

# Unprepared and vulnerable: The resilience of the Slovak republic to foreign, foremost Kremlin-led disinformation campaigns

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*The following paper is a shortened version originally published as a part of the international publication „Disinformation resilience index – Central and Eastern Europe.“ It aims to describe the current situation in the country with the attention to the relevant issues, identify the weaknesses regarding the Slovak resilience to the disinformation campaigns and, lastly, suggest possible recommendations. The full text is available [here](#).*

According to the study, Slovakia has been among the worst among the 14 selected countries of Eastern and Central Europe, including the Visegrad states (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia), Eastern Partnership countries (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), Baltic states (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia), and Romania, regarding their levels of resilience to foreign, foremost Kremlin-led disinformation campaigns.

In the three composite indicators, Slovakia ended on the 10th place in population exposure and susceptibility to Kremlin-led media, 13th in the quality of systemic responses and 10th in digital warfare vulnerability.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Propaganda, Slovakia, Disinformation Resilience Index

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## General profile of the country

Slovakia is a landlocked Central European country with a communist past that got its independence after the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993. However, even in 2017, Slovakia is still branded as a nation in transit according to Freedom House (which gives it a democracy score of 2.61<sup>1</sup>) and Democracy Index 2017 compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (which rates Slovakia as a flawed democracy, with a score of 7.16<sup>2</sup> [44th in the world]). Quite symptomatic are also the results of a survey<sup>3</sup> conducted by the GLOBSEC Policy Institute in 2016, in which 52% of respondents stated that Slovakia should serve as a bridge between the East and the West, an idea that Martin Sklenár, Director of the Security Policy Department at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, mentioned as one of the most illustrative examples of how pro-Kremlin disinformation exploits long-held beliefs in the country.<sup>4</sup> According to the survey, 42% of Slovaks would define the country's geopolitical orientation as 'in between', neither West nor East oriented, 59% want to stay in the EU, and 56% of respondents would agree that NATO membership is good for Slovakia's security.<sup>5</sup>

Slovak society is often described as a traditional one. For example, two of the largest demonstrations in Slovakia since the Velvet Revolution in 1989 were national pro-life marches organised by the Episcopal Conference of Slovakia in 2013 and 2015 and attended by approximately 80 000<sup>6</sup> and 85 000<sup>7</sup> people, respectively. According to the 2011 census, only 13.4% of the population consider themselves to be atheists, while 62% describe themselves as Roman Catholic.<sup>8</sup> Ethnically, the population of Slovakia is homogenous. The idea of Slavic unity or brotherhood has been present since the end of the 18th century when the area of present Slovakia was under the rule of the Austrian Empire and later Austria-Hungary. Pan-Slavism, as a cultural and political movement, appeared in the 19th century and is associated closely with the ideological fathers of the Slovak national revival. Nowadays, according to an opinion poll conducted by the Institute for Public Affairs (IVO) in 2015, 31% of Slovaks trust Russia, which is the highest number among all Visegrad Group (V4) countries.<sup>9</sup>

While Slovakia's biggest trade partners are mostly the EU Member States, the country is almost completely dependent on imported Russian gas (which supplies approximately 97% of Slovakia's demands) and oil (approximately 98%), which makes the country very sensitive to

<sup>1</sup> "Nations in Transit 2017. Slovakia: Country Profile." 2018. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/slovakia>.

<sup>2</sup> "Democracy Index 2017." 2018. <https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>.

<sup>3</sup> "GLOBSEC Trends. Stredná Európa Pod Paľbou Ruskej Propagandy: Skúmanie Postojov Verejnosti v Čechách, Maďarsku a Na Slovensku." 2016. GLOBSEC Policy Institute. [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec\\_trends\\_2016\\_sk.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2016_sk.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Martin Sklenár, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, January 30, 2018. In-depth Interview.

<sup>5</sup> "GLOBSEC Trends. Stredná Európa Pod Paľbou Ruskej Propagandy: Skúmanie Postojov Verejnosti v Čechách, Maďarsku a Na Slovensku." 2016. GLOBSEC Policy Institute. [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec\\_trends\\_2016\\_sk.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/globsec_trends_2016_sk.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Teraz.sk. 1970. "Na Národný Pochod Za Život Prišli Desaťtisíce Ľudí." TERAZ.Sk. January 1, 1970. <http://www.teraz.sk/regiony/kosice-pochod-za-zivot/58997-clanok.html>.

<sup>7</sup> "Bratislavské Centrum Zaplnili Desaťtisíce Ľudí. Pochod Za Život Na Fotografiách – Denník N." 2018. <https://dennikn.sk/245670/%20desattisice-ludi-pochoduju-centrom-bratislavy-za-zivot>.

<sup>8</sup> Štatistický úrad SR. 2011. SODB 2011. Retrieved from: <http://bit.ly/2DtwcUf>.

<sup>9</sup> "PRIESKUM: Rusku Najviac Dôveruje z Krajín V4 Slovensko." 2018. <http://www2.teraz.sk/slovensko/prieskum-rusku-najviac-doveruje-z-v4-s/198140-clanok.html>.

any worsening in mutual relations.<sup>10</sup> The situation is similar in the military area, as the Slovak army remains heavily dependent on the Soviet military equipment.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, Kremlin-orchestrated disinformation campaigns can exploit a shared communist past, the conservatism of the Slovak society, a common Slavic ethnic background or the country's economic dependence on the Russian oil and gas to spread their narratives in Slovakia. However, it is necessary to understand that most of these contexts have only limited value for pro-Kremlin propaganda. A shared communist past brings not only nostalgia but also negative memories of occupation (for example, the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion). Conservatism is limited by the different dominant religious beliefs (Orthodox vs Roman Catholic Christianity), and the common Slavic background is problematic because of the geographical distance or the usage of different scripts (Latin vs Cyrillic) that makes Russian hardly understandable in written form, especially for younger generations.

## Vulnerable groups

Despite being a part of the Eastern Bloc in the past, Slovakia does not have any significant Russian population or other ethnic groups that could be considered as an obvious target audience for pro-Kremlin false and manipulative content. However, there are certain segments of the society that could be considered as more vulnerable than others.

The first includes those Slovaks who feel a strong nostalgia for their communist past. Many of them feel socio-economically disadvantaged and perceive a low level of social security, especially when compared to the pre-1989 era.<sup>12</sup> A typical example is a representative of the lower middle class or working class, with basic education, working manually or unemployed, typically from a rural region. As the results of a poll by Focus in 2007, and another by Focus and the Institute for Public Affairs in 2014 suggest, most in this sector of society are retired people (age 60+), but the ratio of the negative perception of the system change in 1989 is also higher than the average in society within the 45+ age group (31.8%).<sup>13,14</sup>

A surprisingly vulnerable group is composed of young people aged under 25. One of the main reasons, besides systemic flaws in the educational system, is arguably the grim future prospects for students with high school diplomas, and of those from disadvantaged socio-economic

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<sup>10</sup> Marušiak, Juraj. 2013. "Slovakia's Eastern Policy – from the Trojan Horse of Russia to 'Eastern Multivectoralism.'" *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* XXII (1–2): 42–70.

<sup>11</sup> Onuferová, Marianna. 2018. "Slovenská armáda je závislá od ruských dodávok." *ekonomika.sme.sk*. <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/7195940/slovenska-armada-je-zavisla-od-ruskych-dodavok.html>.

<sup>12</sup> "Dvadsaťpäť Rokov Od Nežnej Revolúcie Očami Občanov Slovenskej Republiky a Českej Republiky – IVO – I nštitút Pre Verejné Otázky." 2018. <http://www.ivo.sk/7551/sk/aktuality/dvadsatpat-rokov-od-neznej-revolucie-ocami-obcanov-slovenskej-republiky-a-ceskej-republiky>.

<sup>13</sup> "Press Release: Hodnotenie spoločenskej zmeny po novembri 1989." 2007. Agentúra Focus. [http://www.focus-research.sk/files/72\\_Hodnotenie%20spolocenskej%20zmeny%20po%20novembri%201989%20%20okt2007.pdf](http://www.focus-research.sk/files/72_Hodnotenie%20spolocenskej%20zmeny%20po%20novembri%201989%20%20okt2007.pdf).

<sup>14</sup> "Dvadsaťpäť rokov od nežnej revolúcie o ami ob anov SR a ČR." 2014. Agentúra Focus, Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, Sociologický ústav AV ČR. [http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/vyskum/subor/dvadsatpat\\_rokov\\_novembra\\_tlacova\\_sprava.pdf](http://www.ivo.sk/buxus/docs/vyskum/subor/dvadsatpat_rokov_novembra_tlacova_sprava.pdf).

backgrounds, who are unable to find decent jobs. In September 2017, youth unemployment (under 25) was at 14.9% in Slovakia.<sup>15</sup>

As the last parliamentary election in 2016 showed, a higher percentage of first-time voters supported the right-wing extremist party Ľudova Strana Nase Slovensko (LSNS), whose leader Marian Kotleba openly promotes his pro-Russian, anti-systemic politics based on anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric.<sup>16</sup> As an example, in 2014, he sent a supportive letter to the then president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovich. Later, during Kotleba's term as a chairman of the Banska Bystrica self-governing region, he welcomed members of the Night Wolves motorcycle club with the flag of the president of Russia raised on the government building.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, 30% of young Slovaks are undecided about their country's geopolitical orientation, which creates space for potential propaganda exploitation.<sup>19</sup>

Most importantly, there are political parties in Slovakia promoting pro-Russian views. One of the most significant is LSNS (8.04% in the 2016 parliamentary election) with its pro-Russian political pan-Slavism and strong anti-EU and anti-NATO stance.<sup>20</sup> LSNS is also connected with the rest of the far-right spectrum in Slovakia, which is very pro-Russian in general. However, pro-Russian tendencies can be observed even in traditional parties, especially in the nationalist conservative Slovenska Narodna Strana (SNS) (8.64%). Its leader, Andrej Danko, recently stressed in his speech in the Russian State Duma the importance of the common Slavic culture and expressed a will to cooperate with Russia in many areas, including education.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, even the ex-Prime Minister Robert Fico, the leader of the largest ruling party SMER-SD, reflected a traditionally positive image of Russia among the Slovak population and of Slovak dependence on Russian gas in his 'friendly-pragmatic' condemnation of the sanctions against Russia.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "Press Release: Euro Area Unemployment at 8.9%." 2017. Eurostat.

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/8357265/3-%2031102017-CP-EN.pdf/cc23432e-f918-4f93-9fe7-0c03badb9792>.

<sup>16</sup> Dugovič, Matej. 2016. "U prvovoličov bodoval kotleba, chyba môže byť v školstve – Denník N."

<https://dennikn.sk/395832/prvovolicov-bodoval-kotleba-chyba-moze-byt-skolstve/>.

<sup>17</sup> Bútorová, Zora. 2014. "November 1989 v zrkadle verejnej mienky: zisky, straty, vyhliadky." blog.sme.sk.

Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://institutpre.blog.sme.sk/c/370654/november-1989-v-zrkadle-verejnej-mienky-zisky-straty-vyhliadky.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Vražda, Daniel. 2014. "Kotleba píše ukrajinskému prezidentovi Janukovyčovi: neustupujte – domov. Sme.Sk."

Accessed April 4, 2018. <https://domov.sme.sk/c/7086506/kotleba-pise-ukrajinskemu-prezidentovi-janukovyčovi-neustupujte.html>.

"Do bystrice prišli noční vlci, Kotleba vyvesil na župe ruskú vlajku." 2016. <https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/657800-do-bystrice-prišli-nocni-vlci-kotleba-vyvesil-na-župe-rusku-vlajku>.

<sup>19</sup> Milo, Daniel, and Katarína Klingová. 2018. "GLOBSEC Youth Trends: How Young Central Europeans View the World." GLOBSEC Policy Institute. <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/GLOBSEC-Youth-Trends-How-Young-Central-Europeans-View-the-World.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> "Naše Názory. Kotleba – Ľudová Strana Naše Slovensko." 2018. <http://www.naseslovensko.net/kategoria/nase-nazory/>.

<sup>21</sup> "Danko ako prvý slovak vystúpil na pôde ruskej štátnej dumy. Televízia TA3." 2018.

<https://www.ta3.com/clanok/1116435/danko-ako-prvy-slovak-vystupil-na-pode-ruskej-statnej-dumy.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Krekó, Péter, Lóránt Győri, Daniel Milo, Juraj Marušiak, János Széky, and Anita Lencsés. 2015. "Marching Towards Eurasia. The Kremlin Connections of the Slovak Far-Right." Political Capital Kft., Social Development Institute Kft. [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC\\_Study\\_Russian\\_Influence\\_Slovakia\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_Study_Russian_Influence_Slovakia_ENG.pdf).

## Media landscape

The World Press Freedom Index placed Slovakia 17th in the world rankings in 2017, out of 180 countries. However, compared to 2016, Slovakia has fallen in the ranking by five places, mostly because of the growing number of defamation actions against journalists being brought by businessmen, politicians and judicial officials. Any journalist convicted of such an offence faces up to eight years in prison.<sup>23</sup>

The recent murder of Jan Kuciak, member of an investigative team at Aktuality.sk, who was found shot dead with his fiancée on February 25, was the first time a journalist had been killed since Slovakia gained independence. This crime shocked the Slovak society and could lead to deep political consequences. Kuciak's last published articles uncovered the activities of alleged 'Ndrangheta mafia members in fraud and corruption allegations regarding EU funds and involved the relationship with high-ranking individuals in the Slovak government.<sup>24</sup>

Despite some rumours of a lack of political impartiality, for example in the case of TA3<sup>25,26</sup>, there have been no signs of pro-Kremlin narratives from any of the significant TV broadcasters on any of the mentioned channels broadcast in the Slovak language.

Probably the most important 'alternative' radio station is the Internet radio station called Slobodny Vysielač, which serves as a hub for the disinformation spreading community and individuals.<sup>27</sup>

Regarding mainstream print media, no title has a pro-Russian bias. There are, however, some marginal weekly and monthly magazines, such as Literarny Tyždenník and Nove Slovo, which support pro-Russia views. The most important one is Zem a Vek, a monthly magazine spreading hoaxes, pro-Russian propaganda, and conspiracy theories. There are no reliable data available, but according to Tibor Eliot Rostas, editor-in-chief of Zem a Vek, 25 000 copies<sup>28</sup> were published monthly in 2015, and there were almost 7 000 subscribers.<sup>29</sup>

According to the Global Trends study by GLOBSEC Policy Institute, 12% of respondents consider online disinformation sites as a legitimate source of information, while 40% of respondents do not trust mainstream media.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> 2017 World Freedom Index." 2017. Reporters Without Borders. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

<sup>24</sup> Rezaian, Jason. 2018. "These Are the Corruption Allegations That May Have Gotten a Slovak Journalist Killed." Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/28/these-are-the-corruption-allegations-that-may-have-gotten-a-slovak-journalist-killed/>.

<sup>25</sup> Daniš, Dag. 2015. "Komentár Daga Daniša: Ako majiteľ TA3 zarába milióny na gastrolistkoch." aktuality.sk. <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/310447/komentar-daga-danisa-ako-majitel-ta3-zaraba-miliony-na-gastrolistkoch/>.

<sup>26</sup> Kernová, Miroslava. 2013. "TA3 má na politikov dvojaký meter." blog.sme.sk.

<https://omediach.blog.sme.sk/c/320528/TA3-ma-na-politikov-dvojaky-meter.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Wars Online. (2018). Wars Online – Slobodný vysielač. <http://warsonline.slobodnyvysielač.sk/>.

<sup>28</sup> Havranovo Talk Show, Hostia: Tibor Eliot Rostas a Juraj Smatana. 2015. Nu Spirit Club.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ONr6uHAD-hM>.

<sup>29</sup> "Hlavná stránka." 2018. Zem a vek. <http://zemavek.sk/>.

<sup>30</sup> Milo, Daniel, Katarína Klingová, and Dominika Hajdu. 2017. "GLOBSEC Trends 2017: Mixed Messages and Signs of Hope from Central and Eastern Europe." GLOBSEC Policy Institute.

<https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-signs-hope-central-eastern-europe-2/>.

Pro-Kremlin narratives ('NATO wants to destroy Russia', 'Russia is the only protector of conservative values and traditions while the West is decadent', 'a U.S. military base is planned in Slovakia' etc.) are mostly visible on the Internet. In 2015, there were at least 42 web pages of Slovak and Czech<sup>31</sup> origin spreading Russian propaganda.<sup>32</sup> One of the most popular websites spreading pro-Kremlin narratives ('Putin forces out dollar with golden rouble', 'Brits are ready to emigrate to Russia en masse', 'OSCE observers confirmed illegal organ transplant stations in Ukraine')<sup>33</sup> is a news website called Hlavne Spravy. The limited long-term impact of 'alternative media' is also confirmed by Snídl, which stresses their ability to reach a wider audience through specific topics such as migration.<sup>34</sup> According to the activist Juraj Smatana, who was first to come up with a list of web pages spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda, it is a decentralised network with three main branches: anonymous websites publishing lies and disinformation, half-anonymous websites without any names (but their owners willing to communicate via email or telephone), and web pages with published real names of the authors. The components of this network are very closely interconnected, with social media being the main tool of connection.<sup>35</sup>

## Legal regulations and institutional framework

The media regulatory framework in Slovakia is based on the Article 26 of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, which guarantees the freedom of expression and the right to information. It also declares that no approval process shall be required for press publishing while '[e]ntrepreneurial activity in the field of radio and television broadcasting may be subject to permission from the state.'<sup>36</sup>

The most important act for TV and radio providers is the Act on Broadcasting and Re-transmission published in 2015. It regulates 'the status and competence of the Council for Broadcasting and Re-transmission', of which members are nominated by the National Council of the Slovak Republic, and 'the rights and duties of a broadcaster, a re-transmission operator, the provider of an on-demand audio-visual media service and legal entities or natural persons.'<sup>37</sup>

Besides the nationwide active media, which received their licences by the decision of the National Council of the Slovak Republic, all regional TV and radio broadcasters obtain their licences and registration from the Council for Broadcasting and Re-transmission, which also has the right to fine them or revoke their licence or registration for re-transmission if they

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<sup>31</sup> As a result of language similarities, the online space of Slovakia and the Czech Republic is shared to a large extent.

<sup>32</sup> Šnídl, Vladimír. 2015. "Proruskú propagandu o zhýralom Západe u nás šíri 42 webov." Denník N. <https://dennikn.sk/57740/prorusku-propagandu-o-zhyralom-zapade-u-nas-siri-42-webov/>.

<sup>33</sup> "Hlavnespravy.sk: Postupné primiešavanie jedu." Denník N. 2016. <https://dennikn.sk/blog/562295/hlavnespravy-sk-postupne-primiesavanie-jedu/>.

<sup>34</sup> Vladimír Šnídl, Denník N, January 26, 2018. In-depth interview.

<sup>35</sup> Majchrák, Jozef, and Eva Čobejová. 2015. "Kto je tu proruský." týždeň. <https://www.tyzden.sk/casopis/17220/kto-je-tu-prorusky/>.

<sup>36</sup> Constitution of the Slovak Republic. 1992. <https://www.prezident.sk/upload-files/46422.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Act on Broadcasting and Retransmission. 2000.

[http://www.rvr.sk/cms/data/modules/download/1462523380\\_act\\_on\\_broadcasting\\_and\\_retransmission.pdf](http://www.rvr.sk/cms/data/modules/download/1462523380_act_on_broadcasting_and_retransmission.pdf).

break the rules of the Act on Broadcasting and Re-transmission. Furthermore, ownership of more than one type of nationwide media is prohibited. In 2017, Tibor E. Rostas, editor-in-chief of *Zem a Vek*, was charged with the criminal offence of defamation of a nation, race, and belief because of his article about Jews called '*Klin židov medzi Slovanmi*' ('The Legion of Jews among the Slavs').<sup>38</sup>

Unlike TV and radio, the print media environment is not regulated. The self-regulation of printed media is based on the Association for the Protection of Journalistic Ethics (AONE) and its executive body the Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic (TR SR), which follows the Code of Journalistic Ethics. AONE was founded in 2001 by representatives of the Slovak Syndicate of Journalists and Slovak Press Publishers' Association. Later, it was also joined by the biggest association in the Slovak digital market, IAB Slovakia (the Association of the Internet Media).<sup>39</sup> However, as the membership of all these organisations is voluntary, not every journalist or media outlet is a member. Moreover, as Julius Lorincz, a former chairman of the Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic stated: '*The powers of TR SR are limited in practice with admonition being their only tool of punishment*'.<sup>40</sup> Regarding the alternative media scene, it became more organised in 2016 when representatives of *Zem a Vek*, *Slobodny Vysielac*, *Hlavne Spravy* and *Medzi a Dav Dva* established their own organisation, the Association of the Independent Media (ANM).<sup>41</sup> Besides media regulation, Slovakia does not yet have a specific legal framework focused on information security.

Information about strategic propaganda practices and the threat of disinformation campaigns can be found in a 2016 white paper about defence regarding the Slovak Republic.<sup>42</sup> The updated official documents, the Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic (2017) and the Defence Strategy of the Slovak Republic (2017) consider this area specifically and suggest broad counter-measures. The documents suggest developing special strategies to develop resilience against hybrid threats and building capacity in strategic communications.<sup>43</sup> The Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) created the Strategic Communication Unit in July 2017. The planned counter-measures include strengthening the confidence of the population through strategic communication, active dialogue, support of the development of civil society, focus on the younger generation, etc.

## Digital debunking teams and media literacy initiatives

Fact-checking and debunking initiatives are deeply rooted within the Slovak civil society. Some projects were initiated by individual activists while others were created under research think

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<sup>38</sup> Tódová, Monika, and Miro Kern. 2018. "Konšpirátora Rostása obvinili za hanobenie židov, spravili u neho domovú prehliadku." *Denník N*. <https://dennikn.sk/1040747/konspiratora-rostasa-obvinili-za-hanobenie-zidov-robja-mu-domovu-prehliadku/>.

<sup>39</sup> The Association for the Protection of Journalistic Ethics. <http://www.aonesr.sk/english/>.

<sup>40</sup> Július Lőrincz, Print-Digital Council of the Slovak Republic, December 20, 2017. In-depth interview.

<sup>41</sup> Asociácia nezávislých médií. <https://aneme.sk/>.

<sup>42</sup> "White Paper on Defence of the Slovak Republic." 2016. Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic. [http://www.mosr.sk/data/WPDSR2016\\_LQ.pdf](http://www.mosr.sk/data/WPDSR2016_LQ.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> Návrh Bezpečnostná Stratégia Slovenskej Republiky. 2017. LP/2017/627. <https://www.slov-lex.sk/legislativne-procesy/SK/LP/2017/627>.

tanks or NGOs. The first Slovak fact-checking project, Demagog.sk, was founded in March 2010, inspired by PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org, political fact-checking projects monitoring public speeches and political campaigns in the U.S. Since its foundation, the Demagog.sk team has analysed about 700 political debates and more than 13 000 statements.<sup>44</sup>

Regarding fact-checking or debunking propaganda stories, hoaxes, and fake news coming from various sources, the first reaction in Slovakia came on an individual level, from anti-corruption and civil society activists. Secondary school teacher Juraj Smatana published the first version of his list of websites spreading disinformation in 2015, and he also created a popular Facebook page focused on debunking hoaxes and fake news (Dezinformacie Hoaxy Propaganda).<sup>45</sup> Activist Jan Bencik systematically reveals and publishes stories on his blog about Slovak far-right extremists and their ties to separatists fighting in Donbas.<sup>46</sup> As Tomas Cizik, director of the Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, commented: *‘Civil society and NGOs are most active in countering disinformation campaigns in Slovakia. They are organising public debates, seminars for students and teachers, and leading debunking sites, etc’*.<sup>47</sup>

The website Antipropaganda.sk was created in 2015 by a group of individuals from security and foreign policy think tanks as a part of a broader programme by the Slovak Security Policy Institute. The page publishes regular analyses reacting to hoaxes, stereotypical stories about the European Union, NATO and other topics promoted by the Kremlin-inspired disinformation campaigns. There are several other notable projects countering disinformation. The the GLOBSEC Institute website Counterdisinfo.org is a virtual one-stop shop, a toolkit for civil society organisations and active citizens concerned about their information environment.<sup>48</sup> The GLOBSEC Institute also developed an online course called Media and Disinformation.<sup>49</sup> Blbec.online, a website developed by unknown vigilantes, aggregates and processes open sources of online data from Facebook groups, showing most viral fake news and their sources from the Czech and Slovak online space.<sup>50</sup> Konspiratori.sk is creating a database for individuals and companies who are trying to avoid having their paid online advertisements on websites spreading hoaxes and fake news.<sup>51</sup>

Media literacy and critical thinking are not new topics in the Slovakia’s public debates or public policies. In the area of formal education, the first experimental programmes can be traced back to the years 2005-2007 when the State Pedagogical Institute prepared educational texts, methodological guidelines, and workshops for teachers with the engagement of journalists, mass media theorists, and other experts. In 2011, the concept of media literacy in the Slovak

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<sup>44</sup> Lenka Galetová, Demagog.sk, December 10, 2017. In-depth interview.

<sup>45</sup> “Dezinformácie Hoaxy Propaganda. Facebook Group.” 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/Dezinform%C3%A1cie-Hoaxy-Propaganda-1144754945569773/>.

<sup>46</sup> Ján Benčík: Blog N. 2018. <https://dennikn.sk/autor/jan-bencik/>.

<sup>47</sup> Tomáš Čížik, Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs, January 28, 2018. In-depth interview.

<sup>48</sup> GLOBSEC Policy Institute. 2018. Countering Disinformation Online Toolkit. <https://counterdisinfo.org/>.

<sup>49</sup> GLOBSEC. (2018) Media and Disinformation. Retrieved from <https://globsec.learnworlds.com/course?courseid=cto>.

<sup>50</sup> Blbec.Online. blbec.online.

<sup>51</sup> Konspiratori. <https://www.konspiratori.sk/>.

Republic within the context of lifelong education was adopted by the Slovak government as a key document defining goals, strategy, and assumptions in creating an effective media education system.<sup>52</sup>

Media literacy and critical thinking are most often in the curriculum or broader agenda of organisations dedicated to furthering teacher training, reforming Slovakia's educational system and empowering civil society. The examples include the Comenius Institute, the Institute for Active Citizenship, the InfoKompas project, created by the Strategic Policy Institute and Demagog.sk, or the Slovak Debate Association.<sup>53</sup>

## Recommendations

*1. To publically acknowledge the presence of pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation campaigns in order to be able to adopt effective counter-measures involving all the relevant subjects including state agencies, media, and NGOs.*

- The state should develop a robust strategic communication strategy and prepare an adequate institutional framework for its realisation. An assertive, self-confident, both internally and externally-oriented positive narrative of the Slovak Republic should lie at the very heart of such strategy.

*2. To increase the openness of the state institutions towards the public with transparent and clear communication.*

- It is necessary that all the state subjects express clearly that Slovakia is 'Western', and explain the benefits of the membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures that are in the interests of the nation.
- To overcome the growing distrust of the general public towards state representatives and institutions, it is necessary to be able to communicate clearly not only through official channels but also through mainstream media.
- Departments for strategic communication, such as the one which already exists at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, should be established at other ministries. These can be led and coordinated by a specialised body on a government level or by the Security Council of the Slovak Republic, with strategic communication recognised as a vital part of its agenda.

*3. To improve grant schemes for civil society support.*

- Relevant ministries should, within their strategic communication departments, develop synchronised grant schemes for civil society support. Aligned grant schemes would allow the state to plan synergic steps in its strategic communication. At the same time, this

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<sup>52</sup> "Ministerstvo Kultúry SR – Konceptia Mediálnej Výchovy v SR." 2012. <http://mksrtest.cmsromboid.sk/posobnost-ministerstva/mediaaudiovizia-a-autorske-pravo-/media-a-audiovizia/koncepcia-medialnej-vychovy-v-sr-1d3.html>.

<sup>53</sup> STRATPOL. 2018. InfoKompas: Navigácia bludiskom dezinformácií. <http://infokompas.stratpol.sk/>.

would be helpful for NGOs and activists in preparing their activities and projects on a broader scale.

*4. To improve cooperation between the relevant subjects.*

- NGOs and civil society activists should pay more attention to cooperation. Several projects with almost identical goals, methods, and audiences can be identified in many cases. Close coordination between different organisations should begin at the preparation and planning phases and conclude with the projects' realisation. If NGOs work together, networking and cooperation would help to broaden the projects' reach and make them more effective.
- The state should cooperate actively with mainstream media and relevant NGOs in order to create a platform (i.e. regularly organised round tables) to exchange experiences and knowledge, and to provide some guidance to the mentioned subjects.

*5. To raise the awareness of disinformation, hoaxes and propaganda campaigns among the general public, and increase the media literacy of the population in general, in particular students at secondary schools and relevant state representatives.*

- To organise workshops and seminars for state representatives and active or retired members of the armed forces, with the involvement of media and NGO experts, in order to increase their media literacy and strengthen their resilience to propaganda or disinformation.
- To improve current media literacy initiatives in the state curriculum, in order to educate not only the students but also their teachers. To do that, the The Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sport of the Slovak Republic, as the central body of the state administration, has to cooperate actively with relevant experts from media and NGOs, in order to create an effective and meaningful curriculum for media education as a subject at school level. To create a sustainable model, it is necessary to educate pedagogues in the first place.
- To organise events, workshops, and campaigns for the general public, involving representatives of the media and NGOs.

*6. To improve legislation in regard to the ownership and funding of the media.*

- To cooperate actively on the European level in order to persuade international online platforms to adopt policies against disinformation, hoaxes, and propaganda.

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