



Weekly Briefing

Slovakia political briefing:
Slovakia fights disinformation and hoaxes
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Slovakia fights disinformation and hoaxes

Summary

The fragility of democracies is an increasing concern amid a period of global instability and insecurity reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, a shared belief in good governance, a reliable and trusted news media and government institutions, and an engaged civil society are now all crucial for democratic societies to get back on their feet, overcome societal and economic challenges of today and the near future. Due to the fact that the Slovaks believe conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives the most of all Central European countries, the Interior Ministry has started to build a Centre for Combating Hybrid Threats to defend the country against them.

Introduction

The fragility of democracies is an increasing concern amid a period of global instability and insecurity reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic. Against this backdrop, a shared belief in good governance, a reliable and trusted news media and government institutions, and an engaged civil society are now all crucial for democratic societies to get back on their feet, overcome societal and economic challenges of today and the near future.

Although Slovakia saw a government with autocratic tendencies rule, by and large, during the 1990s, the country now has a record of economic growth behind it and is a fully established member of the European Union and NATO. However, support for democracy and commitment to democratic freedoms in the country is far from absolute and buy-in to conspiracy theories is the highest in the region. Slovaks, moreover, express a heightened sense of threat perception that is directed towards various actors and groups.

Conspiracy theories and actors peddling disinformation in Slovakia

According to several public opinion polls conducted by GLOBSEC and other institutions, Slovakia is the most conspiracy-prone of all Central European countries. Interestingly, Slovakia is the only V4 country where it is possible to observe a direct correlation between the belief in conspiracy theories and higher education levels. Slovaks with a university degree tend to agree with conspiracy statements more than those who received a basic education.

In this category, Slovakia is an outlier. The data shows indirect correlation between the belief between the conspiracy statements and reached higher education levels. The reasons behind these findings might have various dependent and independent variables. The widespread belief in conspiracy theories in Slovakia might also be reflecting gaps in the Slovak education system and pointing out the lack of media literacy.

Another explanation might be that Slovaks believe in all the messages that their political representatives spread. While disinformation narratives used to be a characteristic of far-right extremists it has nevertheless been possible to observe the emergence of conspiracy among mainstream political representatives. In this sense, ordinary people are just following the perceptions of political elites that they elected.

There are so many different actors in Slovakia, from politicians to various outlets that actively peddle disinformation. Slovaks are easy prey for peddlers in lies who are on the lookout for both financial and political gain. However, independent fact-checkers have found a way to pinch holes in the stuffed pockets of purveyors of disinformation, bringing the fight to the very source of conspiracies.

Slovaks, deeply suspicious of the mainstream media and public health authorities, sit well above that EU average, with 46% not trusting official COVID-19 statistics, second only to Romania. One explanation for this lies behind the sheer number of alternative outlets available online that claim to be in possession of the 'only truth' about contentious matters. There are more than 200 such websites in Czechia and Slovakia alone.

For example, in 2018, there were 120 such websites in the Czecho-Slovak online space. Today, more than 2,000 pages of lies and hoaxes in Slovak sit on Facebook alone. We can add to that private, closed and secret groups with thousands of members, and the problem becomes more complex and far-reaching. People are curious and automatically click on hate content, which means money automatically flows into the wallets of disinformation peddlers.

Disinformation has become part of the public discourse. Many politicians have realized that Slovaks react to conspiracy theories, so they employ them more to lure people in and build their political fan-base. In a fact more than half of Slovak politicians and parties try to score points with voters who share a conspiracist worldview. They represent roughly a third of the electorate.

It has been already eight years since the number of hoaxes and disinformation started to increase on Slovak websites, especially the spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda amid the 2013-14 Euromaidan protests in Ukraine. The narratives were the same: the corrupt, lame-duck West and fascist Ukraine again want to attack the strong and resource-rich Russia, etc.

Despite warnings from activists and from the Slovak Information Service (SIS), the country's main intelligence service, Slovak governments – led at that time by the Smer-SD party – did little or nothing to deal with these disinformation websites. The situation changed with outbreak of the pandemic in 2020, when the current government launched several projects to debunk COVID-19 related disinformation and the police started knocking on the doors of the people who were most active in spreading them.

Now with the Russian invasion of Ukraine giving rise to yet more disinformation, the Slovak government is going even further. Recently, the cabinet and the parliament hastily passed an amendment to the Cyber Security Act allowing the National Security Authority (NBÚ) to shut down sources of “malicious content”. This means software or data that causes cyber security incidents, fraud, and theft of data, serious misinformation and other forms of hybrid threats.

Russian propaganda in Slovakia

In connection with the invasion of Ukraine the disinformation war continues as the Russian Federation is trying to influence the perception of reality among the citizens of the Slovak Republic, the Slovak police stated on a special Facebook page that they have set up to combat disinformation. The police page also maintains a list of pro-Kremlin accounts which “spread misinformation, manipulate and lie.” Some of these accounts publish as many as 200 posts a day.

In the recent disinformation effort, some people have received fake text messages pretending to be official government orders declaring that every man aged 18-60 is obliged to

join the armed forces. Or there is also a video with a description says that the recording proves that fighting in the streets of the Ukrainian capital is a lie. The police have warned citizens that its National Criminal Agency (NAKA) is searching for such crimes on the internet in connection with the war in Ukraine. The propagation of war is a crime in Slovakia, punishable by 10 to 25 years in prison.

Recently several Slovak newsrooms that have reported on the hybrid war, among them the Refresher news website, the Denník N daily and the news website Aktuality.sk, came under cyber-attack. Hackers also attacked the Czech newsrooms of iDnes and public-service broadcaster Czech Television. Meanwhile, the national administrator of web domains in the Czech Republic, CZ.NIC, shut down several Czech disinformation websites that had been spreading fake, Russian-origin reports about Ukrainian "atrocities" and using these to justify President Putin's decision to invade Ukraine.

Even before the Ukraine crisis, Slovakia's Ministries of Justice and Culture proposed making several changes to the Criminal Code and media laws in order to address problems with misinformation. Also, the Interior Ministry has started to build a Centre for Combating Hybrid Threats, which will eventually employ about 50 people. This will analyze disinformation and design strategies to defend the country against it.

The Ministry of Defense is also planning to conduct its own campaigns to strengthen public resilience against foreign information operations. The debunking of hoaxes is a small, but important part of the communication effort aimed at combating misinformation. Although the changes are coming rather late, this is understandable because the current Slovak government had to face the pandemic crisis as soon as it came to power and the Ukraine crisis has only recently emerged.

The ministries were aware of the hybrid threats, they were ready for their arrival, but they did not yet have the capacity to deal with them properly. In a fact, Mária Kolíková (SaS), the Minister of Justice, has proposed an amendment to the Criminal Code that would, controversially, sanction the spreading of misinformation – even by accident. Anyone convicted could face up to a year in prison. However, several coalition leaders have questioned this paragraph, calling it vague and fearing that it could be used to punish people for expressing an opinion. Also, Minister of Culture, Natália Milanová (OĽaNO), has presented legislative changes to regulate media that operate only on the internet. Currently, the standard obligations of publishers do not apply to them. The law is due to be debated by parliament.

Conclusion

People susceptible to believing conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives demonstrate a particular propensity for favoring autocratic leaders over liberal democracy and are more willing to trade away democratic freedoms for other social and financial benefits. Slovakia is the most conspiracy theory- and misinformation-prone country in the region. Around half of the citizens agree with conspiratorial thinking and misinformation. Around 64% of Slovaks, also the highest percentage in the region, express a willingness to trade away freedoms for other benefits. Besides, Slovaks, deeply suspicious of the mainstream media and public health authorities, sit well above that average of CEE countries, with 46% not trusting official COVID-19 statistics. These are the reasons why the Interior Ministry has started to build a Centre for Combating Hybrid Threats. It will analyze disinformation and design strategies to defend the country against it.