

"CRIMEA HAS ALWAYS BEEN RUSSIAN"



Revealing Russian disinformation networks and active measures fuelling secessionism and border revisionism in Slovakia



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This paper is the summary of the results of an over a year-long research project covering the Kremlin's and pro-Kremlin actors' disinformation campaigns and active measures related to territorial revisionism in six countries – Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania and Serbia – during a period of heightened nationalism and historical revisionism involving World War I commemorations between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020. Political Capital has assessed in numerous studies how the Kremlin transformed European far-right parties and extremist organisations harbouring age-old territorial or other grievances against other countries into pro-Russian political assets since the early 2000s. In this study, we set out to understand the inner workings of “revisionist” disinformation campaigns as tools of destabilisation on a local and regional level. The research utilised a novel methodology that combined qualitative content-analysis with the analysis of networks and social media statistics to reveal communication strategies and the dissemination of revisionist ideas in Central-Eastern Europe. For more information on the project, please visit our [thematic website](#).

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INTRODUCTION

Since the start of the Crimean war in 2014, Russia has masterfully exploited societal divisions present in Ukrainian society and abroad. The war against Ukraine was part of the Kremlin's long-term foreign policy attempt to preserve or (re)gain influence over the post-Soviet space and its countries by creating so called "frozen conflicts" in territories such as Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia in Georgia or Donetsk in Ukraine, which claimed independence based on alleged differences or societal divisions rooted in ethnicity, language, historical origins etc., supported by the Russian state. Territorial secessionism as a foreign policy tool has been enabled by rights-based territorial discourses or narratives to legitimize current-day or historical justifications for territorial authority over a piece of land.

Political Capital has laid out in numerous studies how the Kremlin transformed European far-right parties and extremist organisations harbouring age-old territorial or other grievances against other countries into pro-Russian political assets since the early 2000s to garner intelligence and leverage over foreign countries' political life.¹ The pro-Kremlin extremists and their media potential was then put to good use during the illegal occupation of Crimea in 2014, to provide political and media cover for the illegal secession referendum and the subsequent war in Eastern Ukraine. Russian power projection has also relied on disinformation campaigns – "active measures" – targeting audiences in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Ukraine to create or escalate bilateral tensions between these coun-

tries along ethnic or territorial lines to this day. The leaked emails of Vladislav Surkov,² a chief strategist of the Crimean annexation, detailed how Ukraine's territory could be further disintegrated or "federalised" with the help of minority/secessionist organisations in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia.³

Vulnerabilities to Russian media or other (hard or soft, sharp) influence have been investigated extensively before.⁴ We have not set out to define the Kremlin's overall strategy to destabilize European security and economic coalitions in order to shift the balance of power in its favour. Rather we seek to understand the inner workings of "revisionist" disinformation campaigns as tools of destabilisation on a regional level. To this end, with the help of the Open Information Partnership, Political Capital and its partners in Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine and Poland launched a year-long media research study in six countries to identify pro-Kremlin domestic or international disinformation campaigns, or so called "active measures," that are specifically reliant on revisionism and inter-ethnic conflicts.⁵

We hope that our research findings may provide local elites, the Euro-Atlantic Community and the wider public with insights and tools to better identify and thwart Russian hostile information operations based on social divisions and identity politics aimed at upending European peace and stability.

METHODOLOGY AND THE SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The geographical scope and timeframe of the media research study was defined to reflect current or past territorial disputes – flashpoints of national discourses related first and foremost to World War I about identity, language or territories and proactively utilized by the Kremlin to sow divisions among Central-European countries.

We therefore chose to limit our research to Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Serbia, in addition to Ukraine, as focal points of hostile disinformation operations, because they all experienced territorial disputes and shifting borders dating back to World War I. More specifically,

Romania: Romania celebrated the 100-year anniversary of its Great Unification of Bessarabia, Bucovina and Transylvania in 2018.⁶

Hungary: 2020 is the 100th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty, declared the Year of National Togetherness by the Hungarian National Assembly to commemorate the loss of territory and population formerly belonging to the Hungarian Kingdom and the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy.⁷

Poland: Historical legacy of the Polish-Ukrainian War between 1918 and 1919 that resulted in the control of Galicia and the city of Lviv by the Second Polish Republic until 1939.

Current inter-ethnic conflicts: Disinformation campaigns based on current territorial conflicts addressed Russian revisionism in Ukraine and Slovakia, and the status of Kosovo in Serbia.

In line with the timing of national anniversaries and commemorations, we conducted our media monitoring activities during the period from 1 January 2018 to 15 April 2020, to reveal Russian hostile influence operations targeting the commemorative events or exploiting other forms of territorial revisionist, separatist tendencies and inter-ethnic conflicts in the countries under review.

The research addressed the following four questions:

1. What are the basic and most widespread revisionist narratives, related (dis)information strategies and identity politics concerning the official commemorations of World War I or other significant current-day territorial issues?
2. What are the drivers of revisionist media trends, in terms of events, actors and media sources in news media and in social media?
3. What are the prerequisites for the successful dissemination and construction of revisionist narratives and messages in pro-Kremlin media in each of the countries under review?
4. What are the vulnerabilities of each society to foreign hostile influence operations based on territorial issues and societal divisions between minority and majority populations?

We defined a “narrative” as a specific structure of (real or imaginary) events or occurrences linked by causality in storytelling, which can be articulated in oral, written, visual etc. forms of communication. Within each narrative we were looking for the type of information used to interpret the main line of argumentation: (1) information (fact-based, objective reporting); (2) disinformation (misleading information disseminated intentionally); (3) misinformation (ad hoc or accidentally false information).

Because territorial revisionist tendencies against other countries are not present in Slovakia and Ukraine, we expanded the operational definition of “revisionist narratives” in two important ways.

First, revisionist narratives were categorised as either exhibiting “aggressive” or “victimhood” aspects. “Aggressive” territorial narratives express a wish or demand for territorial change, or a revision of borders favouring a certain state or country, while “victimhood” narratives express fear of a possible change of the sovereign status of a given territory.

Second, we distinguished between “domestic” and “Russian” revisionist narratives. While domestic narratives were not created to manipulate specific audiences and did not necessarily contain any disinformation, pro-Kremlin or Russian disinformation meta-narratives reinterpreted domestic narratives for disinformation purposes as part of their disinformation campaigns.

In Slovakia, our initial desktop research revealed that territorial revisionism against other countries is a non-issue, while historical revisionism certainly is one. Slovakia has never in its recent history expressed any territorial demands, nor did it mourn any loss of territory since the formation of Czecho-Slovakia in 1918. Therefore, it comes as a surprise that according to the Pew Research Center survey,⁸ 46% of Slovaks consider that part of a neighbouring country should belong to Slovakia. Czecho-Slovakia lost after WWII almost one fourth of its territory, the so called Transcarpathian Ukraine, to the Soviet Union. Yet it was part of Czecho-Slovakia only for some 20 years and there has been no real discussion of its return to modern Slovakia. If such attitudes indeed exist, as the research suggests, they are not manifested in the public nor in the political discussion. The notion of „greater Slovakia” is non-existent in the media nor in the political discourse.

Therefore, our research focused on pro-Russian narratives regarding Crimea and the frozen conflict in Eastern Ukraine present in the Slovak fringe media, while the analysis of World War I and the Treaty of Trianon served as the historical context of the former to understand long-term Slovak foreign policy regarding revisionism in general.

The following research methods were used to prepare this study.

- Desktop research to collect the necessary information related to territorial revisionist politics, political ideas and media activity in each country to narrow down our research foci, and create three lists of mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin media for monitoring purposes.
- In-depth interviews with experts of scientific life, politics and the media so as to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events.
- Monitoring of revisionism-related websites’ articles and Facebook messages on mainstream news media, and fringe pro-Kremlin and far-right media using the SentiOne online platform’s research function which gathered data in the given timeframe based on country-specific sets of keywords selected by our researchers in each country under review.⁹ As a result, we ended up with “relevant” messages in the forms of website articles or Facebook posts related to revisionist ideas, territory-related information, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and all the “irrelevant” messages produced by the media on our three initial media lists.

Media data gathered was analysed using four distinct research methodologies.

- Time trends of the dissemination of website articles and Facebook posts were analysed through the SentiOne platform’s data visualization tools to understand the main events, actors, media, etc. driving mainstream or fringe media discourseswebsite.
- To identify, map and categorise the most prevalent revisionist narratives present in each country, we took a random, representative sample of website articles of at least 500 articles per country. The recurring, representative themes of articles were categorised into the main types of narratives present in each country.¹⁰

- To understand what conditions or prerequisites make revisionist or territory-related narratives and conspiracy theories successful in social media, we compared the most successful fringe (far-right or pro-Kremlin) Facebook pages' and posts' statistical performance to each other in terms of the number of interactions (based on the number of reactions, comments and shares).
- The research utilized a "big data approach" to comprehend how pro-Kremlin networks of websites in each country disseminated revisionism or territory-related messages through hyperlinks embedded in articles, in order to direct their audience to other revisionist sites or construct impactful messages by referencing - many times - third party sources website.

In the end, we combined the different layers of analytical and methodological approaches to provide a comprehensive picture of all the revisionist narratives and related (dis)information campaigns utilized by pro-Kremlin actors to sow social polarisation and geopolitical instability in all the six countries under examination.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **Slovakia is, due to its history, small size and geographic position, very sensitive to any notion of territorial revisionism. World War I serves as a historical context or subtext of current Slovak geopolitical thinking,** which also contributes to how the war in Eastern Ukraine is perceived by the public and the elite in the Slovak media discourses taken under review
- **There is almost complete national consensus regarding the Trianon Treaty ending World War I, which is seen as a cornerstone of modern-day Slovakia. Although this issue is seen by most political actors as a historic event, which should not negatively influence Slovak-Hungarian relations, the very different interpretations and narratives regarding the Trianon Treaty in both countries could potentially be used by external hostile actors as a pretext to stoke tensions.**
- Similar unanimity is not present regarding the Russian annexation of Crimea or the status of the so-called people's republics in eastern Ukraine. **Slovakia, as one of the most pro-Russian countries in the whole region, is particularly vulnerable to information operations aimed at presenting Russia as a victim of Western aggression and its activities in Crimea and eastern Ukraine as fully legitimate,** despite evidence to the contrary.
- **Russian soft power in Slovakia is quite significant and includes an eco-system of various pro-Kremlin media outlets:** electronic, print, online fringe networks of media, politicians, extremist organisations and influential individuals, cultural and sport events and educational activities. **Slovakia also witnessed elements of active measures combining a stick-and-carrot approach involving rides by the Russian motorbike club Night Wolves, which recently established its European headquarters in Slovakia, active paramilitary groups and the hacking of state institutions.**
- **The issue of separatism and territorial revisionism in Slovakia is visible mostly in relation to the situation in Ukraine, especially the status of Crimea and the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics.** Fringe media cover any issues related to Russia, including the conflict in Ukraine, much more frequently, and they closely follow the narrative and perspective of Kremlin, either directly using text from Russian sources or using their talking points and reasoning.
- Mainstream media, on the other hand, follow the official foreign policy of Slovakia – supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the non-recognition of the Crimea referendum and Russian annexation. However, **fringe media manage to drive much more interaction and engagement on social media; therefore, their content often outperforms mainstream media.** There is also growing mutual support and recognition between some fringe media and fringe politicians. Fringe media further disseminate their Facebook posts and provide them with ample space to reach beyond their traditional bubble, while politicians often use in their posts narratives widely disseminated by these media outlets.
- **The fringe media narratives analysed in the report are connected by a single thread: the positive perception of Russia and its actions in Ukraine and elsewhere, and the demonisation of the West (EU, NATO, United States) and its policies towards Russia (sanctions regime, Crimea).** The sanctions regime is hurting Russia and Crimea; therefore, **it is the immediate short-term strategic goal of Russia to create fissures in the unanimous support for sanctions at the level of the EU, including in Slovakia.**

- **The network analysis of fringe media sources revealed that the fringe media ecosystem in Slovakia has relatively weak internal links**, since each of the outlets aims for slightly different audiences and they are often in competition with each other. **While the total number of fringe sources is quite significant, the whole landscape is dominated by several big players** or network hubs organising the fringe pro-Russian discourse. **Hlavné správy is the most important and best connected fringe news portal, using significant amount of Russian language sources, including official Russian authorities, pro-Russian de-facto authorities in Donbass and various Russian media.**
- **The analysis of Facebook pages confirmed that the best performing pages with content related to revisionism and separatism are pro-Russian pages promoting openly Russian narratives related to Crimea, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the sanctions regime.** Unsurprisingly the best performing stories with such content are on pro-Kremlin media, while far-right stories attract significantly less attention.
- **While we are aware of the fact that differing national or historical interpretations regarding the World Wars and territorial changes between Central-European countries cannot ultimately or permanently reconciled, the Kremlin and its local allies are continually launching disinformation campaigns to antagonize EU or NATO member states based on current-day or historical revisionist ideas to legitimize the Kremlin's geopolitics.** The Trianon Treaty is used by pro-Russian Hungarian extremists and fringe media to incite hatred against Slovakia, Romania or Ukraine, while Slovak pro-Russian actors' support of "separatists" drives a wedge between Ukraine and Slovakia. **Therefore, these revisionist narratives, supported or disseminated by the Kremlin's affiliates, present a direct national security threat for the Euro-Atlantic Community in general, and for the Central-European region in particular.**

GENERAL POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL ATTITUDES IN SLOVAKIA

Geopolitical attitudes and social divisions related to issues of race, ethnicity, religion or language may serve as vulnerabilities which the Kremlin can use to sow discord and create inter-ethnic tensions in domestic politics or in international relations. National identities intertwined with historical narratives serve as the most powerful basis for geopolitical orientations in a given country, making it susceptible or protected against the Kremlin's power projection, or soft and sharp powers.

Slovakia is a lukewarm and hesitant pro-Western oriented country with large pockets of the population feeling nostalgia for the communist past. In terms of East or West orientation, almost half of the population – 46% – would prefer the “in-between” position¹¹, while the pro-Western camp is only half as strong – 23%. While support for the EU is increasing year by year and according to GLOBSEC

Trends 2019 is currently at 71%, that is not the case for NATO. Slovakia has been one of the weakest supporters of NATO membership among all NATO member states. Currently, the level of support is at 56% (Globsec Trends 2019), due to high levels of anti-American and pro-Russian sentiments. The positive attitude of Slovaks to Russia is, according to a recent Pew Research study, second highest in the world, with 60% viewing Russia positively and only Bulgaria scoring better.¹² The perception of the United States has been historically quite negative, both as a consequence of the communist past and as a side effect of strong-pro Russian sentiments. This has manifested also in the perception of the United States as a threat – 4 out of 10 Slovaks (41%) perceive the United States as a threat, while only 26% feel the same way about Russia.

TOPICS OF TERRITORIAL DESTABILIZATION IN SLOVAKIA

Slovakia as a relatively young country, which came into existence as an independent state only in 1993 after the peaceful breakup of Czechoslovakia, has always been and continues to be quite sensitive to territorial destabilisation efforts. There are numerous reasons for such an attitude, with the small size of the country, its population of 5 million and historical experience being the main drivers. The second World War serves as a cautionary tale when the Slovak state, shortly after declaring independence in March 1939, lost a significant portion of its territory to Hungary in a so-called “small war”¹³. The period after the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the early 90s were dominated by strong nationalist narratives and a debate regarding the relationship between the Hungarian minority living mostly in southern Slovakia¹⁴ and the majority population. This was manifested also in tensions in the official Slovak-Hungarian relations and relatively strong support for various nationalist parties. Although

these tensions have largely subsided, the fear of territorial destabilization continues to serve as a framework also in the current environment.

One of the historical reference points in Slovak geopolitical thinking concerns World War I. The breakup of the Austro-Hungarian empire after the end of the war is generally viewed as a natural process, which led to founding of Czechoslovakia and the political emancipation of Slovaks from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The territorial changes associated with the breakup of Austro-Hungary are thus seen as a natural consequence of the nation building phase, reclaiming the physical space inhabited by Slovaks or perceived as historic Slovak lands. The political consensus across the political spectrum is that the Trianon treaty is a cornerstone of a stable central Europe and therefore any attempts to question its validity or revise it in any way are seen as dangerous to and threatening Slovakia.

On the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the Trianon Treaty in June 2010, the Government of the Slovak Republic adopted a strongly worded declaration in which it *"strongly rejects the revisionist efforts of the Hungarian Government and Parliament, which ultimately call into question the history of the twentieth century and not only affect the lives of citizens of sovereign states, but also the stability and democratic development of Europe."*¹⁵ The declaration was adopted as a reaction to Hungarian legislation granting dual Hungarian citizenship to ethnic Hungarians living in neighbouring countries, including Slovakia and the declaration of June 4th (Trianon Anniversary) as a Day of National Togetherness by Hungarian parliament. The Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in response, summoned Slovak Ambassador in Hungary Peter Weiss to refuse any territorial revisionism on the part of the Hungarian government or in the text of the law on the Day of National Togetherness.¹⁶

Although Slovak-Hungarian relations have improved significantly over the last couple of years, the increasing adoption of greater Hungary rhetoric and the questioning of the Trianon treaty by some political actors in Hungary or use of so-called Greater Hungary maps¹⁷ is a source of growing concern in Slovakia. While we are aware of the fact that differing national or historical interpretations between Hungary and Slovakia cannot ultimately or permanently be reconciled with regard to the Trianon Treaty or any other significant historical events, good bilateral relations can be and are maintained over different and democratic political points of views. Our analysis tries to reveal current-day vulnerabilities directly linked to these very narratives in our region.

Although the original focus of the research was aimed primarily at the perception of the Trianon Treaty, it was necessary to broaden it and include the issue of separatism and specifically the situa-

tion in Ukraine. As the data of our media research confirmed, Trianon is not a significant issue in the Slovak public or political debate, while the annexation of Crimea, the status of de-facto autonomous regions in eastern Ukraine – the so called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics – are. Therefore, our analysis addresses both issues on different levels. World War I serves as a sort of historical context for current Slovak geopolitical thinking, which also impacts how the war in Eastern Ukraine is perceived by the public and the elite in the Slovak media discourses taken under review.

Likewise, World War I is simply a non-issue for most of the far-right groups in Slovakia. If it is debated at all, it is only the position of Slovaks in the Czechoslovak republic and events leading up to breakup of the common state in late 1930s. World War I as such is not discussed or analysed in the right circles. Perhaps the only exception are Slovak branches of Hungarian far-right groups such as The Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement (Hungarian: Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom, HVIM) or Jobbik, advocating for Greater Hungary and questioning the Trianon treaty. Yet their overall impact among fellow Hungarian minority members living in Slovakia is rather small and they did not manage to attract any serious attention. The activities of Jobbik or other similar groups in Slovakia are not included in the official reports on the security of Slovakia¹⁸, nor are they present in the political or public discourse.

On the contrary, the footprint of groups and individuals connected to Fidesz, including some Hungarian minority political parties, is significant and it is quite likely it will continue to grow with the demise of the Most-Híd party.

THE SLOVAK MEDIA SPACE

The success of hostile influence operations is highly dependent on the media environment in each country. A free and balanced media space characterised by a high degree of media freedom and freedom of speech is more resilient to disinformation attacks, since fact-based reporting makes it easy to debunk and expose disinformation and conspiracy theories, thereby rendering manipulation attempts ineffective. On a more general level, the presence of a strong, balanced and independent mainstream media in a country directly neutralizes local pro-Kremlin networks and indirectly improves audiences' media literacy against manipulation.

Mainstream media in Slovakia predominantly support a pro-Western orientation, and EU and NATO membership. This applies both to private media as well as to the public broadcaster. As such, their coverage of any Russian pro-separatist actions in Ukraine or Crimea are covered from this perspective, always reminding of the illegitimate referendum in Crimea or the presence of Russian troops in eastern Ukraine. Currently there are no mainstream media – TV, radio, dailies or electronic outlets – which would adopt a pro-Russian position or replicate their narrative and talking points. This might change in the future, however, as the ownership of large private media is shifting from western owners to local oligarchs or shadowy financial groups.¹⁹

FRINGE AND PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA

According to a recent poll by Transparency International Slovakia, 13% of the adult population follow at least one of the more well-known fringe media outlets (Hlavné spravy, Zem a Vek, Slobodný vysielateľ, Infovojna) several times a week. By comparison, fewer than 28% of adults open some of the reputable mainstream newsletters and portals (SME, Denník N, Aktuality) several times a week.²⁰ Other sources confirm that social media are becoming an ever more important source of information for Slovaks, amounting to 53%, while TV remains the dominant source at almost 80%.²¹ Yet the overall trust in the news is among the lowest in the 38 countries surveyed for the Digital News report: only 33% trust news overall.²² The position of Slovakia in the World Press Freedom Index improved slightly, and Slovakia is currently ranked no. 33, with 22.67 points.²³

As stated above, territorial revisionism is a non-issue for Slovakia, while historical revisionism certainly is one. Fringe media repeatedly replicate pro-Kremlin narratives on a number of historical events. The role of the Soviet Union in starting World War II, and specifically denial or white washing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, resurfaced in autumn 2019 as the Russian federation vehemently opposed the European Parliament declaration regarding the 80th anniversary of the start of World War II²⁴ with several outlets repeating the Kremlin's line claiming that a similar pact existed between Poland and Germany.²⁵

Another significant historical event subject to revisionism is the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw pact armies in August 1968. While the overwhelming majority of Czechs and Slovaks firmly reject any attempts to justify it, such attempts are present in fringe media. These include either the spreading of pro-Russian narratives that the invasion merely pre-empted the occupation of Czechoslovakia by NATO armies²⁶ or the theory that the 1968 invasion was necessary in order to prevent a return of capitalism with all its ills²⁷. Similarly, the events surrounding the fall of the communist regime in 1989 are sometimes presented by the fringe media as an example of a "colour revolution" orchestrated by the CIA.²⁸

Russian actions in Crimea, Ukraine or even in other parts of the world such as Syria are portrayed mostly from the pro-Russian perspective in Slovak fringe media, either using original Russian sources (Sputnik, RT, RIA etc.), or just including commentary supporting the main Russian narratives. Such content is usually hidden among content taken from Slovak press agencies, since this helps them create an image of an "impartial" or truly independent media. Given the high level of pro-Russian sentiments in Slovakia and the largely pro-Western orientation of mainstream media, such an approach is quite successful.

RUSSIAN SOFT AND SHARP POWER & DISINFORMATION

Fringe media outlets have grown over the years into a well-functioning ecosystem with various channels and formats, including print (at least two print magazines), websites (more than 50), internet radios, podcasts, YouTube channels and live events. They command a significant following and managed to break free from the ostracization and, on the contrary, fringe media are becoming a media of choice for an increasing number of political actors from far-right, far-left and even some mainstream political parties. Usually, they utilize these media outlets to present their views, which are not in line with the official position of Slovakia regarding its geopolitical orientation, the EU, NATO, Ukraine, Crimea, Russia or even domestic issues.

This ecosystem of news outlets, individuals and channels clearly and unequivocally supports any Russian position and as such is being utilized and instrumentalized to effectively push either openly pro-Russian views and narratives or at least views and attitudes hostile to "the West", the EU, NATO and specifically the United States. The extent to which this ecosystem is supported or coordinated directly or indirectly by the Kremlin is a matter of speculation; yet, there were several occasions where significant representatives of this pro-Russian ecosystem met with official representatives of Russian authorities and even requested financial support.²⁹

Other vectors of Russian soft power in Slovakia build on World War II remembrance, communist nostalgia, economic ties and traditional cultural and sporting events. An important vector of Russian sharp power in Slovakia is the significant number of former military servicemen, who are critical of NATO and some are even openly voicing support for Russian policies. One such example is the Association of Slovak Soldiers / ASV, whose official chair is, according to some analysts, involved in business deals with Russian authorities.³⁰

Since World War I is rarely debated at all in the political discourse, this also includes the historic facts leading up to World War I and the attempts of the Kremlin to rewrite history. More attention is given to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and events leading up to World War II. Several mainstream media reported on the spat between Poland and Russia regarding the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact³¹, the European Parliament declaration and attempts of the Kremlin to whitewash the role of the Soviet Union in the breakup of Poland and cooperation between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union³². While the dominant narrative goes against the Kremlin's attempts to rewrite history, several political actors and fringe media tried to recycle and support the Kremlin's claims. However, such attempts are rather the domain of far-left groups and various pro-Russian activists and outlets, spreading the Kremlin's narratives, than that of the far-right.

Nonetheless, the issue of separatism and specifically the situation in Ukraine, Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk is covered extensively both in mainstream and fringe media as well as in discussions on social media. Several rather influential public figures, including current or former MPs,³³ recently started to bring these issues into the public and political discourse, using the most frequent Kremlin narratives verbatim, or even travelling to these territories or meeting with their representatives.³⁴

SOCIETAL AND POLITICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF REVISIONISM AND SEPARATISM

The issue of preserving territorial integrity is seen as crucially important for Slovakia, due to its history and geographic position. As such, there is an almost complete national/political consensus supporting the post-World War II borders of Slovakia. Therefore, any attempts to question or even change the existing borders in Europe, whether in the Balkans or elsewhere, are perceived as a potential threat to the territorial integrity of Slovakia. Such a perception is clearly visible also in the Slovak position regarding the status of Kosovo and Crimea. Slovakia is one of the few EU member states which still has not recognised Kosovo, and despite its strong pro-Russian sentiments, more Slovaks rejected the annexation of Crimea (38%) than supported it (35%).³⁵

The centenary of the Trianon treaty in June 2020 was an opportunity to discuss different perspectives of this historic treaty and the current situation related to the Hungarian minority living in Slovakia. Prime minister Igor Matovič organised on June 2nd 2020 a closed door meeting commemorating the Trianon centenary with some 100 representatives of the Hungarian minority, and in his speech offered an apology to all Hungarians for all the wrongs they had to endure.³⁶ The event nonetheless ended with tensions, when representatives of SMK (the Party of Hungarian Community) presented the Prime Minister with a declaration³⁷ demanding de-facto autonomy and a set of significant changes, including the abolition of the so called Beneš decrees, stripping many Hungarians of their property and rights.

While Slovaks perceive the Trianon treaty as a fair and just conclusion of the Austro-Hungarian empire and a cornerstone of Czechoslovakia and consequently the modern Slovak Republic, Hungary perceives it quite differently. Yet this issue did not cause any significant tensions in the bilateral relations recently. Slovak-Hungarian relations improved significantly in the last 10 years and despite different position on many issues, Slovak political representatives rarely criticised Hungary or their policies.

In a different manner, the issue of recent events of separatism had in many aspects shaped the perception of NATO and the United States. Specifically, the NATO campaign in Kosovo against then Yugoslavia, which involved the use of Slovak airspace for bombers and fighter jets en-route to Yugoslavia, is until this very day used as an example of treason committed by then Slovak authorities towards a brotherly Slavic Serb nation. The slogan "Kosovo is Serbia" dominates even now the Slovak perception of the conflict in Kosovo, and many discussions are dominated by the examples of atrocities committed by UCK against the Serb population in the aftermath of the conflict, completely omitting victims among the Kosovar (Albanian) population during the conflict.

On the contrary, in the case of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine – the Donetsk and Luhansk region –, Slovak society is divided. While according to some data, 50% of Slovaks reject Russian military presence in the region, one third does not believe the conflict is persisting due to the presence of Russian military on the ground.³⁸ Moreover, Slovaks do not perceive Russia as a threat: only 26% perceive it that way, despite the fact that Russian military personnel are actively involved in a conflict in a neighbouring country.

The attitude of the far-right and the far-left is in line with the national consensus – they reject any attempts to question post-World War II borders, and also reject recognition of Kosovo. The position towards recognition of Crimea is different though: in this case, both the far-right and the far-left recognise the Crimea referendum as valid, and just as well as the annexation of Crimea by Russia, using the very same Russian arguments.³⁹

Due to the almost universal national consensus rejecting any notion of territorial revisionism, which includes also fringe actors, there are no figures or entities actively promoting territorial revisionism. The only exceptions to this are the positions of fringe media, nationalist and fringe political parties and some paramilitary groups regarding the Russian annexation of Crimea. This case is however framed not as a revision of borders, but as a return to a natural state, which was violated during Soviet times by Khrushchev, who donated Crimea (which was allegedly always Russian anyway) to Ukraine. Interestingly enough, the same narrative is not present regarding the position of DNR or LNR.

When it comes to the revision of the current geopolitical orientation of Slovakia, EU and NATO membership, or attempts to revise the generally accepted narrative on the fall of communism, there

is a plethora of various domestic actors. The first group include remnants of various nationalist or fringe political parties, which mushroomed in the 1990s; others are linked back to the era of autocratic prime minister Vladimir Mečiar and his entourage in public media or government figures, some of whom are active in disinformation media or even academia. The third group is composed of recent far-right and far-left political actors, who despite their many differences share their disdain for the EU, NATO and the pro-Western orientation of Slovakia. The fourth group of actors are fringe media actors, who vehemently parrot pro-Russian narratives. Last but not least are various subculture groups and interest-driven communities such as paramilitary groups, motorcycle clubs or Russian martial arts clubs.

THE ROLE OF RUSSIA

The Kremlin is well aware of the affinity significant portions of Slovaks have towards Russia, and tries to capitalise on such attitudes. While at the level of official state policies, such attempts did not have much success (with the exception of the previous Speaker of Slovak Parliament and his openly pro-Russian statements and frequent visits to Moscow) and did not lead to any lasting change in official policies, the impact among the general population was not marginal. As illustrated in the 2019 Political Capital Institute study entitled *Larger than life - Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia?*, drivers of Pro-Russian attitudes in Slovakia are related to the drive for individual or national survival, geopolitical self-definition or the lack of it, and an inferiority complex. According to the same report, around 20% of participants in online conversations lean towards pro-Russian perceptions.⁴⁰

The increasing influence of fringe media and the penetration of their narratives are well illustrated by the level of trust to various conspiracy theories in Slovakia, which often forms a backbone of a wider acceptance of pro-Russian narratives. According to a recent survey by GLOBSEC, 60% of Slovaks believe that world affairs are not decided by elected leaders but by secret groups aiming to establish a totalitarian world order, and 65% believe that NATO bases in Slovakia would amount to a U.S. occupation.⁴¹

This points to a relative success in injecting conspiracy theories and distrust towards authorities and the way they present reality and world events.

The prevalence of such attitudes in Slovakia is not a new phenomenon, and the Kremlin has been cultivating and developing links and contacts with various fringe, extremist and even paramilitary groups, as documented in the 2017 Political Capital Institute report *Hatred, violence and comprehensive military training*. The relations between Slovak extremists and the Kremlin encompass not only the well-known anti-Western or anti-liberal narratives and the demand to leave the EU or NATO, but long-term organizational or military cooperation with Russian officials or extremists.⁴²

While the publicly available evidence of any active measures campaign is scarce, there have been several events which might qualify as a part of such active measures:

- Russian motorbike club Night Wolves set up their European headquarters in Slovakia in summer 2018⁴³ in a compound which resembles a military base.
- Activities of pro-Russian paramilitary group Slovenski branci (Slovak Levies),⁴⁴ which has active military servicemen among its leadership
- Attempted hacking attack against Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs by who appeared to be Russian hackers.⁴⁵

EXPERT INTERVIEWS

In the course of the research, five individuals were interviewed, including representatives of the authorities, expert community and researchers. Due to the sensitivity of the subjects discussed, they chose to remain anonymous; however, we will refer to their role in general when quoting their opinions. All the interviewees were in agreement regarding their perception of revisionism, territorial integrity or the role of Russia in this regard.

The main conclusion of the experts interviews is that Slovakia and its political representation vehemently rejects any attempts at territorial revisionism. While in the past, tensions between Hungary

and Slovakia concerning the rights and position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia were quite significant, currently the relations are without major problems. The situation in Crimea and partially also in the two separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine is seen by a significant segment of the population and some political figures through the lenses of pro-Kremlin narratives and the Pan-Slavic brotherhood between Russia and Slovakia. The high penetration of conspiracy theories and high level of anti-American sentiments contribute to the spreading of such pro-Kremlin narratives.

REVISIONISM AND SEPARATISM

Several experts concluded that the 1990s were dominated by the issue of the position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and strong nationalism, yet it is an issue of the past. Border and territorial revisionism is framed in a defensive format – blaming Hungarians, while Slovaks just want to protect their current territory.

The fear of Hungarian irredentism was the basic formatting factor of Slovak political elites since the very beginning of Slovakia. (academic expert from Slovakia)

The Trianon treaty is perceived as a backbone of current Slovak state identity – there would be no Czechoslovakia and no independent Slovakia without the Trianon treaty. The basic bilateral treaty of Slovakia with Hungary was signed only in 1995 and even then it had to be facilitated by the French foreign affairs minister in Versailles.

The position of the government is and has been clear across many administrations - resist any attempts in Europe to revise borders, since this might be a precedent for Slovakia. (representative of authorities from Slovakia)

The support for the Trianon treaty is present across the whole political spectrum. All the actors reject any attempts to revise Trianon. The first official commemoration of the Trianon treaty was organised by Slovak prime minister Igor Matovič in 2020 at the occasion of its centenary, offering a gesture of reconciliation. Yet it turned into a conflict when Hungarian minority representatives publicised their declaration, including significant demands amounting to autonomy. Prime minister Matovič was the first state official in the history of Slovakia who recognised the suffering caused by Trianon and sent a message of reconciliation.

KOSOVO

The prevailing consensus of not recognizing Kosovo independence is based on domestic political reasons. Recognition of Kosovo is seen as a threat, since it could energise domestic demands of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. The official position is based on the premise that only when Serbia recognises Kosovo will Slovakia do the same.

Moreover, the situation in Kosovo is portrayed as a conflict between Slavic Serbs and Muslim Kosovars, with the undertones of Slavic brotherhood and historic bonds between Serbs and Slovaks. This is the case especially when nationalist, far-right and far-left politicians and fringe media cover the issue.

CRIMEA AND EASTERN UKRAINE

Separatism in Crimea or Eastern Ukraine is not seen in the same way as Kosovo. In this case, pan-Slavic and Russian agenda cause a different approach. Some mainstream politicians are voicing support for Crimea, the Donetsk People's Republic or the Luhansk People's Republic and the separation of Eastern Ukraine.

Russia supports Slovak nationalism, yet the focus in Slovakia is different and based on pan-Slavic elements, which are very strong in Slovakia. Russia supports both nationalisms – in Hungary and in Slovakia to increase tensions and the potential of conflict –; it weakens the EU and NATO. (representative of the expert community in Slovakia)

MEDIA CONTEXT OF REVISIONISM

Mainstream media in Slovakia are much more pro-Western and pro-Atlanticist than the general population. This leads to a feeling of alienation and even distrust of a significant portion of the population towards the mainstream media. As a result, public opinion is very much influenced by fringe media and their narratives. Slovaks believe in conspiracy theories; the pro-EU and pro-Western stance of political elites is questioned and perceived as something alien and not aligned with their views.

Slovakia shifted to a parallel reality, based on trust in all kinds of conspiracy theories. (representative of the academic community in Slovakia)

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict is described by mainstream media siding with Ukraine, following the official Slovak position. Most vocal supporters of Ukraine are centre- right media (SME, DenníkN, Tyžden), but left leaning media such as Pravda also support Ukraine. Tabloids are also on the Ukrainian side. Public radio and TV are also in line with the pro-Western consensus. Yet, pro-Russian voices are present on some TVs (TA3).

Fringe media are more powerful than many people think or that the research could show. The impact is much more important, since they create a whole new frame of reference – providing outlandish explanations to world events, their drivers, triggers etc. Unsurprisingly, fringe media are 100% pro-Russian. It is also tied to their ideological orientation, which is based on anti-liberalism, anti-western, anti-U.S.

and anti-EU attitudes. Fringe media side with Russia, due to traditional pro-Russian narratives. The conflict in Ukraine is depicted by them and perceived as a proxy war between West and East. Most fringe media are not directly controlled by the Kremlin. Such an approach is driven by their own political and personal views, yet they welcome any support from Russia they can get. Representatives of fringe media communicate and meet with representatives of Russian authorities in Slovakia. The influence of fringe media is difficult to measure. According to opinion polls, the share of Slovaks following such media is marginal, yet their impact is disproportionately higher. Some of these media are not fringe in terms of their impact and scale of operation.

The conflict in Ukraine is thematized through Russian lenses, presenting Russian content (Russian state media, Russian fringe media, or even western media if it aligns with their perspective) but also through their own editorials.

Pan Slavism is a strong narrative and a tool used by fringe media. Anti-U.S. attitudes which are strong in Slovakia are the other side of the same coin – the United States was the ideal "other" –representative of Western values, rejected by many. The United States is perceived as a militarist power, which replaced the former Soviet Union. Russia is perceived as a victim of US militarism.

POLITICAL ACTORS

In the past it was the Slovak national party, which was driving the discussion about revisionism – historical ills happened to Slavic people during Austro-Hungarian empire and pushing for closer relations with Russia. Currently the main authors and opinion leaders of this pro-Russian milieu in Slovakia include both mainstream and fringe politicians, media and individuals. These include Ľuboš Blaha (SMER-SD MP), Milan Uhrík (LSNS MEP), Miroslav Radačovský (LSNS MEP), Rastislav Šiška (LSNS MP), Tibor Rostas (owner of Zem&Vek magazine), Branislav Fábry (Member of the Board of Slovak-Russian society), Ján Čarnogurský (former PM, member of Valdai club), Štefan Harabin (former minister of Justice and former judge of the Supreme Court, presidential candidate, leader of Homeland party), and various fringe media personalities and commentators.

They are using their channels, even organising public events and demonstrations. The main narratives are: we are losing our sovereignty; the EU and NATO do not care about us, instilling foreign values, alien to traditional Slovak values. In the case of NATO: NATO is pulling us into conflict with Russia, provoking it with the expansion of its members, military exercises etc.

Another element of Russian soft power in Slovakia is Russkiy Mir and their activities in several universities teaching Russian classes. A new form of activities is support for speakers and lecturers visiting Slovak universities. Cultural events are highly visible and successful in attracting many visitors.

RESILIENCE TO DISINFORMATION

Resilience to disinformation in Slovakia is not good, as surveys, including the ones commissioned by GLOBSEC contest. Russian efforts are focused on ethnic Slovaks, not so much on the Hungarian minority. Education, media literacy and critical thinking are underperforming. School curricula are using old historic narratives of oppressed Slovaks, not reflecting the current situation.

Pro-Russian affinity is part of the national identity. Strong anti-western attitudes are reflected also in the strong pro-Russian affinity.

There have been some efforts to counter information campaigns by the Kremlin and their pro-Russian allies. At the state level, it is the MFA and their Stratcom unit; MoD is also increasingly active. Campaigns such as #WeareNATO, #WEAREEU are good illustrations, yet they should be massively expanded. It is often NGOs and think tanks or even mainstream media which are filling the void.

Socially deprived, less educated, losers of the system or of the transformation are the most vulnerable to Russian disinformation. The eastern part of Slovakia – less economically developed, higher reception of pan-Slavic narratives.

TREND ANALYSIS OF MAINSTREAM AND FRINGE MEDIA DISCOURSES

The trend analysis focused on general dissemination patterns of all media and social media under review in terms of news peaks, top sources and drivers of discussions about nationalism.

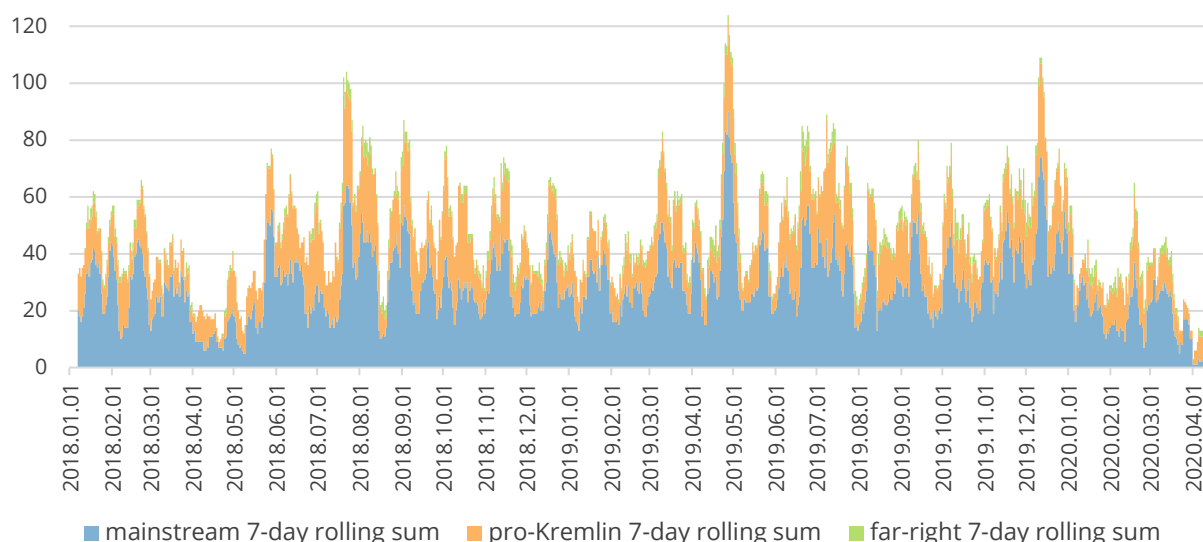
Executive Summary

The trend analysis of Slovak data confirmed that the issue of separatism and territorial revisionism in Slovakia is visible mostly in relation to the situation in Ukraine, especially the status of Crimea and the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. Moreover, fringe media tend to cover any issues related to Russia, including the conflict in Ukraine, much more frequently than the mainstream outlets. Therefore, fringe news items closely follow the nar-

rative and perspective of the Kremlin, either directly using text from Russian sources or using their talking points and reasoning.

Mainstream media, on the other hand, follow the official foreign policy of Slovakia – supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine, the non-recognition of Crimea referendum and Russian annexation. While the fringe outlets manage to have viral content regarding specific incidents or events, in terms of overall volume, the bulk of the content is on mainstream media. Altogether, however, fringe media manage to drive much more interaction and engagement on social media; therefore, their content often outperforms mainstream media.

GENERAL TREND



The number of revisionism-related website articles and Facebook posts in the Slovak media space between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020

Three main peaks in the number of mentions were recorded in the given period. The first peak concerned the issue of the European headquarters of the Russian bike club Night Wolves; the second was driven by the Kerch strait incident; and the third concerned the granting of Russian passports to citizens of Eastern Ukraine. As it is clearly visible from the chart, in terms of overall mentions, the Kerch

strait incident drew most of the engagement on social media.

The 16 July 2018 peak of 314 mentions was driven by two to three main topics. Firstly, it was the issue of the newly established European headquarters of the Russian bike gang Night Wolves in Western Slovakia, and its implications for security of Slovakia.

The whole affair caused significant public outrage and led to a very lively, although polarised, debate. While one part of the population demanded tougher measures against the activities of Night Wolves and compared their activities to the 1968 occupation, another part, influenced and driven by the pro-Kremlin media, used this opportunity to further their message of Slovak-Russian brotherhood and bonds. Slovak state authorities, which were quite reluctant to interfere against the Night Wolves in the past, took several measures against the base, including removal of defunct military vehicles borrowed from the state museum. The top source was the FB post with an interview with Daniel Milo (sic!) in liberal mainstream daily DennikN on July 21st 2018.⁴⁶

Two other main narratives in this peak concerned the Crimea referendum, describing it as legitimate and legal. The specific events were driven by politicians stating the referendum was legitimate and valid. In one example, Mateo Slavini stated this in an July 20 interview shared in a flagship pro-Russian disinformation daily, Hlavne Spravy, with a telling title:⁴⁷ Italian vice-premier defends Russian annexation of Crimea.⁴⁸ In another example the same argument was stated in July 17 interview of Vladimir Putin on FOX News.⁴⁹ Both mainstream and fringe media were represented in the sample, with slightly more mainstream media being present.

TOP SOURCES

When it comes to top sources ranked by the number of messages, out of roughly 14,000 mentions, more than one third occurred on the flagship pro-Russian online media outlet Hlavne Spravy. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, this outlet is the main channel for any Russia-originated content, whether from Sputnik, TASS or other state funded Russian media sources. Secondly, Hlavne Spravy have a significant online following. According to their own statement, they have more than 1 million unique monthly visitors. The only other representative of problematic, disinformation-spreading media is magazin.panobcan.sk. Other sources are mainstream media. Hlavne Spravy outperforms other mainstream media, because their coverage of anything related to Russia is significantly higher and

The main topic driving the second peak, of 26 November 2018, with 459 mentions, was the Kerch strait incident and the reaction of Ukraine, such as the declaration of martial law and the state of war in Ukraine, and the reaction of Petro Poroshenko and Vladimir Putin.⁵⁰ The most influential post was an article in mainstream online daily Aktuality.sk, describing the declaration of the state of war in Ukraine from November 26 2018.⁵¹ The second main topic was related to the Kerch strait as well, but focused on different perceptions of the crisis and the role of Russia by members of the ruling coalition.⁵² The third topic concerned the Muller investigation of the Trump campaign and the alleged lies of Paul Manafort. Mainstream media dominated the discussion.⁵³

The main topic driving the third peak of April 28, 2019 was the decree of Vladimir Putin granting citizens of Ukraine living on the occupied territory of Donbas and Luhansk Russian citizenship and issuing them Russian passports.⁵⁴ The most influential post though was a video from the city of Simferopol (located in Crimea) published by the pro-Russian Facebook page Russian news on the 5th anniversary⁵⁵ of the unification of Crimea with Russia including a speech of Vladimir Putin to a crowd of cheering supporters. The third main topic was the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as the new President of Ukraine. Mainstream media dominated this peak.⁵⁶

their coverage of such issues is based on repeating, often verbatim, Russian speaking points and perspectives. Yet, overall, mainstream media dominate in terms of the number of overall coverage.

There were 4996 articles on top 10 sources in the given period; out of these fringe media comprised only 32%. The main difference concerns the recognition of the Crimea referendum and the situation in Eastern Ukraine. Fringe media are fully in line with Russia in terms of presenting their geopolitical perspective, their position towards the EU, NATO, the United States, the conflict in Ukraine or Syria. On the contrary, mainstream media are in line with the official Slovak/EU policy (territorial integrity of Ukraine etc.)

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ARTICLE SAMPLES

Using the SentiOne platform, we generated a representative sample of website articles of at least 500 articles in each country to reveal and categorise the main types of revisionist narratives present in our data of tens of thousands of articles.⁵⁷ The samples, representative of all the articles' and sources' distribution within our timeframe between 1 January 2018 and 15 April 2020, allowed researchers to identify and categorise the main types of revisionist or territory-related narratives in each country without the need to read through thousands of articles. Narrative analysis of samples revealed the differences between fringe or mainstream interpretations of the same topics and the construction of country-specific narratives utilizing unique manipulation techniques and disinformation of the Kremlin's playbook.

Most of the analysed narratives in the sample are connected by a single thread – the positive perception of Russia and its actions in Ukraine and elsewhere, and the demonisation of the West (the EU, NATO, the United States) and its policies towards Russia (the sanctions regime, Crimea). It comes as no surprise that such narratives are almost exclusively present in pro-Kremlin or far-right sources. Other articles in the sample were mostly articles from regular press agencies covering different events concerning Russia and Ukraine without using any of the analysed narratives. In total, there were 561 articles analysed, yet only 75 of them contained relevant narratives.

Three specific narratives dominate the sample:

1. Crimea has always been Russian,
2. Slovakia should be neutral,
3. Sanctions against Russia should be abolished.

These three narratives are often used alongside each other, even supporting each other, and fit well into an overarching narrative of Slavic brotherhood and special relations between Russia and Slovakia, which is not applied to Ukrainians or Poles. The sanctions narrative has increased in 2019, especially when it comes to depicting the position of other EU members such as Italy or Austria. Every sign

of critique, such as public statements by Matteo Salvini or Sebastian Kurz⁵⁸ directed towards sanctions by representatives of European governments and other public figures, is amplified to create an image of a large and growing opposition to the sanctions regime.

While far-right and pro-Kremlin fringe sources were aligned and used these narratives consistently, mainstream media almost never used them. The most popular narratives are cross cutting and are present both in far-right and pro-Kremlin media, such as narratives about Russia's ancient right to Crimea, the neutrality of Slovakia, or about U.S. military bases in Slovakia or oppression by the EU. Yet the pro-Kremlin media are using somewhat wider sets of narratives, focusing specifically on issues such as the violation of the Minsk agreement by Ukraine or historical revisionism narratives related to the 1989 Velvet revolution, depicting it as a "first colour revolution" in order to delegitimize the post-communist democratic regime. Pro-Kremlin media certainly dominate the list of sources in terms of the overall share of narratives (59 articles on pro-Kremlin vs. 10 articles on far-right sources) which indicates also their overall wider reach and attention given to issues covered in this study.

Since the pro-separatist or pro-Kremlin narratives are present only on far-right or pro-Kremlin media and are almost non-existent on mainstream media (with the exceptions including several analysts presenting opposite views), one would expect that their circulation is mostly limited to followers of fringe media. However, since there are several highly visible and vocal supporters of pro-Kremlin narratives and their views regarding the EU, NATO, the United States, Russia or the conflict in Ukraine among Slovak politicians (far-left MP Ľuboš Blaha, far-right MPs Marián Kotleba, Milan Mazúrek, far-right MEP Milan Uhrík etc.), pro-Kremlin narratives and perspective are being spread also on their social media channels, which are one of the most popular ones among Slovak politicians even without directly referencing any of the media under investigation in this report.

There is also growing mutual support and recognition between some fringe media and fringe (far-left, far-right) politicians – fringe media further disseminate their Facebook posts and provide them with ample space to reach beyond their traditional bubble. Examples of such cooperation are for ex-

ample Hlavné Spravy, Slobodný vysielateľ, the magazine Extraplus or Zem a Vek. In return, these politicians adopted many narratives and talking points presented by fringe media, accusing mainstream media of manipulation, censorship and attacking NGOs and media as foreign agents.

Narrative	Shared	Number	Percentage
Crimea has always been Russian, the referendum was legitimate and valid	yes	17	23%
Slovakia would be better off as a neutral country, and there is no need for NATO membership, NATO is an imperialist, U.S.-led puppet	yes	17	23%
United States/NATO tries to establish military bases in Slovakia, which puts us in a dangerous situation, prepares for war with Russia	yes	6	8%
Slovakia is oppressed and restricted by EU membership	yes	6	8%
Sanctions against Russia are harmful, not effective and should be abolished	yes	13	17%
The EU and the West are pushing decadent, unnatural values, we have to protect traditions, resist LGBTI, gender ideology and forced resettlement of migrants	yes	5	7%
The Maidan revolution was a coup, organised by outside forces, the killing was planned and organised	yes	4	5%
Ukraine is responsible for the conflict in Donbass and continues to violate the Minsk agreements	Pro-Kremlin	5	7%
The Velvet Revolution in 1989 was staged and organised by the United States, communism was much a better regime than capitalism	Pro-Kremlin	1	1%
Ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine would be better off if Zakarpattia would be given autonomy or join Hungary	Pro-Kremlin	1	1%
Total		78	100%

Table 1. The number and share of different narratives across mainstream, far-right and pro-Kremlin samples in Slovakia

Crimea has always been Russian, referendum was legitimate and valid

The main purpose is to establish sense of credibility of the annexation and thus create ground to lift the sanctions regime against Russia and Crimea. The main sources of this narrative are obviously Russian official representatives and media. According to this narrative, Russia is not our enemy, Slovakia should therefore recognise the reality and not bow to U.S. pressure regarding Crimea. Moreover, Crimea was historically always Russian and the referendum was legitimate and valid – almost 90% participation and more than 90% of those who participated voted in favour of joining Russia. The referendum was in line with the Crimean constitution and was a reaction to the illegal coup in Kiev and the suppression of Russian speaking Ukrainians. Accordingly, Russia will under no circumstances return Crimea to Ukraine, so the EU and Ukraine should accept the status quo.⁵⁹

Slovakia would be better off as a neutral country, there is no need for NATO membership, NATO is an imperialist, U.S.-led puppet

This domestically-driven narrative has existed since the late 1990s and returned with the revival of Meciar era journalists and the advent of a new wave of fringe media and online celebrities. Despite being domestic, it is also well aligned with the Kremlin's long term strategy of weakening NATO from within. By questioning the actual character, capabilities and operations of NATO, the Kremlin tries to sow distrust and rejection of some of its members, including Slovakia.

When it comes to Slovakia's membership in NATO, two narratives present a single, unified argument that stipulates that Slovakia, due to its geographic position and history, should be a neutral country with its own strong military, prepared to protect its own territory. Statements related to the narrative declare that Slovakia's membership in NATO is not in our interest, since NATO as such is a U.S. puppet used to support American imperialism throughout the world. As such, Slovakia should quit NATO and support a different security architecture, including also Russia. Slovakia entered NATO without a popular support for the membership and lacking a dem-

ocratic mandate to do so, since the referendum was sabotaged.⁶⁰

The United States/NATO tries to establish military bases in Slovakia, which puts us in a dangerous situation, prepares for war with Russia

This narrative was very significant in the election period, when the Slovak National Party stopped the signing process of an agreement between Slovakia and the United States to refurbish and modernise two Slovak airfields, arguing as among other things that this would lead to loss of sovereignty and open the door to building permanent U.S. bases in Slovakia. This narrative was, according to leaked communication on Alexander Usovsky, brought to Slovakia in 2014-2015, when several public demonstrations were organised in Bratislava and other cities with support of Usovski.⁶¹ Since then the narrative has entered the political mainstream. The notion that NATO or the United States is getting ready for war with Russia is also rather old and reports of alleged huge military transports of U.S. tanks though the territory of Slovakia are one such example of using this frame to explain regular transport of military equipment for exercises in NATO countries. According to this narrative there are secret transports of American military equipment through Slovakia, which is a sign of preparation for war with Russia.⁶² Another line of argumentation claimed that the United States is trying to secretly establish military bases in Slovakia to be used as logistical and supply hubs in its war with Russia⁶³. The presence of any foreign troops and equipment should be rejected, as we got rid of the Soviet army after 1989, we should get rid of any foreign military presence in Slovakia.

Slovakia is oppressed and restricted by EU membership

Despite the EU being overwhelmingly popular among the population, there are certain elements of the EU, which cause tensions. These include a wide range of issues: gender equality (often called gender ideology), LGBTQ rights, the inability of Slovak agriculture to keep up with competition from other EU members, migration and the relocation of asylum seekers, the distant and disconnected Brussels bubble. All these points of contention

are used to weaken popular support for the EU or at least as an argument that Slovakia should join Hungary and Poland in their opposition to liberal democracy and its principles embodied by Brussels.

The anti-EU narratives are less visible in comparison to the ones targeting NATO, yet they form an important vector of pro-Russian efforts. Despite the fact that Slovakia is a net beneficiary of EU structural funds, according to this narrative the EU has destroyed Slovakia economically, and mainly the agricultural sector, by opening country to imports⁶⁴. Statements related to the narrative declare that EU institutions lack democratic legitimacy and are ruled by Germany and France. Hence, the EU does not represent the interest of smaller countries such as Slovakia. Slovakia should be closer aligned with Hungary and Poland in their pushback against the EU. According to this narrative, the EU is a neo-Marxist project, which is in deep institutional, cultural and political crisis. The EU is weak and Slovakia should look for alternatives. It is not the EU, but Slovakia, Hungary and Poland that are bearers of true European traditions and values.

Sanctions against Russia are harmful, not effective and should be abolished

This narrative is obviously taken from Russian official and media sources, since abolishing of the sanctions regime it is one the most important short term goals of Russian foreign policy. By spreading this narrative, the Kremlin hopes to create sufficient momentum which would lead to the eventual end of the sanctions.

The importance of weakening the political and public support for Russian sanctions and ultimately abolishing them altogether is illustrated by relatively high share of this narrative in the sample. According to this narrative sanctions are based on the Minsk agreements, but it is Ukraine, not Russia, which violates the Minsk agreements. Sanctions are not an effective tool, since Russia actually benefits from them, decreasing its dependence on international imports. It is much more costly for the EU than for the Russia. European countries are puppets of the United States and blindly follow orders from Washington and bear the brunt of economic damage resulting from the sanctions regime. Slovakia should make use of its strategic geographic position and act as a bridge between the West and East.

Russia is our Slavic brotherly nation and sanctions are a result of undue U.S. pressure. The narrative ultimately would like to make the impression that there is an increasing pressure in Europe from several countries such as Italy, Austria or Hungary and others to abolish the sanctions regime. Slovakia should join such voices and end the harmful and meaningless economic sanctions.⁶⁵

The EU and the West are pushing decadent, unnatural values, we have to protect traditions, resist LGBTI, gender ideology and forced resettlement of migrants

The depiction of the EU and its values as alien to so called traditional values is present both domestically and at the same time is an evergreen topic of Russian disinformation campaigns. Describing liberal democracies as weak, inefficient and decadent, this narrative indirectly supports political actors who reject these very same values and propose a radical change, which would also mean the restructuring of geopolitical orientations to one that is more beneficial for Russia. In a conservative and relatively closed country such as Slovakia with limited exposure to "otherness" and diversity, such a narrative is quite successful and several far-right and populist parties are using it in their communication. The main argument of this narrative is tied to an alleged conflict between "natural" or traditional values and the ones represented by the EU. This narrative stipulates that the EU is promoting unnatural values, which are undermining the traditional, Christian values our society is based upon. Gender ideology, excessive rights of LGBTI, multiculturalism and the undermining of traditional roles of men and women are examples of these unnatural values pushed by the EU. Russia, on the other hand, is resisting any such efforts and is a protector of traditional values and Christianity, and is therefore a natural ally for all traditional value based political actors.⁶⁶

The Maidan revolution was a coup, organised by outside forces, the shooting of demonstrators was planned and organised by the Ukrainian side.

This narrative fits well with two existing tendencies in Slovakia highlighted previously: trust in conspiracy theories and anti-Americanism. The combination of both elements into a single narrative with the

United States (CIA, Victoria Nuland or any other U.S. entity) pulling the strings from behind and a ruthless opposition organising shooting of their own is appealing to Slovak audience. The end goal is to delegitimise Maidan and the current Ukrainian authorities as U.S. puppets. Statements related to the narrative declare that the Maidan revolution was organised by the United States and the CIA with the aim of building NATO military bases close to Russia. Shooting during the Maidan demonstrations was a covert operation organised by the CIA and or opposition to mobilise public opinion against Janukovych. Neo-Nazis played an important role in the Maidan revolution and the newly created administration.⁶⁷

Ukraine is responsible for the conflict in Donbass and continues to violate the Minsk agreements

Since the sanctions regime is based on the Minsk agreements, by shifting the blame to Ukraine, Russia aims to create yet another argument for dismantling the sanctions. The narrative is Russian in origin, but existing pro-Russian sentiments among some Slovak politicians are making it easy to adopt it and spread as a domestic one. Statements related to the narrative declare that Ukraine is provoking Russia by targeting civilian areas and constantly violates the Minsk agreements. Ukrainian soldiers are ruthlessly killing the civilian population in Donbass and Luhansk by using indiscriminate targeting. Kyiv is the real aggressor, and the official presentation in world media is biased. Russia will not tolerate this and will be forced to protect its citizens in separatist republics in eastern Ukraine, many of whom received Russian passports⁶⁸. Other Ukrainians had to apply for Russian passports either in Belarus or in Russia, since aggressive supporters of the fascist Bandera regime in Ukraine surrounded the Russian embassy in Ukraine.

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 was staged and organised by the United States, communism was a much better regime than capitalism

This particular narrative is based on the decades-old conspiracy theory that the fall of communism was not a spontaneous revolt, but rather a staged coup. It is often combined with a scathing comparison of communism with current times, with communism

emerging as a much better and fairer system of government for ordinary people. While being domestic in its origin, this narrative is used at times in combination with several other pro-Russian narratives undermining liberal democracy as such.

This narrative is less represented in the sample, yet it is quite important in delegitimizing post-communist democratic systems of government at the time of the Velvet revolution anniversary. According to this narrative, 30 years after the fall of communism, the situation is clearly worse than it was during the communist regime. Living standards decreased, and privatisation was a failure. The Velvet revolution was no spontaneous uprising against the regime, but a coup organised by the KGB and the CIA, including the staged death of a student. The Velvet Revolution was the first colour revolution and the same pattern followed in other countries⁶⁹.

Ethnic Hungarians living in Ukraine would be better off if Zakarpattia would be given autonomy or join Hungary

This narrative is Russian in origin and its one occurrence was sourced from several Russian language sources such as Vzglyad or Iarex. Although this issue caused significant difficulties for Ukraine, and Russia allegedly even conducted active measures using Polish nationalists to stoke ethnic tensions in Ukraine by conducting false flag operations, it did not resonate much in Slovakia. The issue of border revision or autonomy for the Hungarian minority in any neighbouring country is very sensitive in Slovakia. This narrative is quite rare in the sample and in the overall public discussion, yet it is illustrative that it sourced directly from Russian media. Statements related to the narrative declare that some Ukrainians, including the ethnic Hungarians, have had enough of pro-American politicians in Kiev and would like to join their brothers in neighbouring Hungary. Many of them work there already and due to the hostile attitudes of Ukrainian authorities they cannot exercise their rights fully. For ethnic Hungarians the situation is clear – they would rather join Hungary than to live in a bankrupt fascist regime.⁷⁰

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXTS OF SLOVAK NARRATIVES

Most of the narratives identified in the sample are very closely aligned with the narratives and positions of the Kremlin and its proxies. By repeating the same story of the Crimea referendum being free and fair and promoting the allegedly successful development of Crimea and happy crowds cheering Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin tries to win the hearts and minds and change the still dominant narrative of Russian “little green men” illegally seizing Crimea from Ukraine. The sanctions regime, despite all the news, is hurting Russia and Crimea, therefore it is the immediate short term strategic goal of Russia to create fissures in the unanimous support for sanctions at the level of the EU.

Other narratives such as the one of an aggressive NATO encircling Russia and the defunct European security system based on a U.S. presence also originates in Russia. The impact of these narratives on support for EU or NATO membership was, according to GLOBSEC Trends 2019 data,⁷¹ rather small; however, by tapping into a significant amount of anti-American sentiments existing in Slovakia, and describing NATO as a U.S. puppet, these actors are knowingly or unknowingly aligning themselves with Russian strategic interests.

Slovakia is one of the countries most prone to conspiracy theories,⁷² with more than half of the Slovak population believing in some kind of conspiracy theory. This creates a fertile ground to plant seeds of other conspiracy theories, where Russia is a mere victim of behind-the-scenes conspirators from Washington. The fascist Ukraine and Maidan as a CIA organised coup or the alleged mysterious circumstances surrounding the shooting of 100 demonstrators at Maidan are examples of such an approach. The long term political implications of such high penetration of disinformation and conspiracy theories could be significant.

NETWORK ANALYSIS OF FRINGE WEBSITES

Big data researchers created a network of pro-Kremlin and third-party websites based on the hyperlinks embedded into articles published on pro-Kremlin media in each country.⁷³ We decided to use hyperlinks as building blocks of our networks, since links either direct interested audiences to other relevant pro-Kremlin media, or they serve as references to third-party sources to authenticate their articles. Consequently, the examination of networks revealed two aspects of pro-Kremlin communication: the wider dissemination networks of pro-Kremlin media used to spread revisionist messages and link other pro-Kremlin sources and the prerequisites of impactful message construction. Researchers analysed three types of networks in their respective countries. A “complete network,” with all the media, to understand all the media’s interconnectedness and their main dissemination/reference strategies. A “clean network” of websites was used to analyse only the most important nodes of the network and connections between media disseminating revisionist narratives. Finally, a network comprised of only our initial pro-Kremlin websites revealed the interconnectedness of the core pro-Kremlin media used throughout this research, examining if they formed a strong bond in the dissemination process of revisionist narratives.

The analysis of the Slovak fringe media network revealed that our initial websites used to generate the network have relatively few mutual links and each of the projects targets a different audience and has different content. Hlavné správy is the most important and best connected fringe news portal, using

a significant amount of Russian language sources, including official Russian authorities, pro-Russian de-facto authorities in Donbass and various Russian media. The most important left-wing and pro-Kremlin portal, Dav Dva, has a significant network of links and connections, including some links to Russian sources or Slovak individuals with a known affiliation to Russia. Other fringe media projects (Infovojna, Extraplus, Napaleta) lack a similar type of network since most of their content is either their own, or sourced from press agencies without direct links to the original source of information.

In terms of replication and spreading of content, one source included in the network – magazin.panobcan.sk – is a good illustration of how some fringe outlets (Hlavne spravy in this case) have set up and operate seemingly independent websites, which are used as amplifiers and disseminators of their content.

The modus operandi of pro-Kremlin websites differs quite significantly in each case. While some outlets such as Hlavne Správy are heavily reliant on original Russian news sources, both official and fringe, others prefer to publish their own content without open or obvious links to Russian media. Increasingly such sources are trying to present themselves as the only truly independent media, which provide balanced, accurate and independent coverage of world events. Uncovering their many connections to Russian sources and pro-Russian narratives is therefore quite important in blowing this cover of alleged independence.

THE COMPLETE SLOVAK NETWORK

The network analysis provides a graphical overview of several interesting facts: Hlavné správy (Main news) dominates the fringe media landscape not only in terms of readership and volume of content they produce, but also in number of connections to outside sources. The number of direct links between Hlavne spravy and Russian media sources such as Pravda.ru⁷⁴ Moskovskij Komsomolec⁷⁵, Russkaya Vesna⁷⁶, Ekonomika

Segodnya⁷⁷, PolitPuzzle⁷⁸ and others confirms the position of Hlavne spravy as the main pro-Russian outlet in Slovakia, with visible and consistent connections to either official Russian sources (MFA⁷⁹, Sputniknews), sources from separatist authorities (the MFA of the Donetsk People’s Republic⁸⁰) or various Russian language sources such as politpuzzle.ru and many more.



The second source with most connections is the left wing magazine Dav Dva, which also has strong connections to well known sources of pro-separatist propaganda in the DNR such as Ruskaya Vesna (Russian spring)⁸¹ and many other Slovak and Czech online sources. Several influential figures from the pro-Russian milieu publish on this website including Lukáš Perný⁸² or Artur Bekmatov⁸³, who are also active members of the disinformation landscape and publish in various other fringe media.

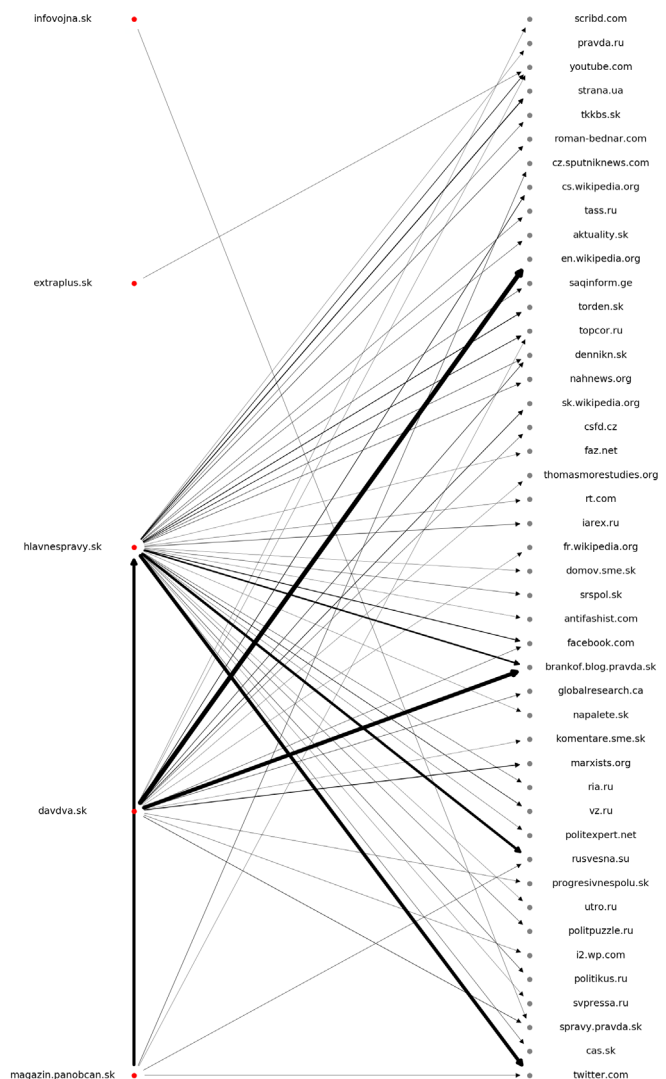
Other sources on the list such as the nationalist Extraplus magazine has very limited numbers of connections, caused by the fact that they publish almost exclusively their own content or content taken from Slovak press agency TASR. Infovojna, which is a spinoff project of one of the founders of Free

broadcaster (Slobodny vysielateľ) is rather limited in its connections, which comes as a surprise since most of its content are reposts from other pages and their own content. One interesting indication of the political preferences of the pro-Russian media is the heavy presence of former presidential candidate Štefan Harabin and his political party named Vlasť, which is perhaps the most openly pro-Russian political entity in Slovakia, and Harabin himself has repeatedly voiced his disdain for NATO, the EU and the United States. He vehemently supported the legitimacy of the Crimea referendum and described Ukrainian authorities as U.S. puppets. The links include his profile, profile of his presidential campaign and links to his political party⁸⁴.

THE CLEAN NETWORK

Two websites stand out in their connections: Hlavne spravy and Dav Dva. While Hlavne spravy confirmed their position as the most important information hub among the fringe media, some interesting details are worth mentioning. One such example is the lack of direct connections between Hlavne spravy and the Czech version of Sputniknews on this map, which has a significant impact and following also in Slovakia and often serves as a source of easily accessible information on pro-Kremlin media. The lack of direct links between Hlavne spravy and the Czech version of Sputniknews might be caused by two factors: first, Hlavne spravy often quotes Sputnik directly without the need to use its Czech language version; and secondly, as the map confirms, Hlavne spravy has a significant number of connections to other Russian sources such as Pravda, Tass, RT, Iarex, Rusvesna, Politpuzzle, topcor etc., and has an in-house Russian speaker;⁸⁵ therefore there is no need to use a secondary source.

Dav Dva shares some of the Hlavne Spravy sources; the amount of Russian sources, however, is much smaller, and unlike Hlavne spravy, it also uses content from the Czech version of Sputniknews. One particular source which links the two together is a personal blog of the lawyer Branislav Farby,⁸⁶ an active member of the Board of the Slovak-Russian society⁸⁷, who often comments on domestic and foreign policy issues.



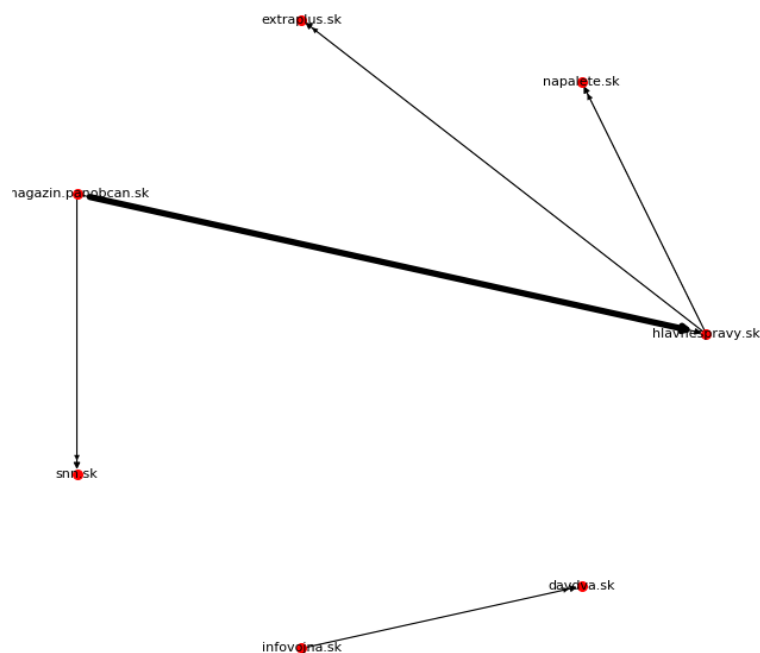
The clean network of Slovak pro-Kremlin websites and third-party sites

THE NETWORK OF PRO-KREMLIN PAGES

The pro-Kremlin network's analysis, as seen below, signifies yet again the central position of Hlavne Spravy in the disinformation landscape.

Hlavne spravy is a hub which links to two outside sources, but the connections are not so significant. This indicates the dominant position of Hlavne spravy and the fact that most of its content is sourced from other than Slovak disinformation or fringe media sources. Another interesting fact is that the magazin.panobcan.sk is used as an additional distribution channel for content produced at Hlavne spravy. The network map just confirms what is visible also on their Facebook profiles. It is very likely that the website panobcan.sk is operated by the same administrator as hlavnespravy.sk. The lack of mutual connections between Hlavne spravy, Infovojna and DavDva signifies that each of these channels has a different audience, but also that they are in a competition with each other.

The only link between conspiratorial website Infovojna (modelled after Alex Jones Infowars) and far-left Dav-Dva also signals different audiences and content. While Infovojna is a news portal with clear messaging, it maintains the look and feel of a news portal. Dav Dva is rather a hub of left wing and far-left politicians, commentators and activists. It is however linked personally to other disinformation actors and projects such as Zem a Vek or the association of independent media, which was created as a response to pushback against fringe media.



The Slovak network of pro-Kremlin websites

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF FRINGE FACEBOOK PAGES

To reveal successful dissemination strategies on social media (Facebook), we conducted a comparison of top-performing fringe Facebook pages' and posts' statistical data.⁸⁸ Our analysis focused on far-right and pro-Kremlin pages only, because these are the main venues of pro-Kremlin or extremist, revisionist communication in most of the countries under review. Based on the analysis of the 5 top-performing far-right and 5 top-performing pro-Kremlin pages in terms of the number of average reactions per post, we identified the conditions for the successful dissemination of revisionist narratives and historical grievances in each country's social media. A comparison of top-performing fringe posts in terms of the total number of interactions was conducted to reveal why certain chauvinistic, revisionist or pro-Kremlin messages are more viral than others. The comparison of viral posts was extended to "irrelevant" or non-relevant posts as well, to see whether revisionist posts performed better or worse than any other posts found on the fringe pages.

It comes as no surprise that the best performing pages with content related to revisionism and separatism are pro-Russian pages promoting openly Russian narratives related to Crimea, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine and the sanctions regime. The Facebook page "Russian news" (Ruské spravodajstvo)⁸⁹ is a primary source of original Russian media context with Slovak translation, and is being used as a source of text and video content supporting and promoting all relevant Russian narratives about "mighty Russia" (advanced and powerful military), the weak West (the decadent, valueless EU in contrast with traditions in Russia), the aggressive and sinister plans of NATO and the United States against Russia (the conflict in Ukraine, military bases, exercises) or the narrative of the fascist regime in Ukraine. The best performing post was a video from the 5th anniversary of Crimea joining Russia, including a public rally and a speech by Vladimir Putin in Simferopol in April 2019. The second most popular page belongs to a well known figure from the disinformation landscape, the author of Zem a Vek magazine articles and a far-left political activist,

Artur Bekmatov⁹⁰. Other top performing Facebook pages are media representing a nationalist pro-Russian milieu dating back to the 1990s. Interestingly enough, none of the flagship pro-Russian disinformation projects (such as Zem a Vek or Slobodný vysielateľ or Hlavné správy) made it into the top 5 sources, and only one story from one of these flagship projects made into the top 10 trending stories. We can only hypothesize why these pages, otherwise widely read and liked, and their content were not among the top performers in our ranking. It might have to do with the sensitivity of topics related to pro-Russian separatism, preventing readers from actively engaging the posts published. Or, it might have to do with the complexity of pro-Russian discourses. Because these well-known brands post a lot of content, our much narrower research topic does not concern the leading or most viral posts driving the discourses on these pages in our period under review.

The top 10 far-right stories are approximately three times as successful in terms of engagement than pro-Kremlin sources, since the issues related to Russia, Crimea and Ukraine are not primary topics for the far-right milieu, and as such they do not attract the same level of engagement as pro-Kremlin sources do.

Strangely enough, one of the main Russian narratives concerning Ukraine – the narrative of Ukraine being a fascist state giving a free hand to neo-Nazis – is quite successful among far-right sources. The most successful among the far-right sources is the profile of Robert Švec, leader of the marginal far-right political party Slovak Revival Movement, which in the past has maintained close relations with various Russian entities.

Posts related to the focus of this report are on average slightly more successful in terms of engagement compared to "irrelevant" posts dealing with other issues, which might be caused by the viral performance of some posts such as videos; yet, on average, they are not more successful in terms of shares.

The most successful pages produce a high amount of content, often post video content and target audiences already pre-disposed to their messages in far-right or pro-Kremlin Slovak circles. Their narra-

tives of “mighty Russia,” the weak and aggressive West and media bias resonate well with their audiences.

PERFORMANCE OF FACEBOOK PAGES

The top 5 far-right pages have relatively low following and are quite diverse in their profile and orientation. They include personal profiles of politicians (Robert Švec, Richard Tokušev), disinformation media (Slobodný výber) and fan-based political pages supporting former presidential candidate Štefan Harabin. Due to this variability, they also significantly differ in their content, number of posts and their focus. While political profiles usually present the activities of a given political party, fringe media profiles use their Facebook presence to disseminate their own web content. There is no universal targeting in terms population groups or audiences, either, other than the rejection of mainstream politicians, media and current geopolitical orientation.

Top 5 pro-Kremlin pages are dominated by the Russian news Facebook Ruské Spravodajstvo⁹¹, which is based on translated content from Russian state media and post-Soviet nostalgia. The second most popular page is the page of Artur Bekmatov⁹², a left-wing political activist with long standing pro-Russian attitudes, criticising the government, sanctions, NATO, the United States and the EU. Three other pages are representatives of nationalist and conspiratorial media, both print (Extra plus⁹³) and electronic (Infovojna⁹⁴, Napalete⁹⁵), presenting a wide range of issues and formats, from video interviews to op-eds, news up and info graphics

While they differ in their audience and political preferences, all of them are channels for pro-Kremlin narratives supporting separatism in Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea and any other current issues.

Based on the performance of the pages, the success of dissemination is based on several criteria:

1. First and foremost, a sufficient number of followers. Pages with a significant following ranging from 10,000 to more than 30,000 are much more successful in creating engaging content.
2. Frequent and regular posting and cross posting of content. Number of posts per day at around a minimum of 3 is significant indicator of activity of a given page and keeps people engaged. Yet this rule is not universal, and Russian News (Ruské spravodajstvo) posts less frequently, but still managed to achieve a high engagement rate due to interesting and unique content.
3. A mixture of domestic issues with foreign affairs. While global foreign policy issues are interesting for a specific group of the population, mixing these with domestic issues and perspectives increases the level of engagement and views. One prime example includes Napalete, which is an electronic platform combining and mixing domestic and foreign policy issues.

PERFORMANCE OF VIRAL POSTS

The comparison of Slovak relevant and irrelevant posts indicates that relevant posts generate slightly more engagement. The numbers of interactions are the following: 62.5 for relevant vs. 59 for irrelevant. This, however, does not translate into higher virality of such content, since the difference in shares is almost non-existent (34.7 for relevant vs. 34.2 for irrelevant) – as seen in the table below.

The total number of comments is, however, slightly lower for relevant content (11.7 vs. 15.4), which might be connected to the fact that international relations and foreign policy are not as popular as other domestic issues.

	Average Number of Reactions	Average Number of Comments	Average Number of Shares	Numbers of Documents
Irrelevant posts	59.0	15.4	34.2	117,897
Relevant posts	62.5	11.7	34.7	114
Total	59.0	15.4	34.2	117,993

Table 2. The average number of total reactions, comments or shares produced by revisionism-related or unrelated Facebook posts found on far-right or pro-Kremlin pages in Slovakia

FAR-RIGHT SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES

Far-right narratives in the top 10 trending stories are very diverse, revolving however around several main themes:

- Fascism is still alive in Ukraine, the massacre of pro-Russian demonstrators in Odessa in 2014 is a testament to this.
- Crimea is a legitimate part of Russia, the life of people in Crimea is much better.
- Sanctions are illegal, meaningless and the EU should abolish them.
- Media pluralism does not exist in Slovakia.

The narrative of Ukrainian fascism is one of the oldest ones, dating back to early 2014, and is still

being used to delegitimise Ukrainian authorities. The so called "Odessa massacre"⁹⁶ is a significant event, which is used to highlight this point. The legality and validity of the Crimean referendum is a cornerstone of Russian claims to this region, and at the same time by rejecting the notion of illegal annexation, the logic of the Russian sanctions regime disappears. Moreover, the depiction of economic progress and successful development in Crimea is also an important part in contrasting the situation in Russian Crimea with what is described as a collapsing, bankrupt and weak Ukraine. These messages resonate well with their audience, which already has a pre-conceived image of the winners and losers, the good and the bad, in the Ukraine conflict.

PRO-KREMLIN SOCIAL MEDIA NARRATIVES

The top trending stories in pro-Kremlin sources are somewhat similar to the ones of far-right pages, and may be categorised into several main lines of argumentation:

- Citizens of Crimea are happy and rejoice at being part of Russia.
- Ukraine is still letting neo-Nazis do as they wish – from the lack of investigation of the Odessa massacre to the vandalization of Soviet era monuments or World War II heroes' statues.
- Europe should accept the new reality – Crimea is and always will be Russian, and therefore there is no need to keep the sanctions in place. More and more voices in the EU demand an end to the sanctions.

The status of Crimea is central to the continuation of the sanctions regime, which is seen as a major mistake by the audience of pro-Kremlin sources. Therefore, the depiction of Crimean people as happy, celebrating and even welcoming Vladimir Putin as their saviour, fits well with the overall narrative, preparing the ground for the abolition of sanctions. The fascist Ukraine also fits into this overarching narrative, since it presents Ukraine as the main culprit responsible for the war and pro-Russian separatists as mere victims protecting their right to use the Russian language, protecting themselves from hordes of neo-Nazi armed thugs. Since a significant part of the pro-Russian population are elderly people, the depiction of Ukraine as a fascist regime and Russia as protecting people in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea from fascists, resonates very well and creates strong emotional bonds to Russia.

SOCIETAL RESILIENCE

Slovakia is unique in its support for Russia and relatively widespread support of pan Slavic ideas. This makes the country a ripe target for manipulation by pro-Kremlin information operations. Both far-right and far-left groups have historically been anti-American, thus open to any pro-Russian sentiments and narratives. As such, these groups have very limited resilience to any outside influence or attempts to use them as proxies by various Kremlin actors. Non-governmental organisations and independent media have developed and implemented number of initiatives aimed at countering the impact of disinformation. To name just a few examples: antipropaganda.sk platform⁹⁷, konspiratori.sk⁹⁸, Checkbot⁹⁹, online courses on media literacy and hybrid threats¹⁰⁰.

The groups most vulnerable to Russian disinformation are elderly people (15% of 65+ year old want to be affiliated with the East) and people with elementary education¹⁰¹. This comes as no surprise, since elderly people also have the highest level of nostalgia for the communist regime, which is strongly connected to the "brotherhood with Russia". Yet the susceptibility of the Slovak population to various conspiracy theories cuts across age and education groups, which illustrates that even university-educated and higher income groups are resilient to such theories, often used as gateways to other pro-Russian disinformation¹⁰².

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Expose actors and their networks.** Public scrutiny of networks, alliances and actors actively sharing pro-Kremlin narratives and supporting its geopolitical goals is one of the most effective measures limiting their impact. These actors prefer to operate from the shadows, and despite decrying the media or NGOs as foreign agents, they rarely provide any transparent insight into their operations. By disclosing hidden links and connections between fringe media and the Kremlin, their reach and impact would be decreased and the image of the “alternative media” shattered.
- **Clear and consistent political messaging about democratic values and principles.** While the impact of social media is significant, clear, consistent and well-designed messaging from high ranking political representatives (the president, the prime minister, the Chair of the national parliament) still carries a great weight. Top state representatives should clearly elaborate not only what values they stand for but also why.
- **Develop robust, agile and modern Stratcom state capacities.** In order to increase resilience to various destabilising efforts by the Kremlin and its proxies, state authorities should develop modern, social media savvy, agile and robust Stratcom capacities. Such capacities should perform various functions: monitor trends in the information space, provide analytical outputs of various types to decision makers, carry out pro-active and reactive strategic communication on multiple platforms
- **Make use of all available resources and actors.** For a small country such as Slovakia, adopting the whole of government and whole of society approach in tackling disinformation is the only viable option if we are to resist the well-financed and structured efforts of other foreign actors. Slovakia cannot compete with the information firepower of foreign hostile actors, but by making clever use of all the resources existing in the state, non-governmental and business sector, society could effectively protect itself from the corrosive impact of pro-Kremlin narratives.
- **Cut the funding for foreign hostile operations in Slovakia.** After exposing the links and financial flows of the pro-Kremlin and far-right milieu, a more concerted effort should be made to cut funding for such operations. The existing initiatives such as konspiratori.sk should be expanded and linked to CSR policies. State funded bodies should be strictly prohibited from supporting in any way known disinformation spreading media and outlets.
- **Continue with historic reconciliation between Slovakia and Hungary.** Although the relations between both countries have significantly improved, there are still some unresolved historical traumas, which could be used by external actors as wedge issues, increasing tensions and instability.

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The Government of the Slovak Republic recalls that the rights of all citizens were taken into account when determining the borders of the states. The mentioned treaties, as international legal documents of the highest level, by defining the borders of the Czech-Slovak Republic, defined for the first time Slovakia as a geographical, historical, political and legal unit. The politicians of the victorious powers were already looking for ways to find a peaceful solution to the conflicts and a new shape for Europe and the world. Failure to respect the spirit of the adopted treaties, revisionism and revanchism, eventually led to the Second World War. The bitter and terrifying experience of the Second World War was again aimed at confirming the validity of the peace system, of which the Treaty of Trianon was a part. These goals and concrete actions eventually led to an integrating Europe and the creation of the European Union.

The Government of the Slovak Republic strongly rejects the revisionist efforts of the Hungarian Government and Parliament, which ultimately call into question the history of the twentieth century and not only affect the lives of citizens of sovereign states, but also the stability and democratic development of Europe, especially the European Union. The policy of revisionism drives the wedge into a friendly and peaceful coexistence between nations and states, and is a manifestation of open disrespect and disrespect for international peace treaties and modern 21st century European policy. The Government of the Slovak Republic strongly opposes efforts to unilaterally and purposefully interpret political history after the end of the First World War. The signing of the Trianon Peace Treaty not only meant the emergence of new oppressed nations in Hungary, but also the creation of the Republic of Hungary, most of which joined the European Union. The Government of the Slovak Republic respects its neighbours and will continue to support the policy of understanding, cooperation and peaceful coexistence of all nations and states in the European area.

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