

Larger than life - Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia?

*Grassroots vulnerability to Russian sharp power in Slovakia
Country Report*

Authors

Daniel Milo
Katarína Klingová
Dominika Hajdu

Budapest
April, 2019



POLITICAL CAPITAL
POLICY RESEARCH & CONSULTING INSTITUTE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
SLOVAK-RUSSIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS	5
THE SLOVAK MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND GEOPOLITICAL ATTITUDES	6
THE PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN SOFT AND SHARP POWER, DISINFORMATION IN SLOVAKIA	7
RUSSIA'S PERCEPTIONS AMONG SLOVAKS - PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES	9
PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN RUSSIA-RELATED CONVERSATIONS	12
ANALYSIS OF SLOVAK FACEBOOK PAGES AND NARRATIVES	12
Crimea	16
1968	17
SLOVAK PUBLIC SEGMENTS ON RUSSIA	17
DRIVERS OF PRO-RUSSIAN ATTITUDES IN SLOVAKIA	18

FOREWORD

The current research presents a novel approach to the understanding of Russian soft and sharp power in Slovakia. Our analysis is part of a regional project led by Political Capital institute and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy that explores the vulnerability and resilience to everyday Russian hostile influence in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), focusing on the horizontal, online “grassroots” communication between citizens. An explicit aim of the research was to leave behind the “elitist,” top-down approach of analyses on hybrid warfare and investigate ordinary conversations taking place day-by-day between citizens by mapping 686 thousand spontaneous online conversations related to Russia in Slovakia and more than 3 million online messages in the three countries under revision (Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic). The regional comparative analysis, country reports and policy recommendations are available on Political Capital’s thematic website titled Russian sharp power in CEE¹.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Of the three countries analysed, online conversations in Slovakia appear to be the most pro-Russian with 28% having positive sentiments towards Russia. This comes as no surprise as it is in line with other sociological data confirming relatively high support for pro-Russian views and attitudes in Slovakia.
- While in the Czech Republic and Hungary, the majority of sentiments appearing in the online conversations were anti-Russian, these constituted only 23% in Russia-related conversations in the Slovak online sphere in line with other data on Slovak geopolitical attitudes.
- **Despite Slovakia having the most pro-Russian online conversations out of the three countries analysed, neutral perceptions of Russia dominate in online conversations collected by Bakamo.Social. This can be explained by a variety of factors:**
 1. The use of mainstream, credible media still dominates over disinformation outlets. Disinformation outlets play a crucial role in spreading pro-Russian narratives, but their reach is still marginal.
 2. The dominant perceptions of Russia in the observed period were anti-Russian - viewing Russia as an “Aggressor” and an “invisible Influencer.” These attitudes are mostly prevalent in mainstream media reporting both on current issues and conflicts such as Skripal poisoning, the Crimea annexation or the Syrian war, as well as historical events, such as the 1968 occupation.
 3. Facebook data confirm that disinformation outlets cover Russia-related news disproportionately more than mainstream media. Moreover, in their coverage of those events, they reproduce the Kremlin narratives and try to portray Russia as an ally and a protector. Out of 40 sources analysed, the two top Facebook Pages posting the most about Russia were disinformation outlets Hlavné správy and Slobodný vysielateľ, both pushing various strands of the ‘mighty Russia’ protector and ally narrative.
 4. Furthermore, pro-Russian narratives are promoted by dedicated Facebook groups and pages of the far-right extremist and paramilitary groups. These project the image of the Russian Federation as the only protector of the so-called ‘traditional values’ against the decadent West, which is in line with Kremlin’s strategic objectives.

¹ http://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/index.php

5. Another explanation of the high share of neutral and pro-Russian sentiments could be linked to potential psychological drivers, namely the Slovaks' strive for individual or national survival, geopolitical self-definition or the lack of it, and the inferiority complex. The existence of such identity crisis is clearly supported by findings of the GLOBSEC Trends 2018 on geopolitical orientation of Slovakia, according to which the majority of Slovaks think that their country belongs somewhere in between the West and East. This is in contradiction to the fact that Slovakia, as an active member of the European Union and NATO, is and for the past 15 years has been a fully integrated member of western international organizations. However, strategic communication explaining the benefits of the membership of Slovakia in the EU and NATO is severely lacking in the country.
6. The lack of clear communication about Slovakia's geopolitical orientation by state representatives and their own contradictory perceptions and public declarations further deepen the public's identity crisis in terms of Slovakia's geopolitical belonging. This lack of understanding of where Slovakia belongs to causes feelings of insecurity, which is utilized by pro-Kremlin actors fuelling pro-Russian perceptions.
7. Both the overall pro-Russian Slovak sentiments and existing negative perceptions of Russia can be attributed to a limited number of core users based on the analysis. Within 686 000 conversations analysed online, only 20,900 unique users were identified, which potentially hints at either a strong presence of bots and trolls in the conversations occurring in Slovak online outlets or passionate individuals engaging in related online conversations and spreading pro-Russian narratives.

SLOVAK-RUSSIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS

The position of Slovakia towards Russia has historically been that of pragmatic realism. Due to the high level of energy dependency and strong pro-Russian sentiments in the population (13% of the population would like to be affiliated with the East),² Slovakia tried to balance its EU and NATO membership with overtures to have some kind of special relations with Russia. Since the formation of the current ruling coalition, composed of the social democratic SMER, the nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS) and the centre-right Most-Híd party in March 2016, the official position of Slovakia towards Russia oscillated between two poles. First, the Slovak government programme adopted in March 2016 clearly states that EU and NATO membership are the cornerstones of Slovakia's foreign policy.³ This orientation was also supported also during Slovakia's EU presidency in late 2016 and confirmed by a 2017 Joint Declaration on the EU and NATO signed by President Andrej Kiska, Speaker of the National Council Andrej Danko and the then Prime Minister Robert Fico.⁴ The declaration was a public pledge of the three highest public officials in Slovakia to support the pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation of the Slovak Republic, including support for the measures included in the newly adopted Security and Defence strategies.

However, this official position was rather short-lived. It is SNS chairman Andrej Danko especially who has been undermining the official position of the government during his frequent visits to Russian Federation,⁵ where he met repeatedly with his counterpart Vyacheslav Volodin, the speaker of the Russian Duma, and criticised the sanctions regime.⁶ Even more importantly, the final adoption of the strategic security and foreign policy documents – The Security Strategy and Defence Strategy – in the National Council has failed so far. According to available reports by Mr. Danko himself,⁷ this is due to his objection to parts related to Russia and the Crimea annexation.⁸

Such policy seems to be the continuation of a long-held SNS party position, which has historically been against EU and NATO membership and instead advocated for a close relationship with Russia, tapping into the rather widespread pro-Russian sentiments in the population.

Nevertheless, the official position of the current Slovak government supports the sanction regime and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs clearly and openly rejected the annexation of Crimea.⁹ Moreover, Slovakia played a crucial role at the height of the Ukraine conflict by providing a reverse flow of natural gas to Ukraine, in effect neutralising Russian attempts to blackmail Ukraine through energy.¹⁰ Slovakia also provided hu-

2 GLOBSEC, 'GLOBSEC Trends 2018', May 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>.

3 'Programové vyhlásenie vlády SR na roky 2016-2020' (The Program Manifesto of the Government of the Slovak republic for 2016-2020), 16 March 2016, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/data/files/7179.pdf> The Programme manifesto was re-adopted by the reconstructed government after forced abdication of prime minister Fico in March 2018 and re-approved by the National Council on 26 March 2018 <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx?sid=zakony/zakon&ZakZborID=13&CisObdobia=7&CPT=913>

4 'Vyhlásenie prezidenta, predsedu Národnej rady a predsedu vlády k EÚ a NATO' 23 October 2017, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/vyhlasenie-prezidenta-predseda-narodnej-rady-a-predseda-vlady-k-eu-a-nato/>

5 Mr. Danko visited Moscow three times since 2017, each time meeting with Vyacheslav Volodin, Speaker of Duma and other individuals. See the list of his official trips abroad available at: <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/?sid=predseda/informacie/podujatia>

6 'Andrej Danko sa v Rusku stretol so šéfom Dumy', TASR, accessed 18 February 2019 <https://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/andrej-danko-sa-v-rusku-stretol-so-sef/378332-clanok.html>

7 'Danko prinútil koalíciu stiahnuť strategické dokumenty, ktoré označujú Rusko za hrozbu', DennikN, accessed 18 February 2019, <https://dennikn.sk/1308036/danko-prinutil-koaliciu-stiahnut-strategicke-dokumenty-ktore-oznacuju-rusko-za-hrozbu/>

8 The Security and Defence Strategies of the Slovak Republic were adopted unanimously by the Slovak government on October 4, 2017. The adopted texts are available at: <http://www.rokovania.sk/Rokovanie.aspx/BodRokovaniaDetail?idMaterial=26912> and <http://www.rokovania.sk/Rokovanie.aspx/BodRokovaniaDetail?idMaterial=26914>

9 'Ministerstvo zahraničných vecí pripomína, že Slovensko neuznáva pripojenie Krymu k Rusku' Webnoviny, accessed 19 February 2019 (The MFA reminds that Slovakia does not recognise the annexation of Crimea by Russia) <https://www.webnoviny.sk/ministerstvo-zahranicnych-veci-pripomina-ze-slovensko-neuznava-pripojenie-krymu-k-rusku/>

10 'Foreign Minister pledges to continue reverse flow deliveries to Ukraine', The Slovak Spectator, accessed on 20 February 2019, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20051963/foreign-minister-pledges-to-continue-reverse-flow-deliveries-to-ukraine.html>

manitarian aid to displaced persons in Ukraine fleeing the conflict in Donbas and Luhansk. This also enjoys the support of the main opposition parties - SaS and OLANO. The exception is the far-right Kotleba-LSNS People's Party Our Slovakia. Its chair, Marian Kotleba, during his tenure as a regional governor, issued an open letter to then president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich in January 2014, urging him not to resign and warning him of "the terrorist organisation NATO."¹¹ Kotleba's party won 14 seats in the national parliament in 2016 and Mr. Kotleba was a candidate in the March 2019 presidential elections.

THE SLOVAK MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND GEOPOLITICAL ATTITUDES

Media independence in Slovakia is still relatively well preserved due to the segmented ownership of private media outlets not necessarily subjected to direct governmental influence. As a result, the media landscape is quite balanced in terms of content and independent reporting despite media freedom not being in an ideal state. Generally, mainstream media promote balanced or more pro-Western narratives in line with the country's interests and membership in the EU and NATO.

Compared to last year, Slovakia dropped from 17th to 27th place in the World Press Freedom Index rankings due to several factors with a strong impact on societal and political developments in the country.¹² First, it was the murder of an investigative journalist, Jan Kuciak in February 2018, which sparked mass protests resulting in a government reshuffle involving key members, the resignation of then-Prime Minister Robert Fico, because the investigation pointed to the murder being linked to Kuciak's work on political corruption. Second, a subsequent mobilisation of civil society and increased criticism from independent media journalists towards the government caused a steep rise of verbal attacks on journalists from political representatives, including government officials. Third, the replacement of key management personnel in the public service broadcaster RTVS resulted in the resignations of more than a dozen journalists, many of whom had helped in improving the broadcaster's reporting. In their own words, their resignation was caused by the deterioration of their working conditions, harassment and restrictions to journalistic autonomy.¹³ Combined with the new director-general's links to the Slovak National Party, there were concerns over the possible deterioration of RTVS' objective coverage with shifts towards more pro-government or even pro-Russian stances, although these have not materialised yet.¹⁴

In terms of media consumption, the distribution between traditional and new media is more or less even. According to the Digital News Report, around 80% of Slovaks use TV as well as online outlets as a source of information.¹⁵ Privately owned non-conspiratorial media are the most watched, read and listened to. Nevertheless, the public broadcaster plays a significant role as a source of information, with their TV station "Jednotka" being the third and the main radio station "Radio Slovensko" the second most consumed in the country.¹⁶ Except for popular tabloid-style information portals topky.sk and cas.sk, the news outlets aktuality.sk (news portal where Jan Kuciak was working) and sme.sk (quality journalism, centre-right daily newspaper partially owned by a Slovak financial group Penta) belong to the most visited as well.¹⁷ According

11 'Kotleba napísal Janukovyčovi list: Neustúpte!', Aktuality.sk accessed on 21 February 2019, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/245111/kotleba-napisal-janukovycovi-list-neustupte/>

12 '2018 Media Freedom Index', Reporters without Borders, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#>

13 'Z RTVS odchádza ďalších 12 novinárov', Etrend.sk, May 2018, <https://medialne.etrend.sk/televizia/z-rtvs-odchadza-dalsich-12-novinarov.html>

14 A director-general of the RTVS is elected by the National Council by a secret vote. Although key decisions related to the management and finances are controlled by the Council of RTVS (elected in thirds every six years), significant positions such as the programmatic director or a director of news and reporting sections have changed after the appointment. This makes the institution particularly vulnerable to potential influences should any openly pro-Russian figures get on the top.

15 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018, <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475>

16 'Public opinion poll of Market & Media & Lifestyle -TGI', median.sk, January 2019, <http://www.median.sk/pdf/2018/ZS184SR.pdf>

17 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2018 <http://media.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/digital-news-report-2018.pdf?x89475>

to estimates, the strongest disinformation portal *hlavnespravy.sk* has around 400,000 real users, which corresponds to around a half the user numbers of other quality newspapers *Dennik N* (liberal daily) or *Pravda* (centre-left daily).¹⁸

The disinformation outlets remain practically the only sources strongly and openly pushing pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives, so the majority population might not normally be exposed to them. However, with 80% of the Slovaks using online outlets as a source of information and with a half of the population on Facebook,¹⁹ which is a hub for key Slovak disinformation actors and pages, the reach and indirect impact through social media can be higher than the numbers of regular readers suggest. *GLOBSEC Trends 2017* data show that around 12% of Slovak respondents mark online conspiracy outlets either as their first or second most important source of information.²⁰

Surveys have also demonstrated that Slovakia remains the most pro-Russian of the V4. According to *GLOBSEC Trends 2018*, 13% of Slovaks would prefer their country to geopolitically belong to the East. The figure is strongly influenced by the oldest generation of 65 years and older, of whom almost 23% would position their country to the East and among whom there is a strong nostalgia for the pre-1989 regime.²¹

The same survey shows that only 21% of Slovak respondents would ideally position their country to the West and more than half of the population see their country being “somewhere in between.” In Slovak media, especially disinformation media, the West is often associated with the United States, which might be one of the reasons why pro-Western orientation is low in the country despite generally high pro-EU attitudes. The surveys have been showing stronger anti-US sentiments among Slovaks than Czechs and Hungarians.²²

THE PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN SOFT AND SHARP POWER, DISINFORMATION IN SLOVAKIA

While Slovakia does not have a significant Russian minority,²³ the notions of pan-Slavism and Slavic unity are quite widespread and used as one of the most important sources of soft and sharp power. Russian soft or sharp power in Slovakia is based on several factors, combining historic memory, economic factors, political divisions and current geopolitical and cultural issues.

First, it is capitalising on the nation-building period in the mid-19th century and on the notion of Russia being a big Slavic brother protecting the small Slovak nation from outside (mostly Hungarian) oppression. Second, the heritage of the Soviet Red Army liberating Slovakia from fascism and the heavy casualties suffered in this process is another factor, important especially for the older generation. Culture and sports are the third factor of Russian soft or sharp power. Frequent cultural events of Russian state-sponsored groups (such as the Russian army choir Alexandrov Ensemble or Russian Cossacks) held in Slovakia or the fact that Slovakia's best ice hockey team Slovan Bratislava is a member of the Russia-founded Continental Hockey League (KHL) could also be regarded as a soft power instrument. Fourth, Slovakia is a major transfer

18 Lukáš Kosno, 'Akú návštevnosť mali najsilnejšie slovenské weby v novembri (poradie a graf)', *zive.azet.sk*, December 2018, <https://zive.azet.sk/clanok/136406/aku-navstevnost-maju-najsilnejsie-slovenske-weby-v-novembri-poradie-a-graf/>; Filip Struhárik a Radoslav Augustín, 'Spravodajské médiá dosiahli v marci rekordy, Hlavné správy majú čítanosť takmer na úrovni TA3', *Dennik N*, April 2018, <https://dennikn.sk/1086874/spravodajske-media-dosiahli-v-marci-rekordy-hlavne-spravy-maju-citanost-takmer-na-urovni-ta3/>

19 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018'.

20 GLOBSEC, 'GLOBSEC Trends 2017: Mixed Messages and Signs of Hope from Central and Eastern Europe', 2017, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2017.pdf

21 GLOBSEC, 'Generation Trends Central Europe: Mosaic of Perspectives', 2019 <https://www.globsec.org/publications/generation-trends-central-europe-mosaic-of-perspectives/>

22 'PRIESKUM: Rusku najviac dôveruje z krajín V4 Slovensko', *TASR*, May 2016, <http://www.teraz.sk/slovensko/prieskum-rusku-najviac-doveruje-z-v4-s/198140-clanok.html>

23 According to latest census, there are some 2000 inhabitants of Slovakia of Russian minority see Statistical office 2011 Census report <https://census2011.statistics.sk/tabulky.html>

corridor for Russian gas and oil to western Europe and as such is almost completely dependent on Russian energy imports. Economic ties and business connections in the energy sector, but manufacturing and other sectors also create opportunities for exerting sharp power. Slovakia operates two Russian nuclear reactors and imports all the uranium fuel from Russia. As for the pro-Russian actors, the most important ones are politicians - both mainstream and fringe ones. Aside from the Slovak National Party, which has always been openly sympathetic towards Russia, segments of the ruling social-democratic SMER party share similar views and some MPs seem to build their public image on the open admiration of Russia and objection to NATO and the US. On the opposite side of the political spectrum lies the far right and its local hegemon - Marian Kotleba and his LSNS party, which is fiercely anti-EU and anti-NATO and openly praises Russia. In December 2018, Marian Kotleba called on Prime Minister Pellegrini to “stop the anti-Russian madness” and vote against the extension of the sanctions regime at the European Council.²⁴

In addition to political parties, there are several very active civil society groups such as the Slovak-Russian society,²⁵ established by a former dissident and Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský and a number of unregistered groups ranging from paramilitary groups (Slovak Conscripts) to motorcycle clubs, such as the newly established European branch of the notorious Russian Night Wolves, stationed in Slovakia.²⁶ Such groups serve as important vehicles for spreading pro-Russian narratives, as they have a clout of legitimacy because they seem to originate in Slovakia.

Last but certainly not least, there are impactful disinformation media outlets operating in the country.²⁷ They range from the glossy 140-pages-long conspiracy-spreading *Zem a Vek* (Earth and Age) magazine,²⁸ through the internet radio *Slobodný vysielač*, to major online news sources such as *Infovojna* or *Hlavné Správy* and many other smaller online outlets. Their combined impact is quite considerable and comparable to the audience of some major TV stations. According to *GLOBSEC Trends* data,²⁹ 12% of Slovaks consider disinformation media to be relevant sources of information. Their real impact is much wider and seem to penetrate wide segments of the population. This could be illustrated by the fact that 41% of Slovaks view Putin’s policies favourably, by far the highest support in the region.³⁰

24 ‘Vyzývame Pellegriniho, aby zastavil protiruské besnenie a nehlasoval za predĺženie sankcií’ Kotleba-Ludová Strana Naše Slovensko (official webpage), accessed on 20 February 2019, <http://www.naseslovensko.net/nase-nazory/zahranicna-politika/vyzyvame-pellegriniho-aby-zastavil-protiruske-besnenie-a-nehlasoval-za-predlzenie-sankcii/>

25 Slovensko-Ruská spoločnosť <http://www.srspol.sk/>

26 Laurence Peter, ‘Slovakia alarmed by pro-Putin Night Wolves bikers’ base’, BBC News, July 31st, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45019133>

27 According to www.konspiratori.sk, as of beginning of March 2019, there are more than 140 disinformation portals in Slovak and Czech language operating on the Slovak online scene.

28 www.zemavek.sk

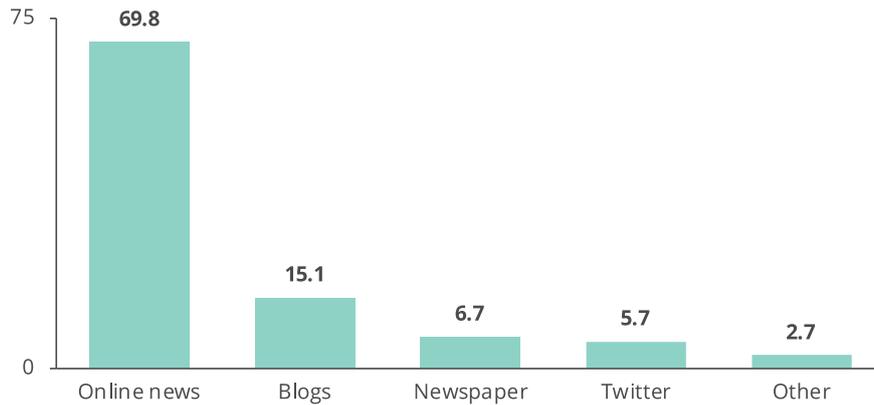
29 ‘GLOBSEC Trends 2018’.

30 ‘GLOBSEC Trends 2017’.

RUSSIA'S PERCEPTIONS AMONG SLOVAKS – PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES

Over 686 thousand online conversations in the past two years have been examined for the purpose of this analysis. Approximately 69.8% came from online news outlets, 15% from blogs and 6% from Twitter.³¹

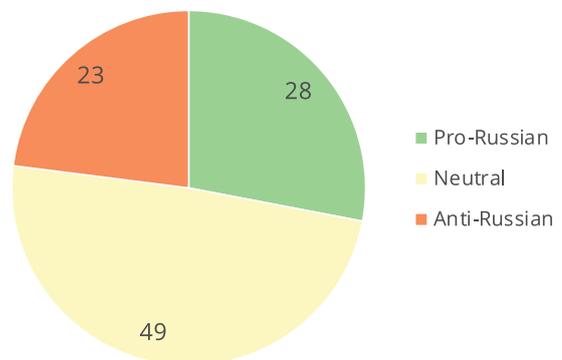
Chart 1. Main sources of communication surveyed in Slovakia



The overall results confirm that Slovakia is the most pro-Russian of the three countries observed in this study - 28% of all the references analysed had a positive connotation towards Russia. 23% of the voices were clearly anti-Russian and around a half turned out to be neutral, as seen on the chart below. The neutrality of conversations reflects the balanced reporting produced by online non-conspiracy media platforms. However, a lot of pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets are very active in spreading pro-Russian and pro-Kremlin narratives.³²

When looking into specific perceptions of Russia, the most prevalent images of the country were of an Aggressor (31%) and invisible Influencer (28%). This suggests the majority seeing Russia in the frame of a strong force interfering in others' affairs, either bluntly or in a manipulative way. Only 9% of the conversations portrayed the country in the opposite sense; i.e., as a "Strong Protector." These are probably deriving from the segments of the society who are sympathetic towards strong leaders and autocratic regimes and who still have positive, nostalgic sentiments towards the "Russian Liberation Army."

Chart 2. Sentiment ratios of 686 thousand public conversations



The dominant neutral stance towards the Russian Federation and the fact that the most pro-Russian discussions were found in Slovakia are in the line with GLOBSEC's representative polling data.³³ Slovakia has had close historical, cultural, ideological and political ties with the Russian Federation as well as its predecessor the USSR. As seen on the communication peak of the chart below - Slovak online perception of Russia, analysed by *Bakamo.Social*, was driven by important international meetings, such

31 Data provided by Bakamo.Social does not include Facebook, which is the main social media platform in Slovakia used by 70% of population, while according to GlobalStats only 2.76% of Slovaks use Twitter. [http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/slovakia-\(slovak-republic\)](http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/slovakia-(slovak-republic))

32 Katarína Klingová, 'What Do We Know About Disinformation Websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia?', GLOBSEC, 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/news/what-do-we-know-about-disinformation-websites-in-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia/>

33 'GLOBSEC Trends 2018'.

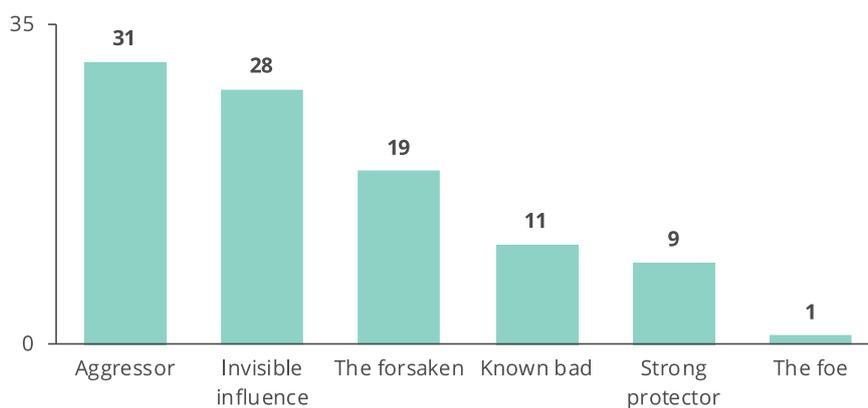
as the July 2018 Helsinki Summit between the US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin.

Chart 3. Distribution of 686K Slovak online conversations encompassing term “Russia” between November 20, 2016 and November 19, 2018



The positive sentiments are mainly driven by the “Known bad” narrative (11%) and the perceptions of Russia being a “Strong protector” (9%), as shown on the chart below.

Chart 4. Positive and negative perceptions of Russia among Slovaks (in %)



The leading positive perception of the “Known bad” is based on the comparison of the West to the East, eventually coming to the conclusion that Russia is a “safer bet” based on the shared cultural and historical experience deriving from the communist era. This perception of Russia is supported by the findings of the *GLOBSEC Trends 2018* poll. In comparison with the other CEE countries, Slovakia is the most nostalgic towards the communist regime: 41% of respondents think that their lives were better before 1989.³⁴ This is possible to observe in the case of nostalgia for Russian food which, according to the online discussions, “brings back nice childhood memories” or:

“In the past my parents knew where I was cycling even when I passed by Russian soldiers, I was safe and could move around alone.”³⁵

In addition, the nostalgia for the “Known bad” of the communist regime plays into the idea of Slovakia being a bridge between the West and the East; i.e., being geopolitically situated somewhere in between. This idea is predominant among 56% of Slovaks, according to polling.³⁶ The positive perception of Russia as a strong

34 ‘GLOBSEC Trends 2018’.

35 Information collected by Bakamo.Social.

36 ‘GLOBSEC Trends 2018’.

ally and protector dominating over 9% of online discourse can be linked to the pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets spreading false narratives about the weak and underdeveloped NATO in contrast to the strong Russia led by President Putin. Indeed, Vladimir Putin is perceived as a likeable leader by 41% of Slovaks, which is more than the support for the German Chancellor Angela Merkel,³⁷ and, similarly, 41% of Slovaks agree with Putin's policies in polling results.³⁸

However, negative sentiments towards Russia are much more widespread in Slovakia. 31% of online content describes Russia as a military aggressor, 28% as a manipulator and 19% as a “Forsaken” or backward country in terms of low living standards, poor infrastructure, social inequalities and weak rule of law. Russia's aggressive measures, especially in the past years, like the annexation of Crimea, conflict in Eastern Ukraine or the Kerch Strait incident, pose a security threat not only to Slovakia, but also to the European Union. In addition, the invasion and consequent occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops is an important historical milestone that had significant impact on the democratic development of Slovak society. Therefore, the current expansionist policies of the Russian Federation are perceived as malevolent and dangerous in a country that experienced such an invasion. Furthermore, in some cases many Slovaks expressed sentiments that the West is not dealing with the Russian threat appropriately, claiming that the EU should take a stronger stance against Russia and its expansionist policies should be discussed more openly. For example:

“The fact is that Russia remains a dangerous country for its neighbours. I just do not understand that while you are defending the occupation of a neighbour with some cultural relations arguments and similar nonsense. (...) It is a fact that Russia attacked and occupied its neighbour, and that is far behind a line of politeness.”

The aggressor perception could be further supported by the second most widespread perception of the Kremlin being an invisible Influencer. Despite the fact that the notion that Russia meddled in the last US presidential election in 2016 and in other elections in Europe is less pronounced in Slovakia than the opposite viewpoint,³⁹ some Slovaks understand the scope of Russian willingness to manipulate domestic politics of other countries. In other words, around 30% of Slovaks might be aware that Russia employs various measures and actors to accomplish its goals, for example, online trolls, disinformation, spies or hackers to influence democratic elections. This perception even included a narrative that Russia is waging a hybrid war against Slovakia and an understanding that Russian foreign subversive efforts might be utilizing and consequently increasing Slovak dependence on Russian gas. The typical Slovak narrative supporting this sentiment would read:

“Russian trolls are now connected to the Saint Petersburg Internet Science Agency, in the same way like they were connected to it before the 2016 elections to spread news to polarize society. However, their techniques have changed.”

The perception that Russia does not play fairly and adhere to the principles of democratic societies continues to play a role in the perception of the Russian Federation as a forsaken country. 19% of Slovak online content showcases the sentiment that Russia and Putin do not adhere even to their own domestic laws and international standards, including issues such as fair play in sports, the protection of animal rights or environmental policies.⁴⁰ This sentiment shows that a lot of Slovaks are contemplating about Russia beyond the traditional political narratives and are perceiving Russia as a poorer country still backwards in many areas and with pertaining domestic problems. The typical Slovak narrative supporting this sentiment would read:

“Do you know what poverty is? In Russia, poor children do not have shoes, are hungry and have measles. Wake up and realize what you have.”

37 'GLOBSEC Trends 2017'.

38 'GLOBSEC Trends 2018'.

39 'GLOBSEC Trends 2018'.

40 As was the case of the systemic doping of Russian athletes enabled by the Russian Anti-Doping Agency.

The “Foe” perception of Russia is almost non-existent among Slovaks with a 1% share in the total sample. Slovaks have irrationally positive perception of Russia dating back to 19th century that stems from their literature and culture. This has further been promoted by various Slovak politicians and opinion leaders.

The fact that Slovaks posted the most neutral and pro-Russian comments in the region also reflects the lack of strategic communication of Slovak state representatives about the geopolitical orientation of the country and a need for public debate about it. The Russian Federation has just been utilizing the existing vulnerabilities of Slovak society, whose state institutions and representatives have neglected the importance of communicating the benefits of being the member of the EU and NATO to the public. This vacuum was filled with pro-Kremlin disinformation. However, nostalgia for communism or romantic perceptions dating back to the 19th century should not overweight rational debate about Russia, its political leaders and policies.

PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN RUSSIA-RELATED CONVERSATIONS

Bakamo.Social also looked at statements regarding China in the grassroots communication about Russia. As a result, four main narratives linked to China were revealed in Slovak everyday conversations. First and foremost, the two powers were jointly referred to as the “East” and identified as the opposite geopolitical bloc to the “West” made up of the US or other Western European countries. Second, Russia and China were perceived as having some kind of a special “friendship” based on the similarities between the two political regimes, either with regard to the shared Communist past or to the current oppressive, authoritarian political systems. Third, despite the special bond between Moscow and Beijing, China was perceived as an independent international actor who pursues its specific economic and political interests, even in Russia. Lastly, the “forsaken” perception was also applied to China as another country that lacks environmental protection or produces low-quality goods when compared to the West or Central Eastern European countries. Thus, negative views on Russia tend to reinforce negative perceptions of China along the same economic, military or human rights issues, which hints at the same grassroots societal resilience factors against any authoritarian influence in CEE.

ANALYSIS OF SLOVAK FACEBOOK PAGES AND NARRATIVES

The analysis of Slovak Facebook pages is based on the top 19 most significant mainstream media and news portals and the top 21 most relevant pro-Russian Facebook pages or disinformation portals as seen in the tables below.

Table 1. Top 21 disinformation media in Slovakia⁴¹

Name	Profile	Number of likes
Slobodný vysielateľ	Conspiracy, pro-Russian	85379
Sila pravdy	Visual memes, pro-Russian	60287
Milujeme Rusko	pro-Russian, pan-Slavism	51125
Slovenske Huntie obrody	Far-right, pro-Russian	47334
Nezavislé správy	conspiracy, pro-Russian	42308
Hlavné Správy	conspiracy, pro-Russian	36969
Štefan Harabin	conspiracy, pro-Russian	36333

41 Information about the likes of Facebook pages relevant to February 11, 2018.

Zem a Vek	conspiracy, pro-Russian	31921
Konzervatívny výber	conspiracy, pro-Russian	27262
Infovojna	conspiracy, pro-Russian	23461
Slovenskí Branci	Paramilitary	14314
Zdroj (ex-Lubo Hudo)	Far right, pro-Russian	11337
Na Palette	pro-Russian, pan-Slavism	6386
Pán Občan, magazín patriaci občanom	conspiracy, pro-Russian	5597
Nazor Občana	conspiracy, pro-Russian	4891
Extra plus	pro-Russian, pan-Slavism	4681
Slobodný Výber	Anti-establishment, pro-Russian	3936
DAV DVA - kultúrno-politický magazín	Left-wing, pro-Russian	3139
Slovensko- ruská spoločnosť	pro-Russian	2295
Tartaria	pro-Russian	535
Na dlani	conspiracy	148

Table 2. Top 19 mainstream media in Slovakia⁴²

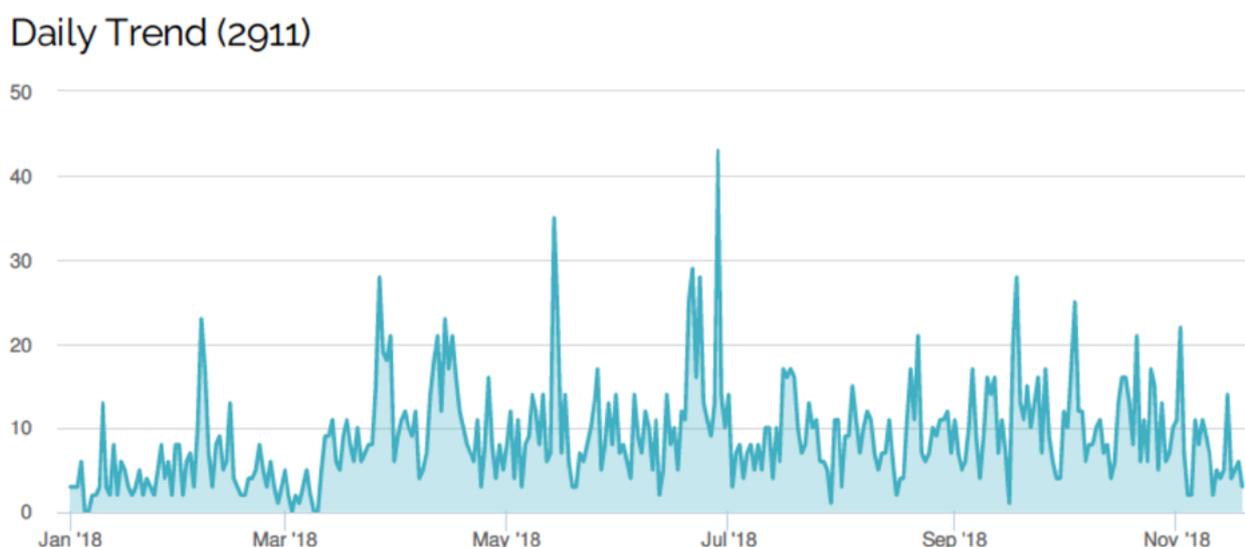
Name	Profile	Number of likes
cas.sk	Daily printed tabloid and online news portal	479023
Topky.sk	Daily online tabloid	381933
refresher.sk	Online news portal focused on	312796
Tvnoviny.sk	Commercial television channel	273061
aktuality.sk	Online news portal	244906
startitup.sk	Online news portal focused on	196342
Dobrenoviny.sk	Online news portal	163573
noviny.sk	Online news portal	161833
sme.sk	Daily print newspaper and on-	137683
pluska.sk	Daily printed tabloid and online	130792
Hnonline.sk	Daily print newspaper and on-	113399
trend.sk	Weekly printed magazine and	75000
Pravda.sk	Daily print newspaper and on-	57198
Teraz.sk	Online news portal of official	36955

⁴² 20 most influential mainstream media and news portals were selected from the list of websites compiled by of Medialne.etrend.sk ranking Slovak websites based the number of their visitors in January 2019 and were re-ordered according to the number likes at Facebook. The 20 selected websites included centrum.sk, however this portal does not have a Facebook page, thus the analysis Facebook includes data only from the 19 relevant news media and 21 pro-Russian disinformation pages and portals.

interez.sk	Online news portal focused on	31262
webnoviny.sk	Online news portal	24935
DennikN.sk	Online news portal and printed	12958
Dnes24.sk	Online news portal	2227
zoznam.sk	Online news portal	2022
centrum.sk	Online news portal	N/A

The blue chart below displays admins' posts on Facebook containing a term "Russia"⁴³ in the time period from 1 January 2018 – 19 November 2018 collected by an online tool Zoomsphere.⁴⁴

Chart 5. Number of Russia-related posts on the 40 Slovak pages between 1 January and 19 November 2018



From the data received, we identified the 4 following peaks when the term occurred the most in the outlets analysed. At those peaks, the most common perceptions of Russia identified by Bakamo, i.e. Russia as an aggressor and invisible Influence were dominant too. All in all, Facebook data confirm the premise that while the well-known online disinformation channels are promoting predominantly pro-Kremlin narratives, the “regular/mainstream” non-conspiracy media present a more realistic picture of Russia and its actions. Another finding is the disproportionately high coverage of any Russia-related issues by these so called these pro-Kremlin disinformation outlets, which often characterize themselves as providing “alternative news.”

This is also possible to observe from the list of top Facebook pages that have published or shared posts with the term “Russia.” The flagship of Slovak disinformation outlets Hlavné správy (Main News) leads with 442 posts, followed by another conspiracy-spreading outlet Slobodný vysielač with 310 posts and the non-conspiratorial online portal Topky (231 posts).⁴⁵

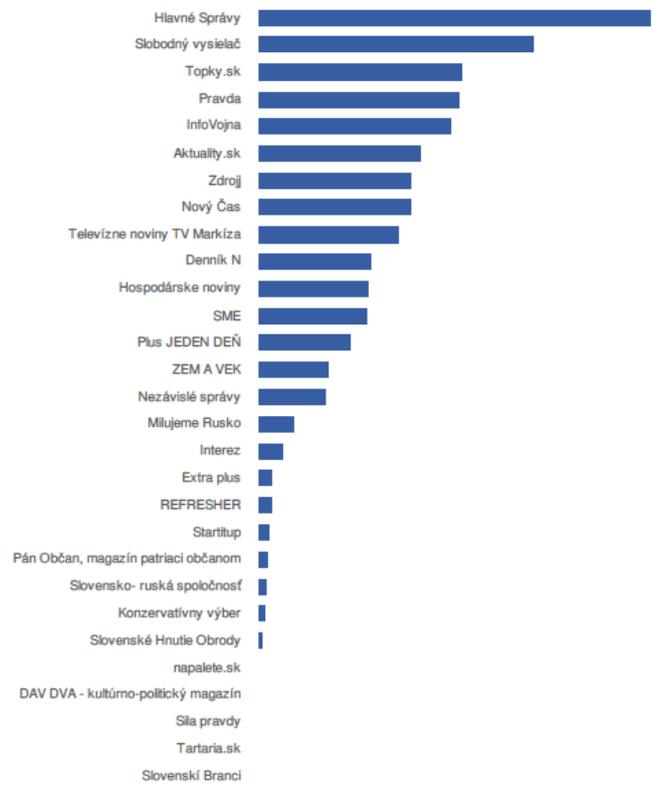
43 In Slovak, “Rusko”.

44 Facebook data generated by Zoomsphere collects administrators' posts containing the term “Russia” from sources monitored by Zoomsphere, including 40 Facebook pages of Slovak mainstream media and pro-Kremlin disinformation websites. <https://www.zoomsphere.com/help>

45 The chart below also indicates that the term “Russia” was included in Facebook posts of pro-Russian Facebook pages as Milujeme Rusko (We love Russia), the page of the Slovak-Russian association and the far right extremist group called the Slovak Revival Movement.

The dominating perceptions of Russia are those of an aggressor and invisible Influencer, which were mostly present in social media articles under review when referring, for example, to the annexation of Crimea or the Skripal case. In contrast, disinformation media often pushed forward a perception of Russia as a protector (of the peace). In addition to perceptions identified by Bakamo data, conspiracy portals were also portraying Russia as a strong actor and player on the international scene, an image they would use to excuse Russian aggression or its illegitimate actions. Additionally, there were also attempts to try shift the perception of the “Foe” to other actors, particularly the US or the “West” generally.

Chart 6. Top Facebook sources disseminating Russia-related articles between 1st of January and 19th of November 2018



In March, 2018,⁴⁶ two main events were driving the increased coverage – the Skripal case and the fire in a Russian shopping mall in Kemerovo. Most of the mentions were related to the Skripal case, specifically to the decision of most EU member states and NATO allies to expel Russian diplomats in retaliation to the involvement of Russian intelligence services in the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter (45 mentions of Skripal in the given period). Disinformation media dominated the coverage with the internet radio “Slobodný vysielateľ” accounting for 24% of the total coverage (15 cases). There was a clear difference in the coverage between disinformation media and mainstream media. The disinformation outlets were pushing mainly the narrative that there was a UK- and US-led conspiracy against Russia and the alleged lack of evidence pointing to Russia’s role in the poisoning. The second narrative, closely related to the first one, focused on Slovakia’s position in this situation and the “undue pressure” to expel Russian diplomats without presenting clear evidence. The decision of the Slovak government not to expel any Russian diplomats was hailed by many pro-Russian politicians and analysts and amplified by these outlets. Mainstream media dedicated less attention to the Skripal case and focused more on the decision of Slovakia not to expel Russian diplomats and the reaction of President Kiska and opposition parties. The meta-narrative of a strong Russia, which is an ally and a partner, was dominant in the coverage of disinformation media, but was also featured in the official press release of Mr. Fico informing of the decision not to expel Russian diplomats.⁴⁷

In mid-April,⁴⁸ following a chemical attack on civilians in Syria, a tense period in international relations sparked a lively debate about Russia on Slovak Facebook, with 54 mentions in 3 days. Two types of articles dominated - reference to Russia condemning the attack of the US and its allies and warnings about possible conflict escalation between the US and Russia. Several attempts of disinformation sources to portray Russia as a strong player and protector of peace could be identified. Non-conspiracy media reported the events mostly in the context of the analysis of both sides’ next steps and a possibility of conflict escalation to open

46 Peak 26-28 March

47 ‘Rusko potrebujeme odkazali Fico a Danko’ (We need Russia said Fico and Danko), topky.sk, March 2018 https://www.topky.sk/cl/100535/1699429/VIDEO-Rusko-potrebujeme--odkazali-Fico-a-Danko--Koalicia-chysta-velky-socialny-balik?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=topky

48 April 12 - 14

war. Some articles supported the perception of Russia as a “manipulator” in terms of not admitting to having been informed about the US attacks in advance.⁴⁹

The biggest buzz around Russia was on 14 May, on the date of a hockey match with Slovakia during the world championship when Russia was mentioned 30 times. While mainstream media kept informing about the match in a neutral and informative way, disinformation media did not seem to be interested in sports. Only the most popular *hlavnespravy.sk* posted an informative article on Slovakia losing against Russia.⁵⁰ *Hlavné správy* produced two more articles on geopolitical games, both portraying Russia as a strong protector and ally, and a skilled and powerful player in the conflict with the not-so-powerful US and the “West.” In such articles, the US is usually identified as the key aggressor.

Another peak in the number of hits for the term “Russia” occurred on 18 September 2018. Russia was mentioned 27 times in connection with various geopolitical events; however, 18 posts were published by pro-Russian and disinformation outlets. Most of the posts (8) were connected to the incident in Syria when Israel shot down a Russian military plane with 15 personnel on board. The majority of the posts portrayed Russia as a dangerous “foe” who will retaliate and take revenge for the death of its soldiers.⁵¹ Other posts presented the potential “foe” perception of Russia in connection with the conflict with Turkey in Idlib, Syria, since both parties are supporting opposite sides of the conflict.⁵²

Some pro-Kremlin outlets focused on the meeting of Russian President Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán in Moscow, pointing out that their cooperation is based on shared Christian values, anti-immigration perceptions and Russian gas exports to Hungary. During the visit, President Putin even declared that Hungary was one of Russia’s key European partners, which supports and further disseminates the perception of Russia being a “Strong protector and ally.”⁵³ This narrative also dominated the coverage of Russia’s cooperation with China and Japan.⁵⁴

CRIMEA

There were altogether 435 mentions of Crimea (Krym in Slovak) during the respective period. The articles were mostly related to the trip of Slovak MP Peter Marček (independent) to Crimea, where he met with the representatives of the Crimean administration and the resulting reaction by various political forces in Slovakia. The whole situation culminated when the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Council adopted a decision denouncing the trip and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation as such.

While mainstream media highlighted the illegal annexation of Crimea and the fact that referendum was illegitimate, thus using the narrative frame of the aggressor, disinformation outlets highlighted the fact that Crimea had always been Russian and thus the annexation was a restoration of its historical place. The coverage was heavily dominated by the flagship of disinformation media outlets *Hlavné správy*, which accounted

49 ‘Rusi vedeli o útokoch na Sýriu, tvrdia Francúzi’, *aktuality.sk*, April 2018, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/581095/rusi-vedeli-o-utokoch-na-syriu-tvrdia-francuzi/>

50 ‘Rusko – Slovensko 4:0; Sekera: “Nepožičali nám puk”’, *hlavnespravy.sk*, May 2018, <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/rusko-slovensko-40-sekera-nepozicali-nam-puk/1401738#>

51 ‘Rusko má teraz právo na odvetu voči Izraelu, vyhlásil Šojgu. Netanjahu: My s tým nič nemáme, na vine je Sýria’, *hlavnespravy.sk*, September 2018, <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/rusko-ma-teraz-pravo-na-odvetu-voci-izraelu-vyhlasil-sojgu/1524534>

52 ‘Koniec krviprelievania je na dosah: Rusko a Turecko sa dohodli na zóne bez zbraní’, *topky.sk*, September 2018, https://www.topky.sk/cl/11/1738613/Koniec-krviprelievania-je-na-dosah--Rusko-a-Turecko-sa-dohodli-na-zone-bez-zbrani?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=topky

53 ‘Putin Orbánovi: Maďarsko je jedným z našich kľúčových partnerov v Európe’, *hlavnespravy.sk*, September 2018, <https://www.hlavnespravy.sk/putin-orbanovi-madarsko-je-jednym-z-nasich-klucovych-partnerov-v-europe/1524644>

54 ‘Člena Pussy Riot pravdepodobne otrávil’, *sme.sk*, September 2018, <https://svet.sme.sk/c/20916562/clena-pussy-riot-pravdepodobne-otravili.html?ref=FB>

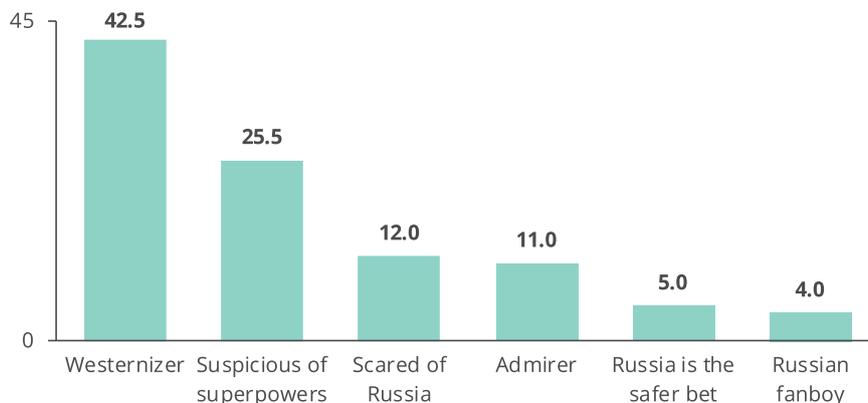
for more than 20% of the total coverage (89 mentions). Other disinformation outlets also had a significant share of coverage - 10% by Slobodný vysielateľ (The Free Broadcaster) and 8% by Infovojna (Infowar).

1968

The peak of 1968 mentions, was, unsurprisingly, on the 50th anniversary of invasion of Warsaw Pact troops to Czechoslovakia on August 21 2018 (1968 was mentioned 91 times). Independent, credible media predominantly reported on personal stories and witnesses, remembering the victims of the invasion while condemning the occupation and the following normalisation. The USSR was thus openly portrayed as an aggressor. Some media, particularly the left-leaning Pravda, also reported on Russian domestic coverage of the commemoration, mostly describing the posts in a critically cynical manner and marking it as “propaganda”, thus portraying Russia within the frame of the invisible Influencer.⁵⁵ Disinformation sources, on the other hand, did not commemorate the event by testimonies. Most articles aimed at shifting the attention away from Russia or tried to spread the guilt among other actors. Such attempts of spreading the guilt included narratives such as “70% of the troops were actually Ukrainian”,⁵⁶ or “Russia had apologised for their actions so our politicians could have, during the commemoration of the troops, apologised for what had happened in Iraq”,⁵⁷ or that “perhaps the invasion was a better option than a complete Russophobia into which a Prague Spring could have culminated”.⁵⁸ Clearly, these articles appearing on disinformation sources are mostly attempts to soften the perception of Russia as a Foe or Aggressor in relation to 1968.

SLOVAK PUBLIC SEGMENTS ON RUSSIA

Chart 7. Distribution of Slovak public segments on Russia (in %)



Data collected from online conversations identified more than half of the sample as either pro-Western or anti-Russian in terms of attitudes towards these two powers. Of these, around 43% would fall under the segment of “Westernizers” and 12% of “Scared of Russia”. Among these users, we can find more informed citizens aware of the economic, social and political benefits of being part of the “West” compared to Russia. Based on earlier survey results, in Slovakia, it is primarily younger people and people with higher education

55 Facebook post of Pravda, August 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/pravdadennik/posts/10156585500861624>; Facebook post of Pravda, August 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/pravdadennik/posts/10156585305356624>

56 ‘Peter Marček: Nebola to “ruská okupácia” Československa’, *hlavnespravdy.sk*, August 2018, <https://www.hlavnespravdy.sk/peter-marcek-nebola-ruska-okupacia-ceskoslovenska/1496958?fbclid=IwAR09I8P9Mmj8CVi2gAbg77th4T2FXQjeggNEUNz5569POeFDIVZok6LPssc>

57 Branislav Fábry, ‘Slovensko-ruské vyrovnanie, priznanie zločinov Slovenska chyba’, *slobodnyvyber.sk*, August 2018, <https://slobodnyvyber.sk/slovensko-ruske-vyrovnanie-priznanie-zlocinov-slovenska-chyba/>

58 ‘Pražská jar a “Vltava-666”, dá sa hovoriť o chybe Moskvy?’, *hlavnespravdy.sk*, August 2018, <https://www.hlavnespravdy.sk/prazska-jar-vltava-666-da-sa-hovorit-chybe-moskvy/1497808>

who are generally more supportive of the EU and NATO membership.⁵⁹ These segments of the society are also usually the ones who have experienced the “West” in terms of working, studying or travelling abroad.

People who perceive Russia as an aggressor would generally derive this perception either from personal experience, informed opinion, or a feeling of insecurity and inferiority. Therefore, older segments of the population with negative views of the communist regime, many of whom still remember the 1968 invasion, can fall into this segment, together with those sceptical about Slovakia’s ability to protect itself against foreign influence. The latter segment is likely to be influenced by the military conflict in Ukraine, which is covered extensively in the Slovak media due to the shared borders between the two countries.

On the other hand, around 20% of participants in online conversations are leaning towards pro-Russian perceptions with the largest segment of Admirers (11%), followed by the perception of “Russia as a safer bet” (5%) and “Russian fanboys” (4%). Admirers generally encompass those parts of the population that have a strong nostalgia for the communist past, as well as those with strong positive sentiment towards Russian culture and products. Both admirers and fanboys can be linked with a narrative of pan-Slavism (with Russia playing a role of a big protecting “brother” securing traditional values and culture), which is strongly pushed forward on social media and being picked up by many disinformation actors and portals.

Key factors contributing to perceiving “Russia as a safer bet” can be linked to scepticism towards NATO and the US as protectors, as well as to the EU migration crisis, which has been strongly exploited by prominent political actors to spread fear and hate in Slovakia around 2014-2016. However, this view can also be prevalent among segments feeling disillusioned and betrayed by the democratic system and who would rather lean towards undemocratic regimes to be granted basic needs in return for the loss of freedom.⁶⁰ These perceptions were observed also in a recent survey, when 24% of Slovaks chose the authoritarian leadership over liberal democracy for their country.⁶¹

The “in-betweeners”, i.e. those without any preference towards either West or Russia were expressed by those 25% of conversation participants, who were identified as “Suspicious of superpowers”.⁶² Conspiracy-prone as well as strongly nationalistic, far-right segments of the society would fall into this category, among whom a narrative of “super-“ or “secret” powers controlling the world resonates strongly. Those segments would usually argue for a neutral and sovereign Slovakia dreaming of their country becoming a “next Switzerland”, which was one of the narratives spread by a far-right extremist party LSNS.

DRIVERS OF PRO-RUSSIAN ATTITUDES IN SLOVAKIA

The qualitative analysis of the discussions on and around Russia across the three countries under study allowed for the construction of an analytical framework of the underlying psychological drivers of attitudes towards Russia. The psychological drivers identified by *Bakamo.Social* were insecurity and inferiority deriving partially from an identity crisis in each of the three CEE countries analysed. Based on this framework, the identity crisis of Central European countries significantly influences not only the perceptions of Russia but also geopolitical orientation, policies or debate about culture and values in Slovakia.

59 ‘Generation Trends Central Europe: Mosaic of Perspectives’.

60 According to a poll conducted in 2016, 40% of Slovaks perceived the quality of democracy in Slovakia as bad or terrible and around a fourth of the respondents perceived the autocracy as a viable alternative to democracy. INEKO ‘Zneužívanie moci ženie ľudí k extrémizmu’, ineko.sk, December 2016, <http://www.ineko.sk/clanky/zneuzivanie-moci-zenie-ludi-k-extremizmu>

61 ‘GLOBSEC Trends 2017’.

62 More than 50% of the Slovaks would prefer Slovakia to be geopolitically positioned somewhere between the East and the West according to GLOBSEC Trends data.

Following this premise, the perceptions of Russia in Slovak online conversations reflect the Slovaks' strive for individual or national survival, geopolitical self-definition or the lack of it, and an inferiority complex. The existence of such identity crisis is clearly supported by findings of the *GLOBSEC Trends 2018* on geopolitical orientation of Slovakia, which showed that the majority of Slovaks think that their country belongs somewhere in between the West and East. This contradicts the fact that Slovakia is an active member of the European Union and NATO and for the past 15 years has been a fully integrated member of western international organizations. However, strategic communication explaining the benefits of the membership of Slovakia in the EU and NATO is very limited in the country. Therefore, the "foe" perception of Russia is almost non-existent in Slovakia, because a clear-cut and positive brand image of the West is lacking. However, attitudes towards Russia and the West do not necessarily have to be an either-or question, a dichotomy of "us vs. Russia" view, as our analysis showed.

According to the data collected by *Bakamo.Social*, Slovakia is the most pro-Russian of the three countries analysed. This affinity towards Russia is based on close cultural, historical and linguistic ties – a pan-Slavic sentiment and cultural affinity often based on nostalgia and somewhat irrational positive perception of Russia. This "historic Russophilia" was promoted in "Slovak socio-political and intellectual circles that traditionally held the view that Slovakia maintains a special relationship with Russia on the basis of linguistic and cultural closeness."⁶³ This narrative is being spread in Slovak literature and history. Therefore, unless there is a significant change in school curricula regarding the history of Slovakia, its national identity, the misplaced positive perception of the Russian Federation and its role in Slovakia's past and present is going to be taught to more and more young Slovaks.⁶⁴ School children, instead of having the chance to gain a strong understanding of responsibilities and benefits of the European Union and learning what it means to be an EU citizen, are being taught obsolete 19th century pan-Slavic ideas. Such practices deepen the identity crisis of Slovaks, who then have difficulty knowing whether they belong.

In addition, the pro-Russian sentiments and narratives have been pursued in Slovakia by a wide variety of actors: mainstream and fringe political representatives; far-right and far-left groups; organisations with economic and cultural ties to Russia; paramilitary and martial arts organisations and, last but not least, by various social media pages and groups, including a number of disinformation websites.⁶⁵ Given the relatively wide penetration of such pro-Russian sentiments across the political and societal spectrum,⁶⁶ it is easier to understand why the updated Security and Defence Strategy of the Slovak Republic was held back from being voted on in the Slovak National Council. The Strategy's clear declaration of the EU and NATO as geo-political allies while the Russian Federation as a potential threat for Slovakia, which corresponds to the "Russia as a foe" narrative, was quoted as the primary reason for the rejection of these documents by the Slovak National

63 Grigorij Mesežnikov and Gabriela Pleshová, 'Testing Democratic Resolve in Slovakia', Chapter 5 in *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Power, National Endowment for Democracy, 2017*, <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Chapter5-Sharp-Power-Rising-Authoritarian-Influence-Slovakia.pdf>

64 Luděk Navara, 'BIS hledá ukradené české dějiny. Zloději utekli do Moskvy a nechtějí je vrátit', *aktualne.cz*, accessed 18 February 2019, <https://nazory.aktualne.cz/komentare/bis-ukradene-ceske-dejiny-zlodeji-utekli-do-moskvy/r~b01af998f94b11e8b04aac1f6b220ee8/?redirected=1550541311>

65 As indicated in the text, the group of actors promoting pro-Russian sentiments is very differentiated and they are supporting such views for very different reasons. These include legitimate political or ideological opposition to current cultural and geopolitical orientation of Slovakia, economic interests or cultural ties. However, some views and sentiments are supported by organisations and individuals linked directly or indirectly to Russian influence operations and anti-system actors using any external support available to weaken the system. Therefore, on one side of this spectrum lies the Slovak National Party and certain parts of the SMER-SD party and on the other side the proto-fascist LSNS party. In the domain of civil society, these include cultural associations and Slovak-Russian Society but also martial arts clubs of Russian Systema, paramilitaries such as Slovak Conscripts and media outlets such as *Hlavné správy* or *Zem a Vek*. While they differ in their ideology and goals, they are often united under the banner of "enemy of my enemy is my friend", hence they often share same views and tend to be involved in spreading of the same narratives, sometimes even cooperating in physical domain, attending demonstrations or supporting political candidates.

66 In general, the most vocal supporters of strong Slovak-Russian ties have been the representatives of the Slovak National Party (SNS) along with its party leader and current Speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, Andrej Danko. Similar attitudes are shared by representatives of extreme right People's Party Our Slovakia (LSNS). For more information please see 'The Vulnerability Index: Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe', *globsec.org*, April 2017, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/globsec-vulnerability-index.pdf>

Party and members of the Slovak National Council of the ruling coalition. An overview of the most vocal actors of Russian influence was mapped by GLOBSEC in the *Vulnerability Index: Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe*.⁶⁷ In addition, due to close cultural ties and language similarities, numerous pro-Russian narratives spread in Slovakia originated in the Czech Republic. For example, in August 2018, 41% of website visitors to the Czech version of *Sputnik International* came from Slovakia.⁶⁸

However, examination of the main Slovak media influencers identified by *Bakamo.Social* reveals the generally neutral nature of the aforementioned perceptions of Russia. The top influencers with largest reach among the news media are news flash portals *topky.sk* or investigative media *dennikn.sk* or *sme.sk* with neutral and balanced articles.

The table below summarizes the most influential outlets that have encompassed the term “Russia” the most according to the data provided by *Bakamo.Social*.⁶⁹ From the number of engagements, it is possible to see that the most influential platforms contributing to Slovak debate about Russia were mainstream media *sme.sk*, *pluska.sk* or *topky.sk* generating neutral sentiments. However, according to the data, main pro-Kremlin disinformation outlet in Slovakia, *Hlavné správy*, also ended up among the top 5 most influential news portals in Slovakia. When it comes to the debate on Twitter, the accounts of main investigative portals – *Denník N*, *SME* and *Aktuality.sk* were the most active on this social media platform. The Twitter account of the Russian ambassador in Slovakia was the sixth most influential Twitter account with posts containing a term “Russia” in Slovakia. This account outperforms, in terms of its reach, the Twitter accounts of mainstream investigative media as *Pravda* or *Aktuality*. In addition, looking at the number of engagements on Slovak forums, it is possible to observe that a disinformation pro-Russian outlet *oral.sk* generated the most engagements.

Table 3. The list of top media sources of grassroots communication in Slovakia

Name of platform	Number of posts	Engagement	Engagement per post
Fony.sk	408	0	0
Mtbiker.sk	183	0	0
Zdravie.sk	47	4	0.1
Hojho.com	285	21	0.1
Modrykonik.sk	12	0	0
Denník SME	608	154	0.3
TA3	139	23	0.2
Denník N	99	194	2
Pravda.sk	54	17	0.3
Aktuality	242	30	0.1

67 GLOBSEC Policy Institute, ‘The Vulnerability Index: Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe’, *globsec.org*, April 2017, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/globsec-vulnerability-index.pdf>

68 Katarína Klingová, ‘What Do We Know About Disinformation Websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia?’, *globsec.org*, September 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/news/what-do-we-know-about-disinformation-websites-in-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia>

69 TalkWalker provided no insights into methodology why particular websites were labelled as a blog and why some as news. Furthermore, Twitter is a marginal social media platform in Slovakia. According to GlobalStats only 2.76% of Slovaks use Twitter. In addition, TalkWalker analysed only Twitter accounts posting in Slovak language. [http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/slovakia-\(slovak-republic\)](http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/slovakia-(slovak-republic))

DRIVERS OF PRO-RUSSIAN ATTITUDES IN SLOVAKIA

Alexej Fedotov/ Embassy of the Russian Federation in Slovakia	201	33	0.2
Webnoviny.sk	1.1K	265	0.2
Interez.sk	199	245	1.2
Touchit.sk	152	288	1.9
Slobodný výber	257	234	0.9
Oral.sk	565	623	1.1
SME	3.3K	24.6K	73
Pluska	593	5.3K	8.9
Denník N	3.7K	1.4K	0.4
Hlavné správy	1.6K	618	0.4
Topky.sk	1.7K	3.1K	1.9