POLISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS FOLLOWED THROUGH FACEBOOK DISINFORMATION CHANNELS

THE MOST POPULAR DISINFORMATION PAGES ON FACEBOOK

The monitoring[1] of pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda in the context of the elections to the Polish parliament shows that there was less activity in this regard than during the campaign in the run-up to the European Parliament elections[2]. Some of the analysed channels on Facebook concentrated on personal attacks on politicians and public figures, most often those known for their critical views of the ruling party.

The graph below shows the popularity of the 6 most popular channels on Facebook (out of 14 analysed[3]) known for propagating pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation content before the parliamentary elections in Poland (which took place on October 13).[4]

Prior to the election day, both parties/coalitions leading in the polls were targeted with negative comments on Facebook. The Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), which eventually came second in the elections, was portrayed negatively 36 times, while the ruling Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość), the winner, received 17 negative posts from the analysed channels. Other parties/coalitions were almost ignored by the monitored outlets.
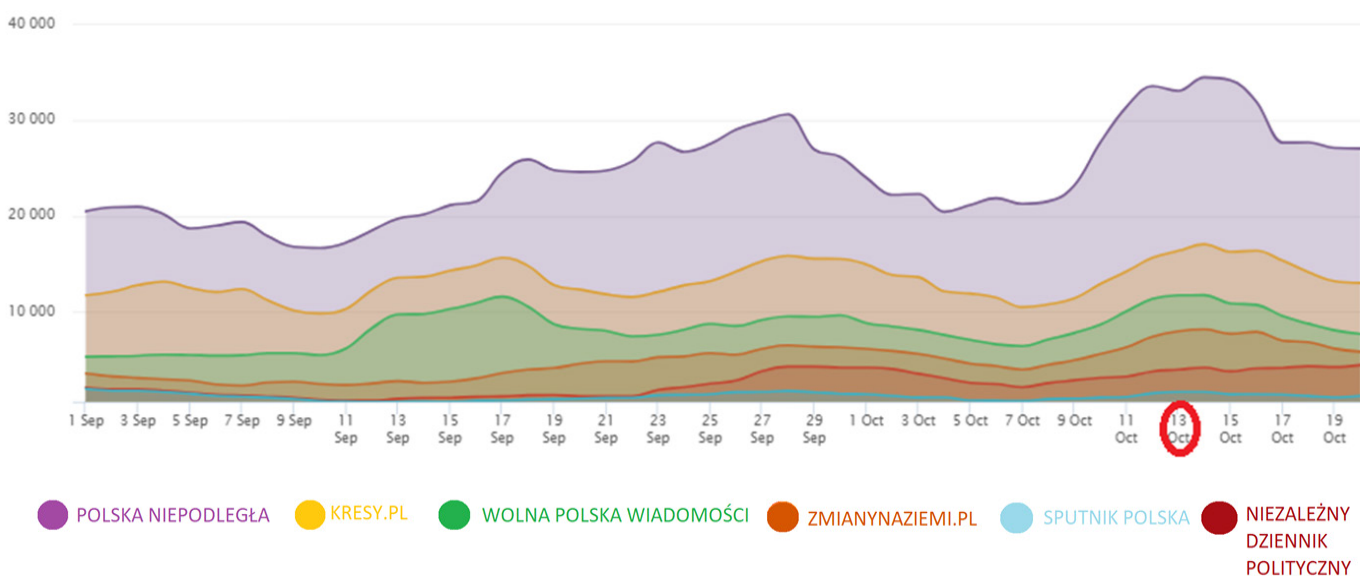
The most influential Facebook disinformation outlets by page storytellers (the number of people talking about the page), source: ZoomSphere
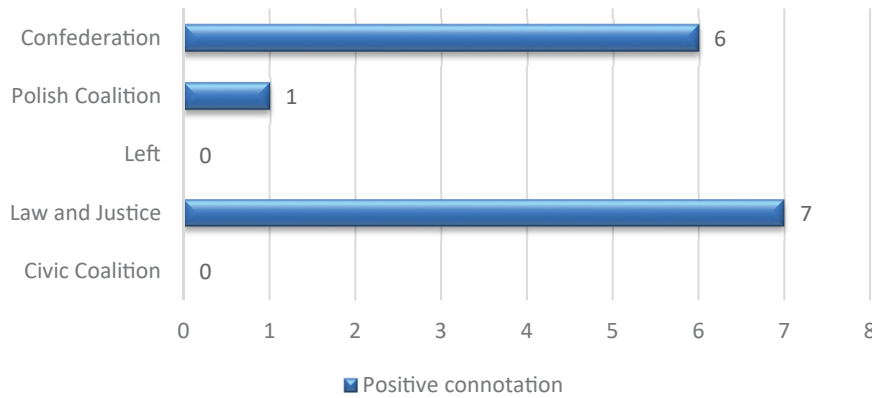
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1   Based on data from ZoomSphere, 14 most relevant pro-Kremlin disinformation channels in Poland on Facebook were identified based on the following criteria: the number of fans, the number of people talking about the page (see below), and information provided about the parliamentary campaign. Those Facebook pages officially or unofficially linked to specific candidates were excluded from monitoring. 154 posts relevant to the Polish parliamentary elections were analysed within the timeframe of September 1 – October 13, 2019. For more information about the methodology, see p. 5.
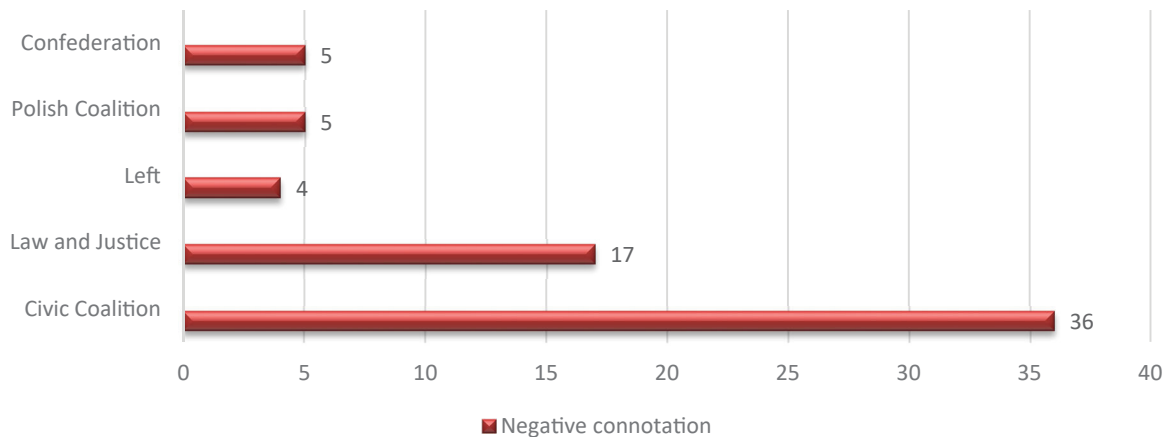2   See: https://sea.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/European-Elections-in-the-V4..pdf.
3   Interestingly the "Alternews" channel, which was very active during the campaign to the European Parliament, stopped its communication activities right after the elections to the EP and was not active at all during the election campaign to the Polish parliament. For more information about this channel see https://sea.org.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/European-Elections-in-the-V4..pdf
4   For more information regarding disinformation cases see: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/

Positive connotation

Party/Coalition	Positive connotation
Confederation	6
Polish Coalition	1
Left	0
Law and Justice	7
Civic Coalition	0

■ Positive connotation

Negative conotation

Party/Coalition	Negative connotation
Confederation	5
Polish Coalition	5
Left	4
Law and Justice	17
Civic Coalition	36

■ Negative connotation

Connotation towards parties/coalitions

MOST POPULAR NARRATIVES AND MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES

Despite several voter turnout campaigns taking place, there were also actors who argued for boycotting the elections, as well as those who were portraying the electoral process as irrelevant by claiming that it did not matter who the voters voted for. The most active channel in this regard, known for its anti-Semitic rhetoric, was Free Poland News (Wolna Polska Wiadomości, with over 34 thousand 'likes' on Facebook). Out of 6 posts calling for this political act of social disobedience, 4 were published just days ahead of election day. Given the highest turnout since 1989 (61.74%), the efforts of this channel may be summed up as ineffective. This channel, also known for its liking for conspiracy and "hidden interests" narratives, was closest to the far right and pro-Russian Confederation.[5]

As this monitoring revealed less occurrences of particular narratives, more focus was put on particular manipulation techniques which were used to target political opponents.

The Independent Poland (Polska Niepodległa) account, which publishes a monthly "Polska Niepodległa" in print, was by far the most popular channel. With over 125 thousand 'likes', it published 47 posts relevant to the elections - the highest number of all of the analysed channels. It criticised the Civic Coalition (26 negative posts) throughout the campaign. In terms of modus operandi, the majority of critical posts about the Civic Coalition focused on personal attacks.[6] At the same time, out of all the parties, it mostly promoted the Law and Justice party (6 positive posts).

While the number of specific narratives covered by all the channels is insignificant in terms of their quantity and impact, cases were observed of mocking of particular candidates (13 posts), personal attacks (8 posts) and attacks on influencers (celebrities) known for their political views (5 posts)[7]. As Independent Poland (Polska Niepodległa) was the channel that used this method most actively[8], Independent Political Daily (Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny) published several posts with suggestive titles implying that it had discovered a scandalous and shocking story[9].
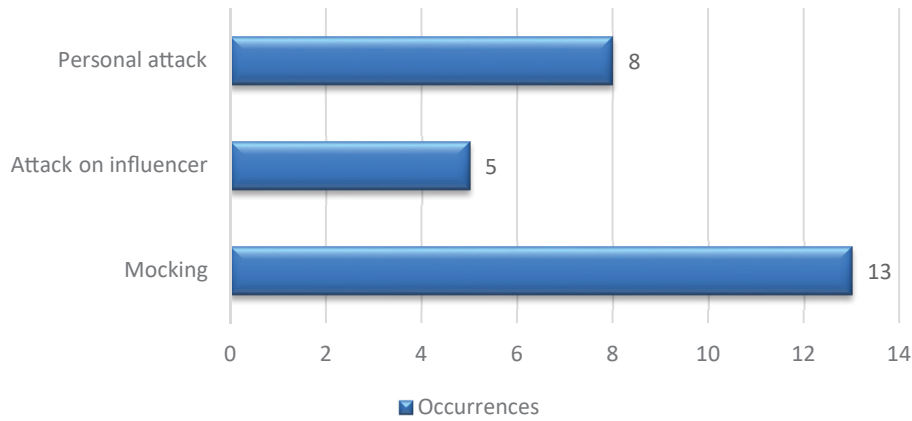
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5   See for example: https://www.facebook.com/WolnaPolskaInfo/posts/2169978699778793.
6   See for example: https://www.facebook.com/367860750012152_1713788348752712 or https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1708701005928113.
7   There is a subtle, yet distinguishable difference between "mocking", "personal attack" and "attack on an influencer". A "mocking" type of attack is less aggressive than a "personal attack" and its goal is often to ridicule the opponent. A "personal attack" is more direct in its criticism. An "attack on an influencer" includes posts attacking actors and celebrities known for their political preferences. The rising role of influencers during this campaign was noticeable and is a natural process which has been experienced in marketing with the rise of social media.
8   See https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1689443151187232 or https://www.facebook.com/PolskaNiepodlegla/posts/1688661301265417.
9   See https://www.facebook.com/NiezaleznyDziennikPolityczny/posts/1546091115597376

Occurrences

Occurrences of particular types of attacks

Importantly, Independent Poland (Polska Niepodległa) distinguished itself again from other channels (just as during the campaign ahead of the elections to the European Parliament) by focusing on discrediting specific candidates. An emotionally-charged headline and posts are a typical communication style of this channel. Posts of this kind, often reinforced by an exclamation mark, are a common feature of disinformation outlets.[10]

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected between 1.9.2019 and 13.10.2019 from 14 relevant Facebook pages identified as producing disinformation content and pro-Kremlin narratives: Sputnik Polska, Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny, Wolna Polska Wiadomości, Kresy.pl, Xportal.pl, namzalezy.pl, NEon24, zmianynaziemi.pl, Anonymous Info Army Poland, konserwatyzm.pl, Alternews.pl Wolne Media, Stowarzyszenie Klub Inteligencji Polskiej and Polska Niepodległa.

The data was filtered through the term 'wybor' ('election'), and then labelled based on the sentiment toward a party/coalition and the most prevalent narratives/manipulation techniques identified.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, perhaps one of the explanations for the reduced amount of activity in the run-up to the parliamentary elections compared to the elections to the European Parliament is that the results were more predictable for the former than for the latter. All of the polls published one month before the election day predicted that the Law and Justice party would secure a majority in the Polish parliament, which it did, although only with a slight lead.

The second explanation for the lack of significant interference by the analysed channels could be that pro-Kremlin channels in Poland had no interest in a change of government in Poland. Hence, no action was needed on their part. The Alternews channel is an example - while it was one of the 3 most popular channels among 15 analysed during the previous monitoring (elections to the European Parliament), this time, it was silent.

Also, Facebook is only one of several social media platforms used to influence elections. This analysis did not focus on monitoring other platforms, such as Twitter or Instagram.

10   For more information see: http://mythbusters.csm.org.pl/index.php/guide/