Grzegorz Schetyna.⁷⁸

On the other hand, Alternews, which is administered by 11 people from the UK and one from the US (according to publicly available data on Facebook)⁷⁹ and liked by close to 35,000 people, was the most active source in terms of the negative posts about the Law and Justice party (16 posts). In terms of the narratives used by this channel, the

⁷² <http://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,117303,24803481,koalycja-europejska-z-niewielka-przewaga-nad-pis-wysoko-konfederacja.html>

⁷³ <https://www.tvp.info/42428761/konfederacja-w-cieniu-kremla> and <http://wiadomosci.tvp.pl/42456530/konfederacja-niejasnych-powiazan>

⁷⁴ The Justice for Uncompensated Survivors Today (JUST) Act, or Act 447, requires the U.S. Department of State to provide a report to Congress on the progress of dozens of countries that signed a declaration in 2009 on the restitution of assets seized during or following World War Two.

⁷⁵ <https://www.tvn24.pl/tvn24-news-in-english,157,m/far-right-supporters-march-in-warsaw-to-protest-against-us-just-act,935230.html>

⁷⁶ See: <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1588354271296121>, <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1571864919611723>, <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1568597306605151>

⁷⁷ See: <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1590071904457691>

⁷⁸ See: <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1558221914309357>

⁷⁹ See: Page Transparency for Alternews: <https://www.facebook.com/alternewspl/>. Please note that Superdziennik (according to Facebook data it is also administered from abroad: UK, Canada and US) often publishes the same content as Alternews. However, those two accounts have different audiences, therefore both were analysed.

negative posts about the European Union were quite popular (11 posts). Alternews also criticised Law and Justice before the 3rd of May Constitution Day for celebrating this day with a military parade held under the theme “Strong Through Alliances”.⁸⁰ According to this channel, the Allies are occupiers and PiS was “Proud of serfdom. Proud of losing sovereignty. Proud of the lack of significance of Poland. Proud of falling. Proud of the Nation’s fall. Proud of the (military) theatre. Proud of themselves ...”.⁸¹ Interestingly there was no mention of a “Polexit” in its communication.⁸²

Given that the EU is Poland’s pillar of economic prosperity and NATO (with the US its most important ally) of its security, as well as the upcoming decisions regarding enhanced US military presence on Polish territory, it is not surprising that both were targeted by pro-Kremlin messaging on Facebook. The topic of lost sovereignty found fertile ground in Poland in the monitored timeframe. This is inextricably linked to the fact that Warsaw faces disciplinary measures within the European Union, including the Article 7 procedure. Some of the negative posts about the EU published by Polska Niepodległa included stories about European Commissioner Frans Timmermans and his supposed “polonophobia”⁸³ while others, promoted by, e.g., Wolne Media, stated that since 1989, Poland has been heading towards “self-destruction”.⁸⁴

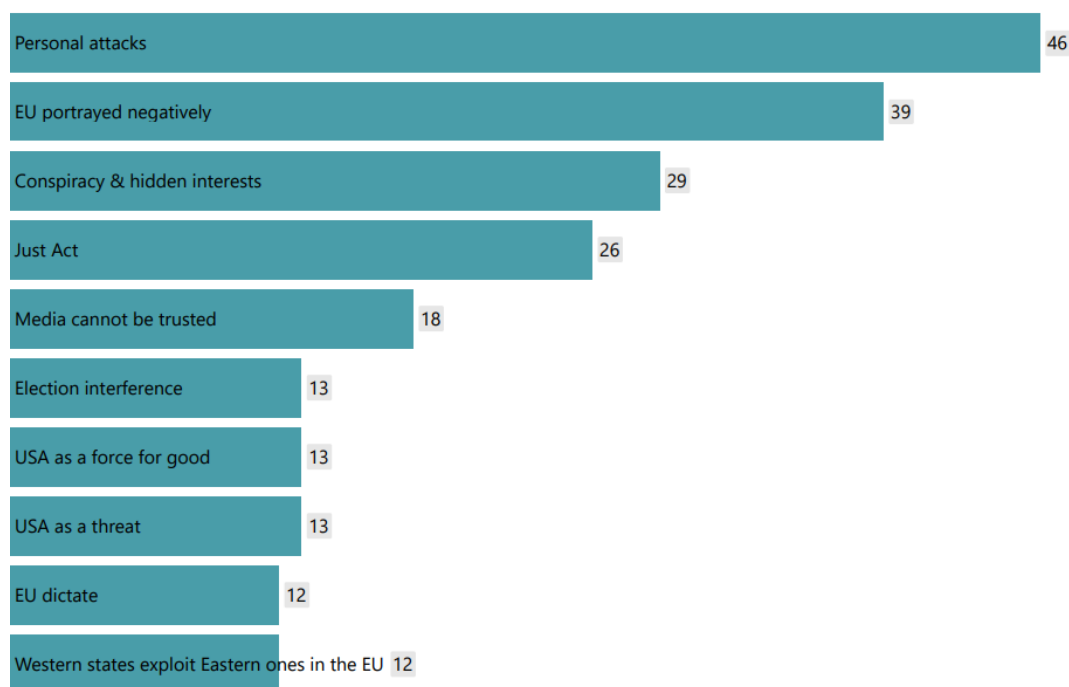


Figure 15: The most popular narratives used by pro-Kremlin channels on Facebook during the election campaign to the European Parliament in Poland.

⁸⁰ <https://polandinfo.com/42470175/polish-and-allied-armed-forces-hold-military-parade-in-warsaw>

⁸¹ <https://www.facebook.com/alternewspl/posts/1989469231179343>

⁸² The narrative related to the danger of Polexit as a result of Law and Justice party rule has been popular among the opposition.

⁸³ „Polakożerca Timmermans. Trzeba kibicować, aby nie tylko w Polsce lewica dostała należny jej rachunek”: <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1581587955306086>; <https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1563130063818542>

⁸⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/WolneMedia/posts/2107278392643121>

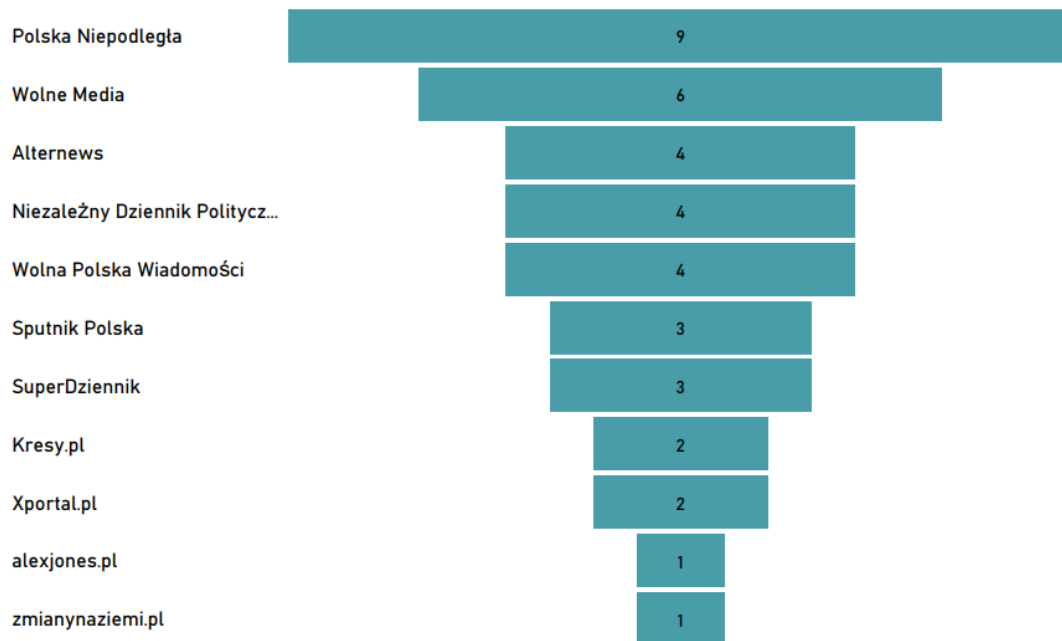


Figure 16: The most common narrative used by the Polish monitored channels on Facebook

What is perhaps even more interesting is which topics were not covered by the analysed channels during the campaign. Migration, which played a key role during the last election to the Polish parliament in 2015, was practically absent (only 5 posts altogether). Given the importance of the LGBT topic during the campaign⁸⁵ and later,⁸⁶ it may be surprising to note that this narrative was almost invisible on the monitored Facebook channels.

To sum up, while Poles are one of the most pro-European nations in the EU (according to the Globsec Trends 2019,⁸⁷ the percentage of Poles who support Poland's membership in the EU amounts to 87%), they were exposed to anti-EU narratives before the European elections (which might be proof of the ineffectiveness of such an anti-EU campaign aimed at Polish society). Even though the degree of the pro-Kremlin messages was not significant in terms of the number of posts, what we could observe during the analysed period was, on the one hand, messages that targeted the two main political blocs (Law and Justice and the European Coalition) and, on the other, directly supported one particular party (the far-right Confederation Korwin). Another trend worth noting from the monitoring period is an effort by pro-Kremlin channels to create an information environment in which anti-EU and anti-US politicians can thrive and gain public support by addressing the needs of these outlets' audiences.

⁸⁵ After Warsaw Mayor Rafał Trzaskowski signed the so-called "LGBT Card".

⁸⁶ Due to, e.g., the Equality Parade, which took place in Warsaw on May 8, 2019.

⁸⁷ <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>

SLOVAKIA

The EP elections in Slovakia received nowhere near as many relevant posts on the monitored channels that often publish controversial content and disinformation as they published throughout the Slovak presidential race between January and March 2019.⁸⁸ In the monitoring period of April 10 to May 29, 2019, only 501 posts published on the monitored channels out of a total of 7,035 posts were related to the EP elections. This amounts to only 7% of all the posts published by the “admin” on these pages. Given the usual low voter turnout in Slovakia for the EP elections,⁸⁹ investing too much time and effort into a robust information operation campaign may not be cost-efficient.

Another factor to consider is that with this low voter turnout, selective mobilisation of the electorate is often sufficient to achieve the desired success, translated as the number of MEPs in the European Parliament. This strategy has worked not only for the pro-European coalition of SPOLU/PS (Together and Progressive Slovakia parties) but also for the extreme far-right Kotleba-ĽSNS party, which managed to secure third place in this election. The monitored Facebook pages played a role in this success since they actively promoted this party.

While the recent Slovak presidential election was characterised by intense disinformation campaigns and character assassination efforts, the monitoring of the EP elections suggests a transformation from hard-line disinformation content (which can be quickly disproved and forcibly removed) to more sophisticated campaigns consisting of the skilful manipulation of facts with a particular focus on divisive issues of non-EU migration. A typical example of this information operation is the sustained efforts to tap into the population’s deep-seated fears and prejudices of the “other” through the selective amplification of stories referring to criminal acts committed by individuals of non-EU origin or simply, of different skin colour. This characterisation is then applied to whole groups in a continuous stream of one-sided “reports”,⁹⁰ as stories of positive integration are purposefully never voiced. The real victims of this treatment are not only those who happen to be of African or Arab origin, or a different faith, but also Slovak society, which through the constant stream of messaging targeting an ever-increasing number of online content consumers, is becoming more prejudiced, hateful, and divided.

Activity of the monitored channels

Of all the monitored Facebook channels, *Zdroji* has been the most active, publishing the highest number of posts related to the EP elections. This outlet was also the most active one throughout the Slovak presidential election campaign. Even though it published 285 relevant posts about EP elections, its reach is relatively limited, as it has the lowest number of fans (11,973 as of May 29, 2019) of all the monitored channels in Slovakia.

The second most-active outlet, *Hlavné správy* (Main News), published 218 posts related to the EP elections. However, the reach of this long-established outlet is much wider. It has its own popular web portal that claims to be a “conservative daily newspaper” that boasts “2 million readers per month”.⁹¹ According to the Slovak public database of unreliable sources, *konspiratori.sk*,⁹² this website “also shares different kinds of disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda from anonymous Russian websites or hoaxes from the Russian social network VK”.⁹³ At the end of the monitoring period, it had 39,989 fans on Facebook.

The third most-prolific channel in the context of the EP elections was *Slobodný vysielateľ* (Free Broadcast), which has by far the highest number of fans of all the monitored channels, with 85,519 by the end of the monitoring period. It operates a very successful radio website,⁹⁴ and its Facebook page with tens of thousands of fans works as a complementary part to this main dissemination portal, which is now partially crowd-funded. In terms of the content it disseminates, the free database of unreliable sources, *konspiratori.sk*, rated *Slobodný vysielateľ* 9.2⁹⁵ on a scale between 1 and 10, whereby the higher the rating, the more harmful and unreliable the rated outlet is.

88 <https://www.globsec.org/publications/character-assassination-conspiracies-and-manipulation-slovak-presidential-election-through-the-lens-of-disinformation-channels-on-facebook/>

89 <https://election-results.eu/national-results/slovakia/2019-2024/>

90 <https://www.facebook.com/hricalubos/>

91 <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/>

92 <https://www.konspiratori.sk/en/>

93 <https://www.konspiratori.sk/assets/screenshots/s.php?i=hlavnespravy.sk.png>

94 <https://slobodnyvysielac.sk/>

95 <https://www.konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok.php?id=41>

However, the number of fans and published posts are not the only indicators of the extent to which a certain channel is influential. One of the monitored channels, the public Facebook page *Hrica Lubos*, published only 7% of all the monitored content related to the EP elections. However, this page was very active throughout the course of the Slovak presidential election and managed to carve out a substantial fan base for itself. The page was created on December 17, 2017, and by May 29, 2019, it already had 19,060 fans. In terms of another important indicator, the PTAT (the number of people talking about a page), the outlet *Hrica Lubos* leads significantly, with an average of 18,194 page “storytellers”, followed by *InfoVojna* and *Hlavné správy*.

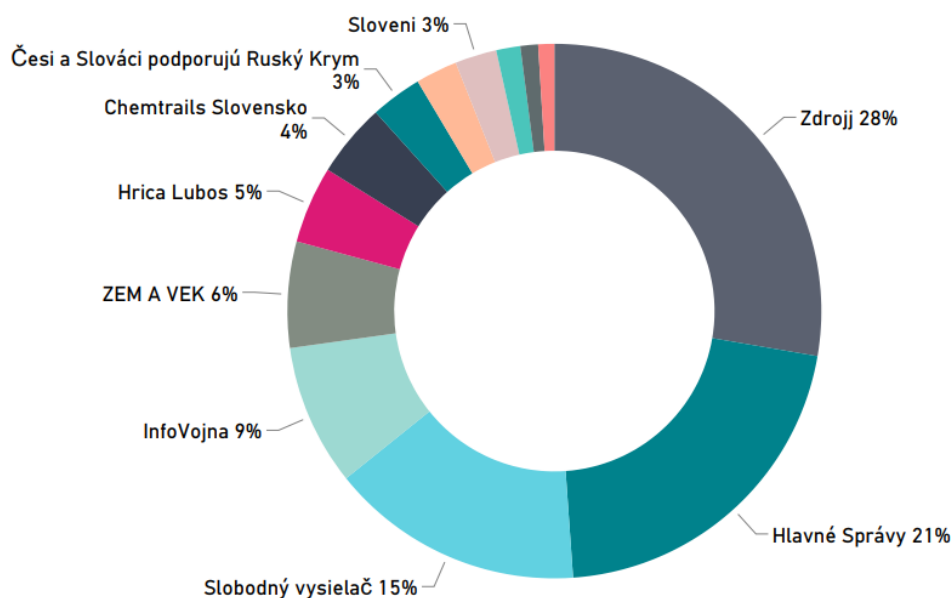


Figure 17: Activity of the monitored Facebook channels in the Slovak EP election

An alarmist and inflammatory post published on this page on May 20, 2019, prior to the EP elections actively promoted Salvini’s populist bloc, claiming that “we won’t be able to learn this from the TV and a similar event may not be possible in Europe within a week, due to political censorship and the regime”, suggesting that the EU is a totalitarian regime and that there is a conspiracy between the political elites and the media. The post further advises voters that “when voting, it is important to remember all the assassinations, murders, rapes, robberies, and other negative influences of uncontrolled migration and terrorism” for which the post subsequently blames the current European administration. It was shared 5,100 times,⁹⁶ which is an unusually high number of shares by Slovak standards. Although the page’s administrators are based in Italy, according to Facebook, the page is operated in the Slovak language and aimed at Slovak audiences.

Portrayal of political parties

In terms of the portrayal of political parties, the clear beneficiary of the highest number of positive mentions on the monitored channels was the extreme right-wing Kotleba-ĽSNS party, with 38 positive mentions overall, and a small number of negative portrayals. The space dedicated to this party included, for example, the promotion of a video with former judge Miroslav Radačovský, in which he speaks about “the need to leave NATO”, shared by *InfoVojna*. Radačovský at one time had been accused of the illicit manufacture and possession of narcotic and psychotropic substances and the illegal possession of firearms,⁹⁷ but later was acquitted of these charges. He will be one of Kotleba-ĽSNS’s 2 MEPs in the European Parliament, as the party secured 12% of the votes in the EP elections in Slovakia.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/hriclubos1/posts/878645769147058>

⁹⁷ <https://spis.korzar.sme.sk/c/22131088/nedavno-rozsudil-kiskov-pozemok-v-jeho-neprospech-uz-je-europoslancom.html>

⁹⁸ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/elections-press-kit/8/european-elections-results>

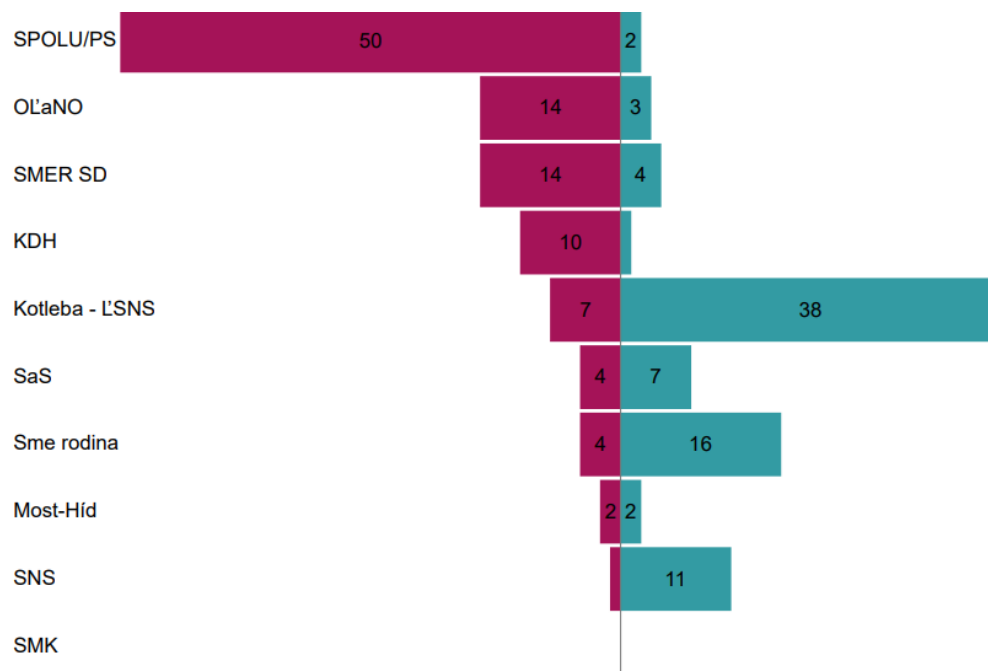


Figure 18: Negative and positive portrayals of Slovak political parties on the monitored Facebook channels

Another example of the active promotion of Kotleba-ĽSNS on the monitored channels was the sharing of the now infamous “no-go zones in Brussels” campaign video by *Hlavné správy*, in which Kotleba party candidates walk around Brussels claiming that “people have left in fear” from certain parts of the city, which now looks more like an African or Arab town.⁹⁹



Figure 19: “Former judge Radačovský on North Atlantic Alliance and the need to leave NATO”, source: InfoVojna

Interestingly, Kollár’s Sme rodina party also received a smaller amount of positive mentions on the monitored channels; however, in the election the party flopped completely, as it received only 3% of the votes.

In contrast, the pro-European coalition of SPOLU (Together) and Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia) was portrayed the most negatively of all the parties, receiving 50 negative mentions in the monitoring period. The ruling party, SMER SD (Direction–Social Democracy) was mentioned much less often, although predominantly in a negative context. This suggests a similarity with the intense character-assassination campaign led against

⁹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/www.hlavnespravy.sk/posts/2187280931309816>

President Zuzana Čaputová in the Slovak presidential election campaign,¹⁰⁰ as she was the official candidate of the Progresívne Slovensko party. The candidate of the SMER SD, Maroš Šefčovič, was portrayed much more neutrally in the runup to the election. Nevertheless, the coalition of SPOLU/PS won the EP elections in Slovakia with 20% of the votes. From the graph below (Fig. 20), it is clear that the support for Kotleba-ĽSNS culminated in the second half of May and surged again after the election results were announced. Even though PS/SPOLU were generally portrayed negatively, their mentions came predominantly after the election, reflecting the coalition's win in the election.

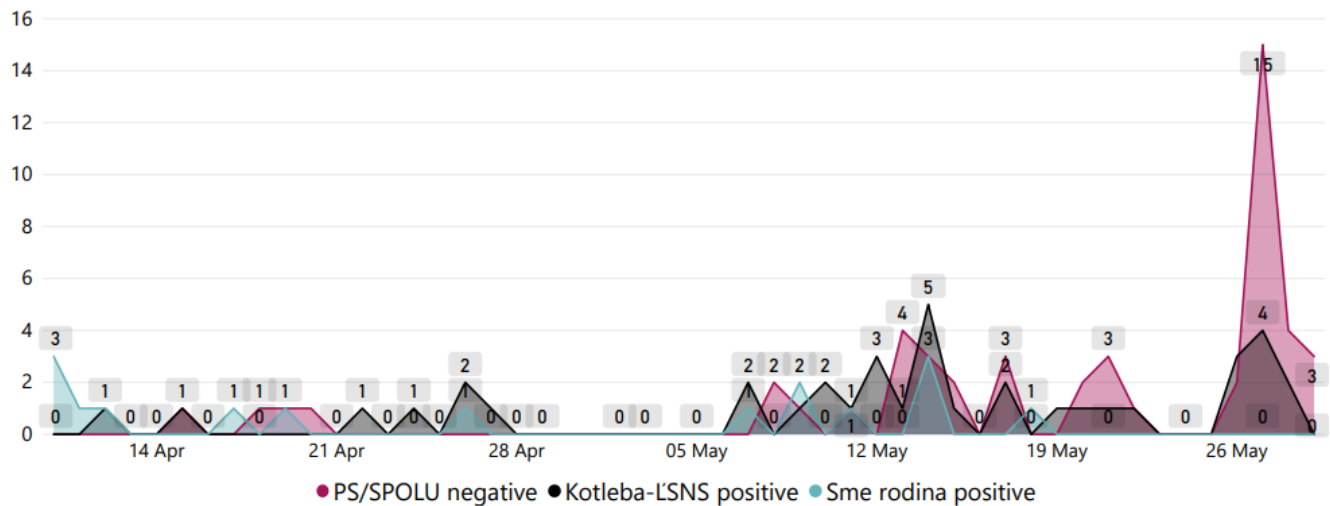


Figure 20: Portrayal of selected Slovak political parties in time

In both the Slovak presidential election and the EP elections, the monitored channels that publish controversial content demonstrated the arbitrary tactic of gravitating towards the promotion of the “anti-system” political representation with the higher chance of succeeding. Unlike in the Slovak presidential election where the monitored channels very actively promoted Štefan Harabin and often even criticised Marian Kotleba,¹⁰¹ in the EP elections, they dedicated considerable space to the active promotion of Kotleba-ĽSNS while the populist Sme rodina party was sometimes criticised for its alleged “hypocrisy”.¹⁰²

Most popular narratives

Similar to other countries in the V4, in Slovakia, the narratives promoted the most by the monitored channels that often publish controversial content were those aimed at portraying the EU in a negative light, such as the post by *Zem a Vek* (Earth and Age) on May 29 that attempted to portray the EU as a totalitarian enterprise.¹⁰³ These narratives of the EU as an antagonistic entity to Slovak interests is coupled with the narrative of “nationalism as the only solution”. The third most-dominant narrative in the monitoring period in Slovakia was “migration as a threat”. This narrative occurred 72 times in posts that also often used alarming language portraying migration as an existential threat, despite the fact that Slovakia has been affected by the 2015 migration crisis only to a very limited extent and despite the extremely small number of non-EU asylum-seekers who applied for refuge in Slovakia in 2017 and 2018.¹⁰⁴

The narrative “liberalism undermining society” was utilised quite often on the monitored channels, often combined with other narratives, such as “conspiracy & hidden interests”. For example, the Facebook page *IdemVolit.sk* (I am going to vote.sk) published a post about Sloboda a Solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity), a liberal party, suggesting that “the leader of the party to the EP elections is a person active in many NGOs and also in a high position in Soros’s OSF. We need to thank him also for spreading politics into our schools”.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.globsec.org/publications/character-assassination-conspiracies-and-manipulation-slovak-presidential-election-through-the-lens-of-disinformation-channels-on-facebook/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.globsec.org/publications/slovak-presidential-election-followed-through-facebook-disinformation-channels/>

¹⁰² <https://www.facebook.com/www.hlavnespravysk/posts/2198172186887357>

¹⁰³ <https://www.facebook.com/ZEMAVEK/posts/1318644804953174>

¹⁰⁴ [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Number_of_\(non-EU\)_asylum_seekers_in_the_EU_and_EFTA_Member_States,_2017_and_2018_\(thousands_of_first_time_applicants\)_YB19.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Number_of_(non-EU)_asylum_seekers_in_the_EU_and_EFTA_Member_States,_2017_and_2018_(thousands_of_first_time_applicants)_YB19.png)

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/idemvolitsk/posts/2815351358689330>

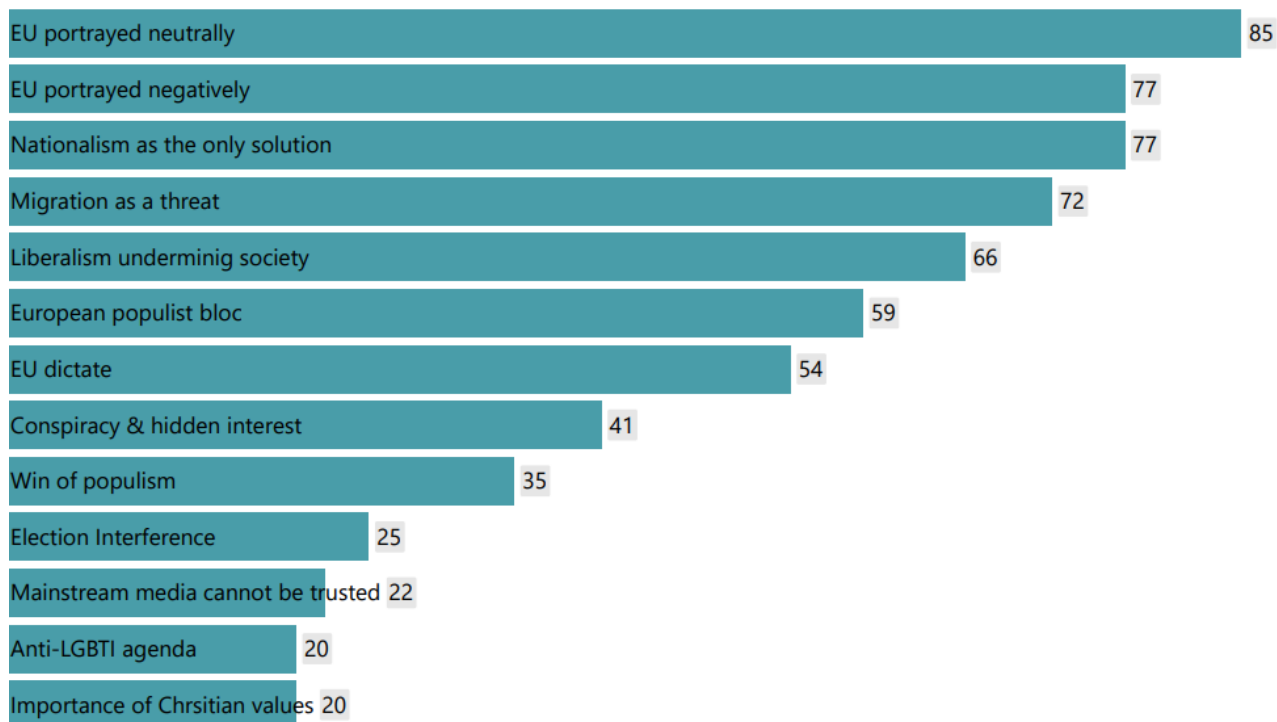


Figure 21: The most often deployed narratives in the context of the EP elections in Slovakia

It goes to show how successful the discourse framing NGOs and civil-society demonization in Slovakia has been by these channels, as the mere suggestion of a candidate's association with this sector serves as a measure of distrust.



Figure 22: Example of the “EU portrayed negatively” narrative published on Zem & Vek: “Voting in the European Parliament is a total farce”

Narratives associated with the EP elections in particular, such as discussion of a “European populist bloc” or “EU dictate”, were supported by the already well-established narratives of “election interference”, “mainstream media cannot be trusted”, and an “anti-LGBTI agenda”. All of these narratives played a prominent role in the previous Slovak presidential election,¹⁰⁶ which demonstrates how easy it is to utilise a particular narrative once it has been planted and became part and parcel of public discourse.

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.globsec.org/publications/character-assassination-conspiracies-and-manipulation-slovak-presidential-election-through-the-lens-of-disinformation-channels-on-facebook/>

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Confederation KORWiN	Confederation KORWiN Braun Liroy Nationalists
ČSSD	Česká strana sociálně demokratická (Czech Social Democratic Party)
DK	Demokratikus Koalíció (Democratic Coalition)
EP	European Parliament
EPP	The European People's Party
EU	European Union
KDH	Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie (Christian Democratic Movement)
KDNP	Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt (Christian Democratic People's Party)
Kotleba-ĽSNS	Kotleba-Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (Kotleba - People's Party Our Slovakia)
KSČM	Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia)
LMP	Lehet Más a Politika (Another Politics Is Possible)
MKKP	Magyar Kétfarkú Kutya Párt (Hungarian Two-tailed Dog Party)
MSZP-P	Magyar Szocialista Párt (The Hungarian Socialist Party)
ODS	Občanská demokratická strana (Civic Democratic Party)
OLaNO	OBYČAJNÍ ĽUDIA a nezávislé osobnosti (Ordinary People and Independent Personalities)
PM	Prime Minister
PS	Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia)
SaS	Sloboda a Solidarita (Freedom and Solidarity)
SMER SD	SMER Sociálna demokracia (SMER Social Democracy)
SNS	Slovenská národná strana (Slovak National Party)
SPD	Svoboda a přímá demokracie (Freedom and Direct Democracy)
STAN	Starostové a nezávislí (Mayors and Independents)
V4	The Visegrad Group: Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia





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