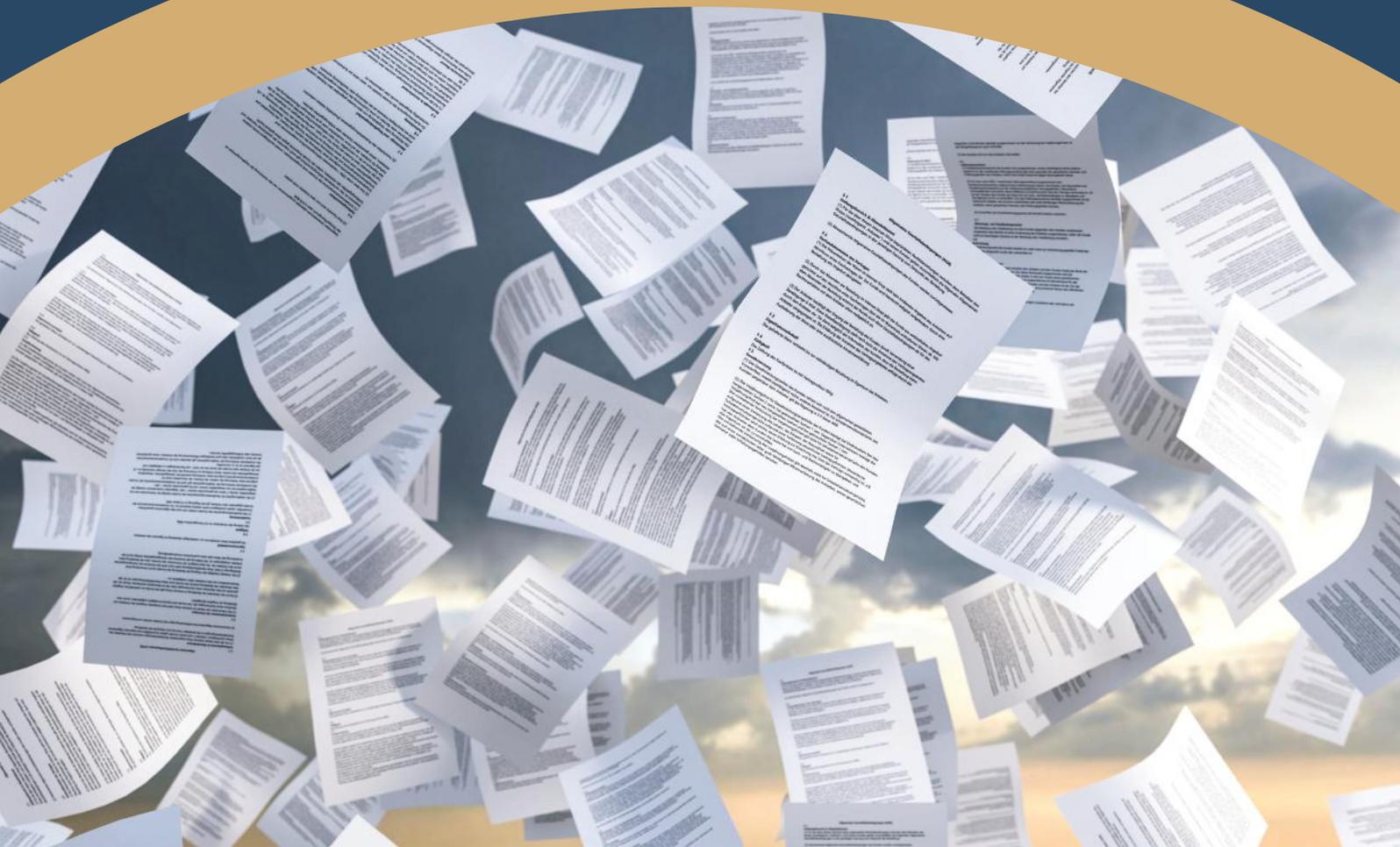


CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, CONSPIRACIES AND MANIPULATION: Slovak presidential election through the lens of disinformation channels on Facebook

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METHODOLOGY

Data was collected between 10.1.2019 and 3.4.2019 from 14 relevant Facebook pages identified by blbec.online as producing disinformation content and pro-Kremlin narratives: Hlavné Správy, Hrica Ľuboš, InfoVojna, Konzervatívny výber, Ľuboš Blaha, Národ Slovenský, Otec Marián “Maroš” Kuffa, Ruské spravodajstvo, Sila Pravdy, Slobodný vysielateľ, Sloveni, Spravodajská alternatíva, Zdrojj, and Zem a Vek. The data was filtered using the term “president” (prezident in Slovak) and then labelled based on the sentiment toward a presidential candidate, and the most prevalent narratives identified. The “friends” network of the monitored Facebook pages was created with the aid of Netvizz.

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

The most often mentioned candidate on the monitored disinformation channels on Facebook prior to the first round of the election was Štefan Harabin, followed by Zuzana Čaputová. Harabin was also portrayed most positively of all the candidates, with 60% of all the posts associated with him having a positive connotation.

On the contrary, Čaputová was portrayed most negatively of all the candidates and became the target of an intense anti-campaign and character assassination, particularly once Robert Mistrík gave up his candidacy and backed her on the 26th of February.

Maroš Šefčovič has not become the target of an intense disinformation campaign despite being a high-ranking EU representative and although his candidacy was openly supported by the Slovak ruling party, SMER-SD. In general, he was mentioned less often than both Harabin and Čaputová, suggesting that the monitored disinformation pages never perceived him as viable competition to Harabin.

The most recurring narratives used on the observed disinformation channels in relation to the presidential election were “liberalism as a threat undermining the stability of society”, along with “election interference”, “conspiracy and hidden interests” and “mainstream media cannot be trusted”.

The deployment of these narratives was used not only to discredit the liberal presidential candidates but also to undermine Slovak citizens’ trust in the electoral process itself, priming disinformation channel audiences for the eventuality that their preferred candidate would not succeed, prompting them to question the democratic process itself.

To achieve these goals, a number of tactics were used including tapping into the population’s existing fears, exploiting racial prejudices and stereotypes, utilising well-established conspiracy theories, and creating new ones and implicating particular candidates in them, for example, by using digitally altered photographs.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents a summary of the key findings from monitoring of the Slovak presidential election conducted between 10th of January 2019, when the race for the office of president officially began, until the 3rd of April, which allowed the research to include a few days immediately following the election. The monitoring focused solely on the representations of presidential candidates on the most significant public disinformation channels on Facebook, the portrayals of the candidates on these outlets, as well as the particular narratives spread in relation to the election.

The Facebook pages were selected based on the following criteria: the publication of disinformation content documented via blbec.online, number of fans, number of people talking about the page, and inclusion on the page of information on the campaign itself. In total, 1,312 posts were analysed.

The monitoring identified the frequent use of character assassination aimed at certain candidates through the intense spread of disinformation and a broad selection of new as well as already well-established conspiracy theories and narratives to influence the electorate's voting behaviour. The use of these tactics often coincided with important dates, for example, in reaction to published opinion polls or in anticipation of a major event, such as one suggesting that the election had been meddled with as a way of priming audiences for the possible loss of the preferred "anti-system" candidate.

MENTIONS AND PERCEPTIONS OF CANDIDATES

With a few exceptions, the monitored disinformation pages on Facebook had a preferred candidate, Štefan Harabin. A former justice minister and a Constitutional Court judge built his campaign on fighting the “Islamisation of Europe” and liberalism and support for “traditional Christian values”. Given his long-standing career within Slovak state structures, it is quite ironic that he managed to portray himself as an “anti-system” candidate. He had been rather active in the disinformation scene even before his candidacy and his official presidential campaign page referred to articles from *Zem a Vek*¹ and *Extraplus*², both far-reaching disinformation outlets in Slovakia.

The most successful of them after Harabin was Marian Kotleba, who had 10,3% of the votes. His far-right political party, Kotleba-ĽSNS, has 13 representatives in parliament and its very existence is currently the subject of a Supreme Court hearing based on a General Prosecutor’s suggestion that the party should be dissolved due to its fascist tendencies, activities, and programme in breach of the Slovak constitution. During the presidential campaign, Kotleba was never perceived as a potential winner. Rather, he managed to mobilise his electoral base in preparation for the upcoming May European Parliament and 2020 Slovak parliamentary elections. From this perspective, his candidacy in the

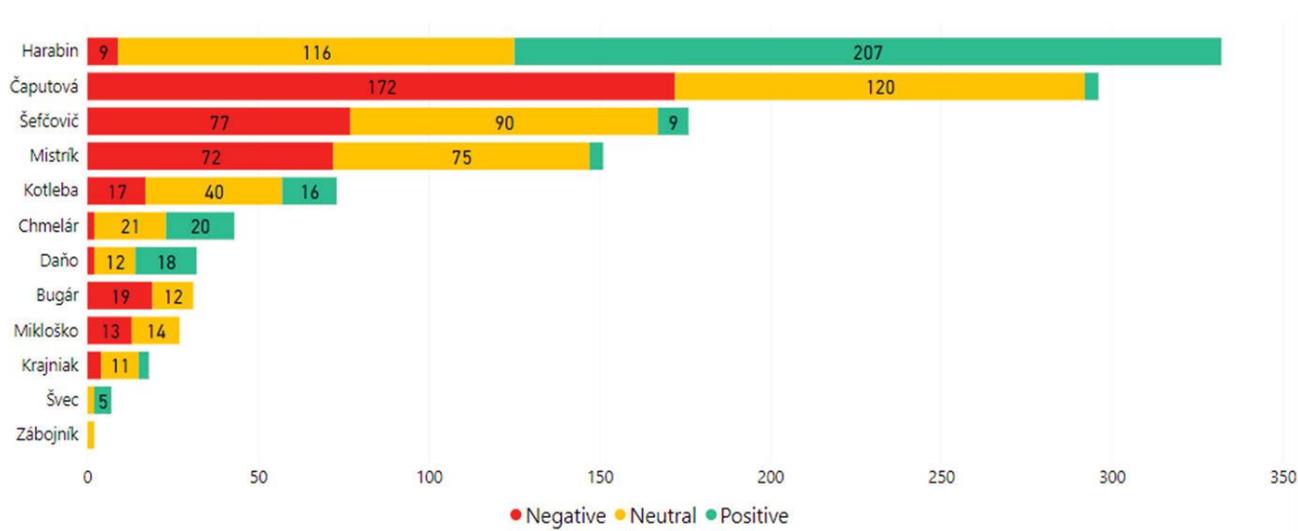


Figure 1: Mentions and perceptions of candidates up to the first round of the presidential election

Out of 332 posts mentioning Harabin, only 2,7% had a negative connotation. Prior to the first round of the election on the 16th of March, he was the most mentioned candidate on the monitored channels and was portrayed very positively, in stark contrast to the other presidential candidates. He ended up third after the first round of the election with 14,3% of the votes.

A number of other candidates could also be described as self-declared “anti-system” products.

presidential election represents a success that will benefit him and his party in the near future.

Eduard Chmelár, who managed to win 59,000 votes in the first round of the presidential election, is a pro-Kremlin political analyst who often perpetuates the narrative of “dangerous political NGOs”. The other two anti-liberal democratic candidates, Martin Daňo and Róbert Švec, obtained a negligible number of votes in the first round.

¹ <https://zemavek.sk/na-ta3-harabin-hovoril-o-rieseniach-caputova-so-sefcovicom-dokopy-nic-nepovedali/>

² <https://www.extraplus.sk/clanok/kandidat-z-vole-ludu-0>

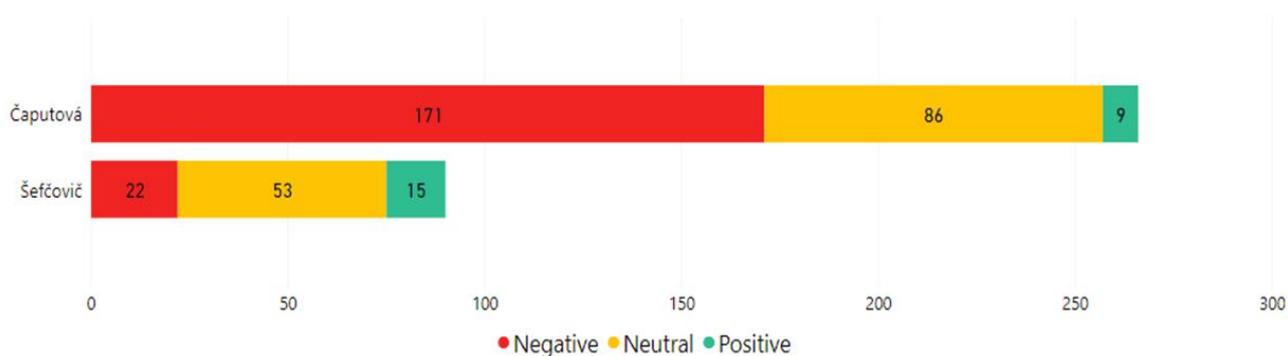


Figure 2: Mentions and perceptions of candidates after the first round of the presidential election

Čaputová, a lawyer and environmental activist, was the clear winner of both the first and second rounds of the presidential election, winning 41% and 58% of the votes, respectively. As a pro-European liberal candidate, she was the target of an intense disinformation campaign and character assassination efforts. The monitored disinformation outlets focused on her persona almost as much as they focused on Harabin's, however, unlike Harabin, the majority of the posts (58%) about Čaputová had a negative connotation. This proportion was even higher after the first round of the election at 64% of posts.

In contrast to that, posts about Šefčovič, an established diplomat and a current vice-president of the European Commission, whose portfolio is the Energy Union, was much less negative compared to those about Čaputová's up to the first round, with 43% of all posts mentioning him having had a negative connotation. This percentage decreased to only 24% in the runup to the second round of the election and shortly after (see Šefčovič's negative perceptions in Figure 1 as compared with Figure 2).

This difference is rather startling because as a high-ranking EU officer and a candidate openly supported by Slovakia's long-ruling SMER-SD, it could be expected that he would generate as many negative posts, if not more, than the liberal environmental activist. A plausible explanation could be that the disinformation scene never perceived him as the liberal candidate that had a real chance of winning and so focused primarily on Čaputová.

Absolute numbers confirm this notion, with Šefčovič mentioned generally much less often compared with both Čaputová and Harabin, even though he made it to the second round with more than 400,000 votes (19%). However, up to the first round of the election, posts referring to his candidacy amounted to roughly half of the posts dedicated to Harabin and in the run-up to the second round, posts dedicated to Šefčovič represented about a third of those dedicated to Čaputová only, as Figures 1 and 2 demonstrate.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE THREE MOST RELEVANT CANDIDATES OVER TIME

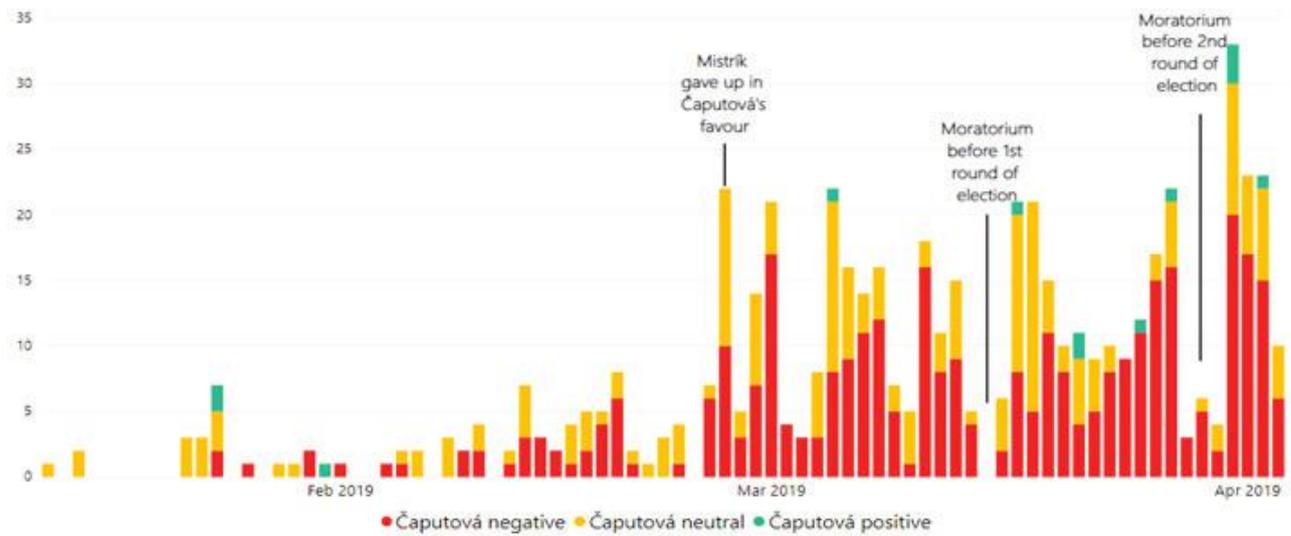


Figure 3: Perceptions of Zuzana Čaputová

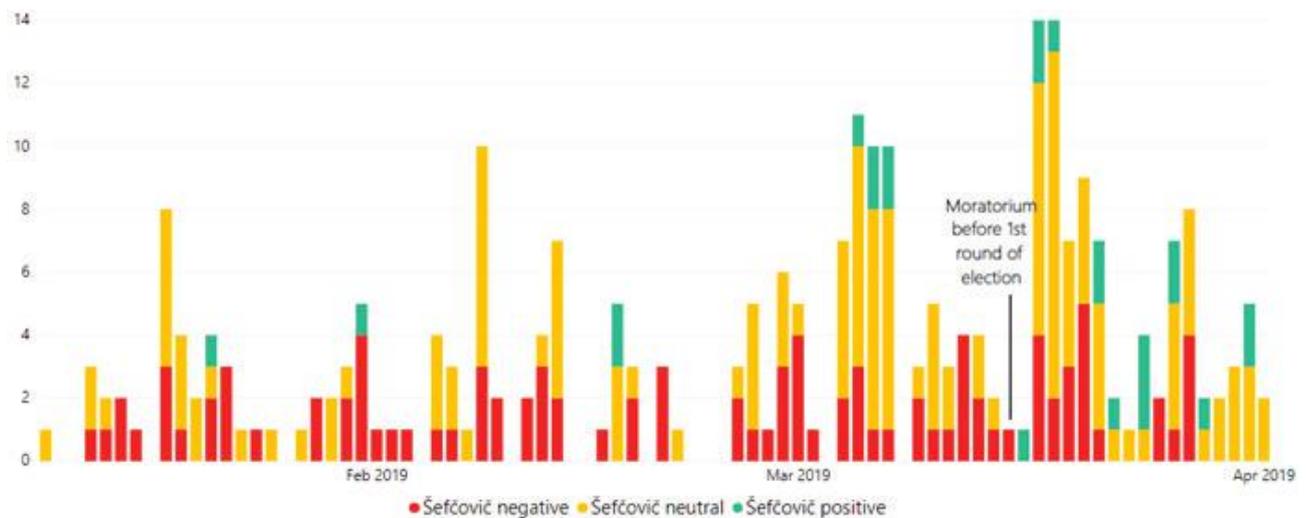


Figure 4: Perceptions of Maroš Šeďčovič

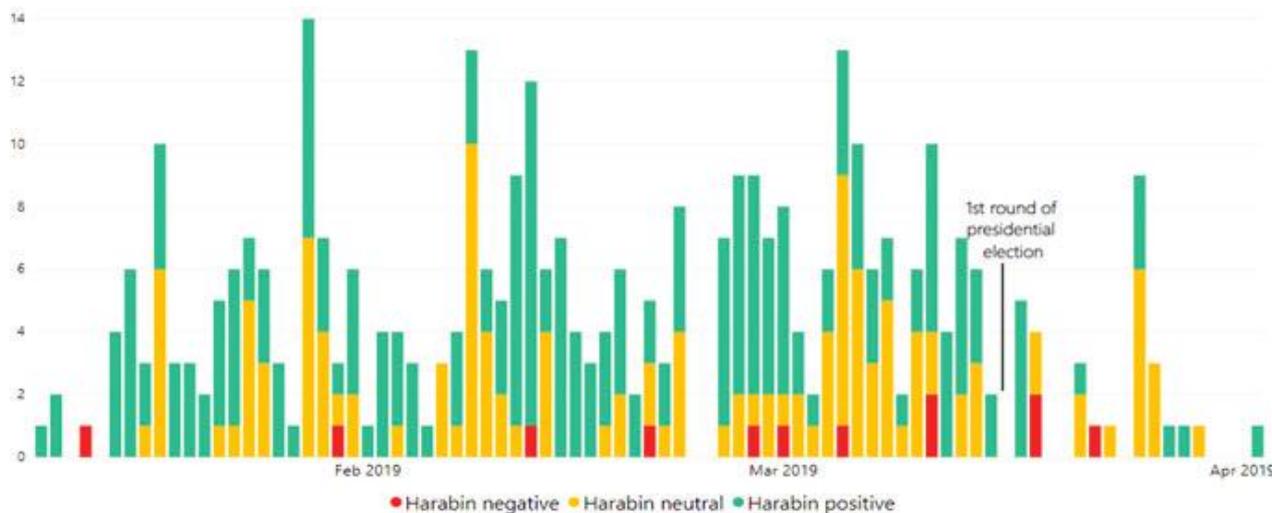


Figure 5: Perceptions of Štefan Harabin

Temporal analysis of sentiment development regarding the three most relevant presidential candidates on the monitored disinformation pages sheds light not only on how differently all three were perceived and portrayed but also on the particular triggers that elucidated intense reactions, as reflected in the steep rise in the number of posts referring to Čaputová and the rise in her negative portrayal, in particular by the end of February.

This negative perception culminated on the 1st of March, a few days after another liberal candidate, Mistrík, gave up his candidacy and endorsed her, thereby increasing her chances of winning the election significantly. This was reflected in two major opinion polls conducted by polling agencies AKO and FOCUS, which suggested that the popularity of Čaputová was steeply rising. Up until that point, the monitored Facebook channels scarcely paid attention to her candidacy.

The highest number of posts with a negative reference to Čaputová appeared immediately after she won the election (see Figure 3), deploying a number of narratives and conspiracies with the aim of delegitimising the election result, such as linking her with George Soros, the ultimate scapegoat of the disinformation scene, or suggesting that civil society and mainstream media, which engaged in mass protests following the murder of investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in February 2018, successfully orchestrated a “coup” by harnessing popular discontent to ensure that dissatisfied citizens voted for Čaputová.

The perception of Šefčovič on the monitored disinformation channels is somewhat similar to Čaputová’s in that it intensified by the end of February and at the beginning of March. However, he was mostly portrayed in neutral terms and sometimes even positively. His positive portrayal grew further

after the first round when some of the disinformation outlets began to perceive him as the “lesser of two evils”. Around this time, some disinformation channels, such as *InfoVojna* and *Zdroji*, began to focus on the social aspect of his programme and reported that Miloš Zeman, the pro-Kremlin populist president of the Czech Republic, openly supported Šefčovič in the presidential race. Šefčovič himself went as far as courting the support of the Catholic priest Maroš Kuffa, notoriously known for his broadcast sermons that spread an anti-LGBTI and anti-women’s rights agenda.

Since the beginning of the race for the office of the president, Harabin was actively promoted by the monitored disinformation channels on Facebook. This constant support and space dedicated to the promotion of his campaign ceased to some extent only after the first round of the election. However, on the 25th of March, Harabin generated positive mentions on the monitored disinformation channels once again, as he informed his audiences that he had submitted a constitutional complaint in relation to the presidential election, claiming that the electoral process has not been conducted in a constitutional and legal manner. On the 2nd of April, the disinformation outlet *Sila pravdy* published a post citing a collaborative effort by Harabin and Kotleba to gather evidence for the supposed malpractice that was alleged to have occurred in the presidential election. Harabin filed yet another complaint with the Constitutional Court following the second round of the election on the 11th of April, based on the same reasons and advocating for the election to be declared void and re-run. This was to be expected, as the disinformation channels had begun to utilise the narrative of election interference significantly to prime their audiences and instil mistrust in the electoral process itself ever since opinion polls suggested growing preferences for liberal candidates at the end of February and at the beginning of March (see Figure 6).

NARRATIVES DEPLOYED BY THE SOURCES



Figure 6: Narratives by source

Differences in the number of posts published and narratives pushed were observed among the disinformation outlets. In a comparison of the monitored Facebook pages, Zdroj turned out to be the most active in both pushing the widest variety of narratives and publishing the most posts. The policy of this page is to repost articles and information from both mainstream media and other disinformation outlets. This Facebook page served as a significant amplifier of Harabin's output, from his blogs on *Hlavné správy* (*Main News*) to his Facebook posts and videos. Interestingly, Zdroj also criticised Kotleba for splitting the “anti-system” votes and thus portrayed him as damaging the “national interest”. This narrative reoccurred also after the first round when it was known that the combined votes of Harabin and Kotleba had reached 25%. Had Harabin and Kotleba cooperated on a single candidacy, one of the “anti-system” candidates could have technically passed into the second round if the votes had been the same. In addition, the high number of posts is also reflected in the tendency of the Zdroj Facebook page to post several messages about a single issue from multiple sources.

While *Hlavné správy* (*Main News*) is the most read and visited disinformation website in Slovakia, which, according to Similar web³ had over 8.5

million total visitors in March 2019 and its Facebook page is among the most influential disinformation pages on Facebook based on the number of page storytellers—the number of people talking about the Facebook account. From the pie chart below, it is possible, however, to observe that it only published 24% of all posts connected with the presidential election. While the Zdroj Facebook page is a channel that reposts particular posts from various sources if they fit the topic the page is currently pushing, the Facebook page of *Hlavné správy* (*Main News*) promotes articles published on its website. Furthermore, *Hlavné správy* (*Main News*) is the most read disinformation and most pro-Kremlin website in Slovakia because it appears to be an unbiased news portal republishing press releases from domestic and international press agencies and covering various topics. False and distorted information is intertwined with the press releases, making it difficult to distinguish between them for readers who have low media literacy and who read only clickbait headlines or the first paragraphs of articles.

³ <https://www.similarweb.com/website/hlavnespravysk>

POST ACTIVITY OF THE MOST RELEVANT SOURCES

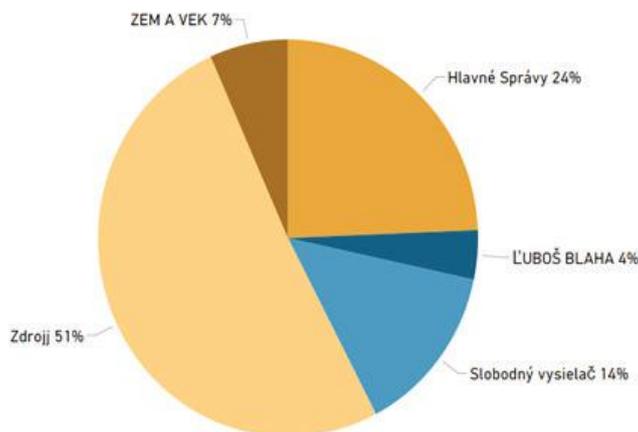


Figure 6: Narratives by source

Interestingly, one of the most influential disinformation accounts in Slovakia with a high number of page storytellers is the official Facebook profile of a Slovak member of parliament, Ľuboš Blaha. Mr Blaha is known for his long posts and videos in which he addresses his followers and the general public. While his Facebook page was only the fifth most active based on the number of posts published (only 4%), it was the second most active Facebook page in spreading various disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories. The big fan base and impact of Blaha's Facebook page could have been utilised in Šefčovič's official campaign

to portray Čaputová negatively. Several sponsored posts with an official disclaimer connecting it to the campaign of Šefčovič were observed in March prior to the first round.⁴ The spokesperson of the political party SMER-SD, Ján Mažgút, declared that the disclaimer in the sponsored posts was attributed to Šefčovič's official political campaign by a "mistake of party's communications administrators." However, a social media expert excluded such advertisements to be just "coincidences."⁵ The disclaimers connecting Mr Blaha's sponsored posts to Šefčovič's campaign appeared in various posts over several days.



Source: Facebook, Ľuboš Blaha (source of screenshot Zomri and SME)

Left: Sponsored Facebook post with a disclaimer connecting the post to the official campaign of Maroš Šefčovič
Right: Sponsored Facebook post with a disclaimer connecting the post to the official campaign of Maroš Šefčovič, with political party SMER-SD being the sponsor

4 <https://dennikn.sk/1407462/smer-spojil-blahove-statusy-proti-caputovej-so-sefcovicovu-kampanou-potom-cuvol/?ref=tema>

5 <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22073442/pod-blahovymi-utocnymi-statusmi-vyskocilo-upozornenie-na-sefcovicovu-kampan.html>

THE MOST RECURRING NARRATIVES

Several recurring narratives and particular ways of information-framing were identified in the course of monitoring during the presidential election. The most frequently occurring was the keyword “liberalism”, in the sense of a negative phenomenon and ideology forcefully promoted by specific groups in society aiming to undermine the so-called “traditional values” of a given society. This narrative dominated because it was most often mentioned in relation to Čaputová (107 times), who received the highest number of mentions on the monitored disinformation channels overall.

The narrative of “election interference” was often utilised with the aim to cause distrust in the democratic electoral process itself once it became clear that the candidate favoured by the monitored disinformation channels would face strong competition, as suggested in opinion polls at the beginning of March. This narrative was again most often linked to Čaputová, at 72 times. In comparison, the disinformation channels used this narrative in relation to Šefčovič only 15 times.

Suggestions of conspiracies and hidden interests interfering significantly in the electoral process, as well as portraying mainstream media as complicit in this conspiracy also played a major role in the way the monitored channels framed information related to the presidential election. The desired effect of such representations was to falsely spread alarm, increase distrust in democratic institutions, and further polarise Slovak society.

Narrative	Occurrence
Liberalism undermining society	175
Election Interference	140
Conspiracy & hidden interests	131
Media cannot be trusted	130
Traditional values under attack	111
Corruption and influence of oligarchs	93
Nationalism	90
Anti-US agenda	70
Anti-LGBTI agenda	61
Influence of NGOs	56

TOP 5 NARRATIVES BEFORE THE FIRST ROUND OF THE ELECTION

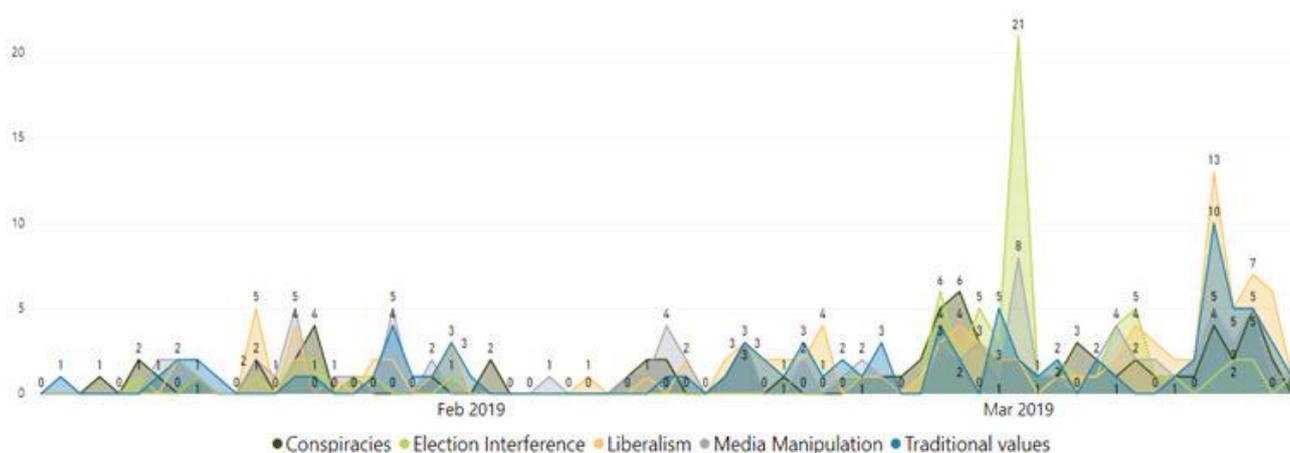


Figure 8: Top 5 narratives before the first round of the election

Looking at the five most recurring narratives and their deployment in time, a clear increase in the narratives “conspiracies and hidden interests”, “media manipulation” and particularly “election interference” can be observed particularly on the 1st of March. This coincides with the growing number of negative posts about Čaputová following her growing popularity in official opinion polls. Around this time, suggestions that media were attempting to create a president from “an unknown girl”, as suggested by the Speaker of the Slovak National Council, Andrej Danko, were shared by disinformation outlets, such as *InfoVojna*, and proliferated.

The spike that occurred on the 11th of March is attributable to the suggestion that Slovakia could be “stolen by American liberals”, expressed by Ľuboš Blaha. At the same time, the Archbishop of Trnava, in his video-recorded sermon warned Slovaks against voting for candidates with “ultraliberal perverse opinions”, calling doing so a grave sin. This recommendation was then widely shared on the monitored disinformation channels.

TOP 5 NARRATIVES AFTER THE FIRST ROUND OF THE ELECTION

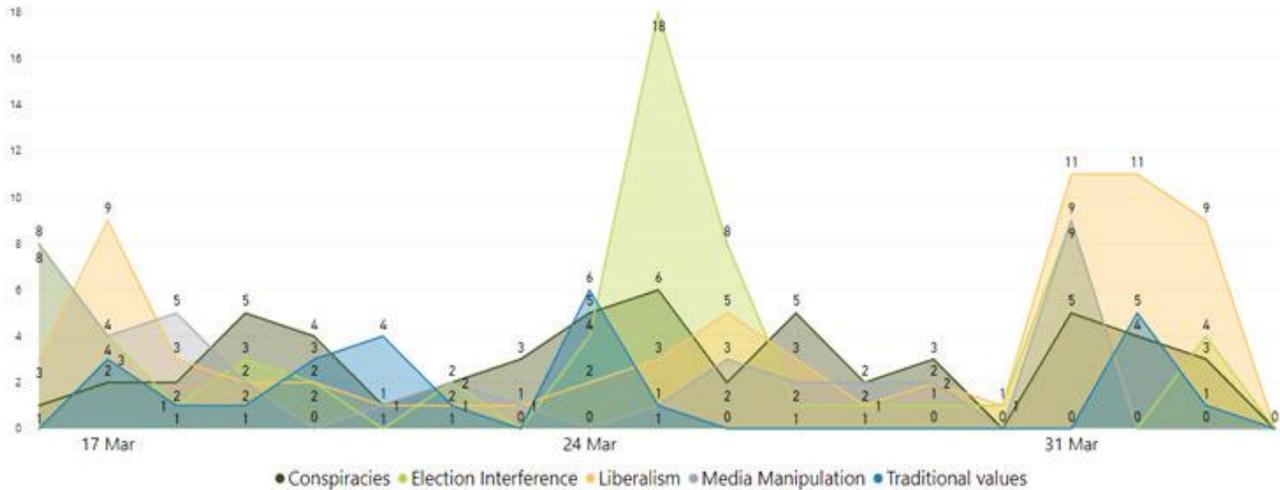


Figure 9: Top 5 narratives after the first round of the election

In the second round, the narratives of traditional values under attack and hidden interests conspiring for influence were continuous themes, overlaid with spikes on the 25th of March when Harabin filed his first constitutional complaint over the election result and on the 31st of March when Čaputová won the election.

Immediately after Čaputová won the election, the monitored disinformation outlets started to spin narratives about how she was elected by a “liberal minority” and started to undermine the strength of her future mandate as the president of the Slovak Republic.

NARRATIVES ASSOCIATED WITH PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

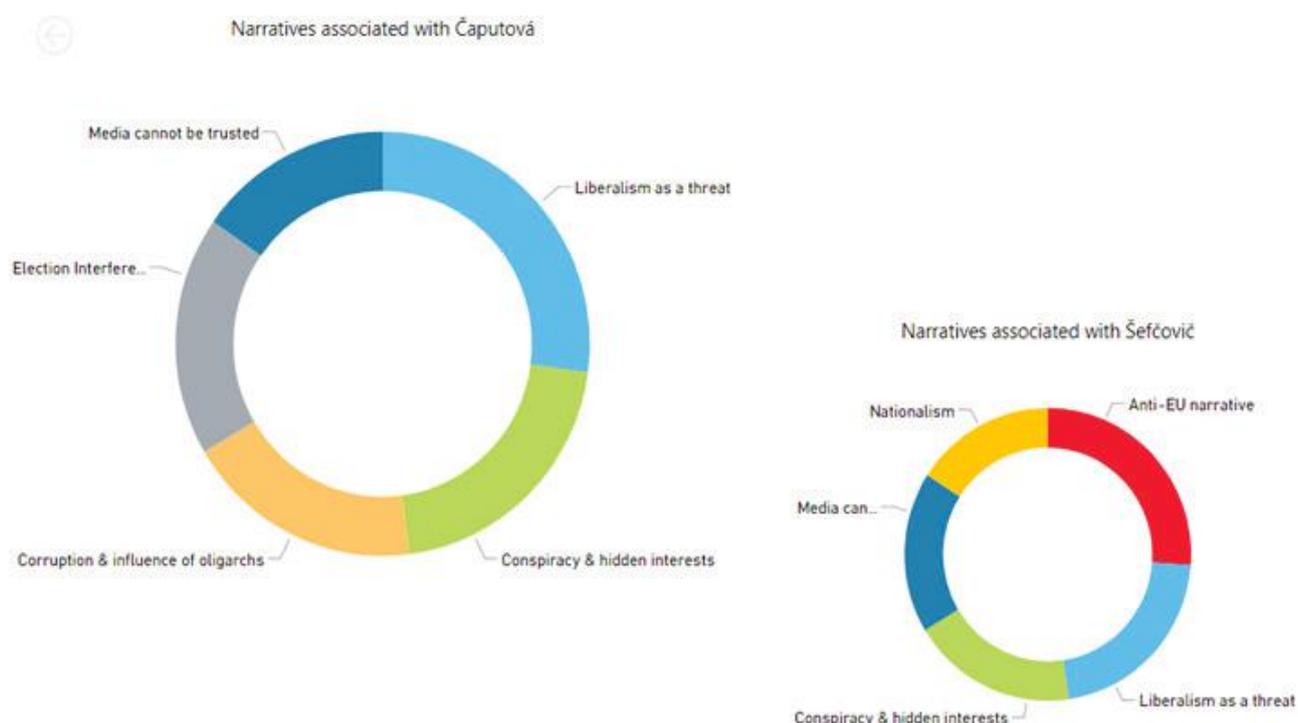


Figure 10: Left: narratives associated with Zuzana Čaputová. Right: narratives associated with Maroš Šefčovič

From the sentiment analysis, it is possible to observe that Šefčovič was overall portrayed by the disinformation pages on Facebook in a neutral way. The analysed disinformation outlets mostly questioned Šefčovič's national loyalty and his ability to understand Slovak voters after spending such a long time in Brussels working for the European Commission. Since the analysed disinformation and pro-Kremlin outlets supported a "true national presidential candidate", personalised in Harabin, and openly pursued anti-EU narratives, it was understandable that most narratives disseminated in connection with Šefčovič had an anti-EU connotation.

However, prior to the second round of the election, some of the analysed Facebook pages disseminated even Šefčovič's statements questioning, for example, Čaputová's legal practice. Eventually, before the second round of the election, it was possible to observe distorted messages by the disinformation outlets spread among voters. On one side, they disseminated Harabin's statements and representatives of Kotleba's

party that both Čaputová and Šefčovič were the same "evil" and called for not participating in the second round of the election.

On the other side, some of the disinformation pages pointed out that Šefčovič is not as liberal as Čaputová, because, for example, he would not vote for the ratification of the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention.

The rise of the intense smear and disinformation campaign against Čaputová was obvious, especially after Mistrík chose to leave the race to favour Čaputová. The disinformation narratives spread against Čaputová varied but at the same time played on deep-rooted prejudice, hate and fear of, for example, migrants, LGBTI or women's rights policies. Čaputová's personal liberal beliefs were thus purported to present a threat to the "traditional values" and structure of Slovak society. This negative campaign directed at Čaputová played on some Slovaks' existing beliefs in conspiracy theories, for example, about Jewish control over

16) CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, CONSPIRACIES AND MANIPULATION



Left: "Video: Čaputová and Šefčovič are evil, declares Harabin". Source: Facebook, InfoVojna
 Right: "Video: There is no difference between Čaputová and Šefčovič, representatives of the Kotleba party do not recommend any candidate in the second round of the election"; Source: Facebook, InfoVojna

various governments.⁶ Čaputová was labelled as just an "unknown girl who is a product of PR companies"⁷. She was also depicted as a product of influential donors and NGOs funded from abroad, among others, by Soros. Unfortunately, this narrative was adopted and further disseminated even by several members of the Slovak parliament.

recipients somehow had suddenly become politically active. Supposedly, public opinion polls were modified to indicate a steep rise both in her public support and in donors funding her political campaign, citing this as "proof" that media did not provide and report on real information, and that various foreign actors and financial groups were attempting to influence the democratic process in Slovakia.

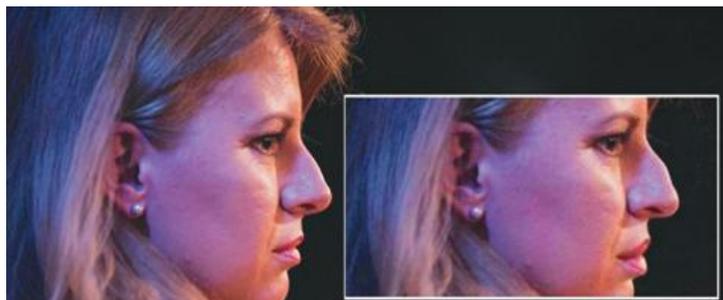
Disinformation outlets also questioned her winning the Goldman Environmental Prize, hinting that its



Source: Facebook, Zdroj

6 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>

7 <https://www.facebook.com/andrejdanko.sk/videos/328770884422160/>



Source: Facebook, Sužana Lenon

Targeted negative posts trying to play on anti-Semitic perceptions continued prior to the second round of the election as well. The outlet *Zem a vek* (*Earth and Age*) outright attempted to play on anti-Semitic sentiment by publishing an altered photo of Čaputová.

The disinformation outlets also questioned her law practice and its legal compliance with her other activities. Interestingly, Čaputová found opponents also abroad. The monitored disinformation pages on Facebook also promoted declarations by Tomio Okamura, a Czech far-right politician and the leader of the political party Dawn of Direct Democracy and Freedom and Direct Democracy, as well as declarations by Hungarian expert⁸ Örs Farkas. While

The development and use of narratives targeted at Čaputová stage a very elaborate picture. The narratives claiming that mainstream media provided biased information about her preferences to manipulate the public were followed by narratives of Čaputová being a product of PR companies and strong donors who manipulated the results of a democratic election and by conspiracies she was tied to Soros and Israel. The smear campaign attempting to call into doubt her integrity went hand in hand with disinformation narratives about how Harabin was the victim of this system and this plot. These narratives were aimed at systematically undermining the credibility of Čaputová in the eyes of public and portraying her as a tool to accomplish a “coup d'état” in Slovakia. One of the last



Left: Excerpt of an interview with Tomio Okamura published on the *Zem a vek* (*Earth and Age*) Facebook page
Right: “Hungarian analyst: Čaputová will follow Soros’s line, Šefčovič plans to support the V4”, Source: Facebook, Zdroj

Okamura portrayed Čaputová as “even more radical”⁹ than the current president of Slovakia, Andrej Kiska, and representing “everything the traditional Slovak society should reject”¹⁰, Farkas stated she would “follow the policy of the United States of America and George Soros”.

dismaying narratives observed during our monitoring after the second round of the election stated that Čaputová had been elected by a “liberal minority”, thus aimed at undermining her legitimacy as the president-elect even before she is sworn into office.

8 <https://www.hlavnespravdy.sk/madarsky-analytik-caputova-pojde-v-sorosovej-linii/1702490?fbclid=IwAR2ZcdAmkulGkM-Fn32RFHRP5KLUVjgsUaSkDOiltFaiOsk4fcuL6bmc8uY>

9 https://hlavnespravdy.sk/hovori-nahlas-co-kiska-si-len-myslel-okamura-prezradil-co-hrozi-cr-v-privade-vitazstva-caputovej-na-slovensku-v-hre-su-tradicne-hodnoty-suverenita-jednota-v4/1707083?fbclid=IwAR3PPxdjtC4f_JX6lido-8PKJABdGpnkk1Ei074aXD1gyz6rWbD6F978T0Rc

10 <https://www.facebook.com/ZEMAVEK/posts/1272719809545674>

FRIENDS NETWORK (FACEBOOK PAGES) OF THE MONITORED DISINFORMATION CHANNELS

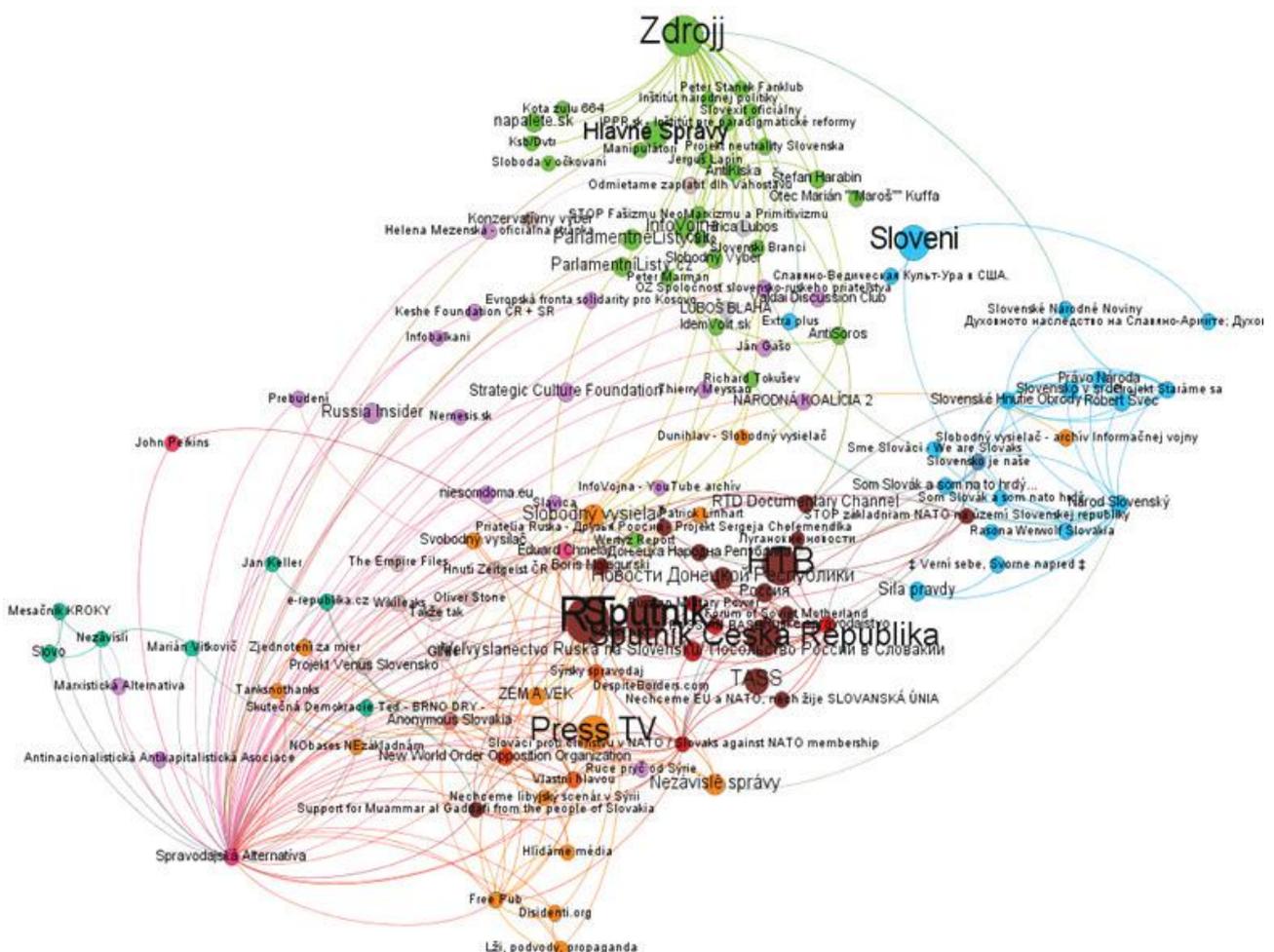


Figure 11: Network of related Facebook pages; source: Netvizz

The map above represents the relational connections of the monitored 14 disinformation outlets on Facebook to other pages on the site. The data were gathered by the Netvizz application, which allows users to extract data from Facebook. The relationships between the various Facebook pages and groups are defined by the likes between

them while the size of each node is determined by post activity. Given that this analysis maps Slovak disinformation pages, it is particularly noteworthy that Russian RT and Sputnik Czech Republic play a central role in it, in close proximity to Slobodný vysielateľ.





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