POLITICIANS, PARTIES, POLLS:

Online Disinformation and Information Manipulation Targeting Elections in Germany, Spain and Slovakia

Imprint

Authors:
Christian Schwieter & Richard Kuchta

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The Greens/EFA in the European Parliament

Paul Henri Spaak building
60, rue Wiertz
1047 Brussels
Belgium
www.greens-efa.eu

Glossary

Disinformation:

Verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policy-making processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security.[1]

Misinformation:

Misinformation is false or misleading information shared without harmful intent, though the effects can be still harmful.[2]

FIMI:

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) describes a mostly non-illegal pattern of behaviour that threatens or has the potential to negatively impact values, procedures and political processes. Such activity is manipulative in character, conducted in an intentional and coordinated manner, by state or non-state actors, including their proxies inside and outside of their own territory.[3]

The Far Right:

An umbrella term, which encapsulates both the "radical right" and the "extreme right", whereas right-wing extremism is a type of nationalism defined by racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy[4] and radical right refers to groups and individuals who subscribe to ideas of racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy but do not implicitly or explicitly ask for this supremacy to be implemented in ways that would alter the political system.[5]

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Executive Summary

Disinformation has emerged as a significant threat during democratic processes and in particular elections. This threat is driven in part by the proliferation of social media platforms that facilitate the rapid dissemination of deliberately fabricated and misleading information for political or economic gains. Consequently, the negative implications of disinformation for electoral processes are identified as a major systemic risk by European policy-makers in the Digital Services Act, the new European legislation governing online services.

This study examines instances of disinformation during the 2021 German federal election, the 2023 Spanish general election, and the 2023 Slovak parliamentary election using novel fact-checking datasets comprising 150 different election-related pieces of dis- or misinformation observed across 410 posts on social media. It employs the ABCDE approach to analysing Foreign Influence and Information Manipulation (FIMI) first introduced by Camille François[6] and later expanded on by Alexandre Alaphilippe[7] and James Pamment[8], providing insights into the actors, behaviours, content, distribution, and effects observed in the context of disinformation campaigns targeting European elections. The key findings of this study are as follows:

- A variety of actors engaged in disinformation activities, and only a small portion of those can be confidently linked to foreign influence campaigns, based on the available data. While the specific actors differed across Germany, Spain and Slovakia, election-related disinformation was frequently spread by **smaller private social media accounts** as well as larger influential accounts that were frequently linked to **conspiracy communities** or **well-known far-right groups,** many of which consistently shared pro-Russian disinformation. Other common actors included **self-described journalists or "alternative" media**, some of which could easily be mistaken for credible news sources, often featuring a blue checkmark next to their username on X.[9] Lastly, in all countries, **politicians** affiliated with predominantly right-wing political parties were found to share election-related disinformation.

- The behaviour of these disinformation actors was comparable across Germany, Spain and Slovakia, with the most common disinformation strategy observed being the **decontextualisation** of real photos or videos to make unfounded claims, or the **omission of important contextual information** to mislead audiences. Another common behaviour with more technical sophistication was the **fabrication or manipulation of media to create so-called imposter content**.These media frequently purported to show screenshots of alleged articles published by trusted newspapers, fake social media posts by political opponents, or manipulated campaign posters. While in Germany and Spain this behaviour mainly relied on standard photo manipulation techniques, Slovakia also saw the **deployment of AI technology for disinformation purposes** by imitating the voices of politicians and journalists.

- The specific content of election-related disinformation similarly converged around common themes, with the majority of disinformation targeting either individual Green or left-wing politicians, liberal and progressive parties, or the electoral process more generally. In Germany, disinformation most commonly targeted **female Green politicians and the Green party in general,** but disinformation targeting the integrity of the **election integrity was also pronounced.** In Spain, the majority of disinformation sought to undermine **the legitimacy of the election** itself, with actors alleging a "pucherazo" based mainly on falsehoods shared on social media about the postal and expat vote. Similar claims were popular in Slovakia, with additional evidence of minorities such as **immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community** being a major target in the electoral campaign.

- In terms of distribution, **Facebook** was found to still be the most important platform for disinformation actors in Germany and Slovakia, whereas **X** was most commonly used in Spain, based on the fact-check datasets. **Telegram** was another key platform used for the dissemination of election-related disinformation across all countries, with content targeting the validity of the election viewed over one million times in Germany alone. Substantial evidence of election-related disinformation on **Instagram, TikTok** and **YouTube** was only found in the Spanish dataset. Notably, disinformation on Facebook was mostly accompanied by a fact-check warning label, which was usually not the case for posts found on X, YouTube or TikTok. On the contrary, on X, Spanish disinformation actors frequently featured a blue checkmark in a likely attempt to increase their credibility and reach.

- The common targets, actors and behaviours observed, combined with secondary survey data, suggest that the large number of falsehoods circulating on social media alleging "Wahlbetrug", "pucherazo" and "zmanipulované voľby" are part of larger cross-national campaigns that seeks to **undermine the legitimacy of democratic institutions,** and coincides with declining trust in established media observed across all cases. Besides declining faith in democratic institutions, the finding that progressive female politicians and LGBTQ+ communities in particular are targeted by disinformation also threatens another key requisite of functioning democracies, namely **political participation.** Those members of society disproportionately subjected to personal attacks online may be less willing to speak up, let alone run for public office.

The data available for this study does not allow for confident conclusions on the actual effect of disinformation spread in the context of elections. However, while the findings of this report are based on only a subset of disinformation content circulating online, they can nevertheless lay the foundation for both country-specific risk assessments as well as EU-wide measures to combat election-related disinformation. The commonalities and divergences between disinformation campaigns targeting Germany, Spain and Slovakia identified in this report highlight what type of actors, behaviours, targets and platforms to look out for as the EU gears up for the European Parliament elections in June 2024.

Policy recommendations

In addition, the analysis also highlights the lack of data currently available to public-interest researchers to fully interrogate how the design and functionalities of social media platforms facilitate the spread of disinformation. Some of these informational asymmetries between researchers and policymakers on one hand and platforms on the other may be remedied by the full implementation of the Digital Services Act (DSA). In the future, Article 40 of the DSA on research data access and the new 'DSA Transparency Database' by the European Commission, alongside the risk assessments and transparency reports published by platforms, will enable greater insights into the functioning of recommendation systems and content moderation activities of platforms. Hence, this data will become a crucial resource to not only hold the actors behind disinformation campaigns to account, but also ensure platforms are complying with their new legal obligations. Nevertheless, some key policy recommendations can be made based on the findings of this report.

Closing regulatory loopholes re: platform design and content moderation

- **Pursue robust enforcement of the DSA and GDPR in regard to content recommendation systems and platform features, and consider additional regulatory action where necessary.** While beyond the scope of this study due to data access limitations, there is a growing evidence base that the choices made by platforms in the design of their recommendation systems and functionalities more generally play a key role in the proliferation of 'systemic risks' in the EU, including the spread of election-related disinformation. In this regard, the Irish Digital Services Coordinator Coimisiún na Meán, among others, has proposed a number of measures to regulate recommendation systems. These include a set of default settings, such as disabling auto-play of videos for young users, and turning off recommendation algorithms based on user profiling - in particular those based on special category personal data.[10] The risk assessment provisions contained in the DSA, as well as the right to privacy enforced by the GDPR, should also encourage the development of new types of transparent recommendation systems, such as those that prioritise the active choices made by users or source reputation, not those inferred by privacy-invading profiling. More generally, platforms should be encouraged to experiment with alternatives to engagement-based ranking, such as bridging algorithms "to reward content that leads to positive interactions across diverse audiences, even when the topic may be divisive".[11]

- **Remain vigilant of platforms that are highly relevant for specific "systemic risks" but have not (yet) been designated a Very Large Online Platform.** The analysis above shows that Telegram as a platform is among the most popular distribution channels for disinformation across Germany, Spain and Slovakia, amassing millions of views on election-related falsehoods. Yet, it is also the only platform observed in the fact-check datasets that has not yet reached the user threshold to be designated a Very Large Online Platform (VLOP) by the European Commission. Policymakers and regulators must recognise the key role these smaller platforms play for "systemic risks" including both the spread and organisation of online disinformation campaigns.

- **Re-examine exemptions from content moderation for politicians.** Some social media platforms, such as those owned by Meta, are currently exempting politicians from content moderation when it comes to mis- or disinformation.[12] As such, posts by politicians that include falsehoods are not supplemented by a content warning from independent fact-checkers. Given that, throughout all country case studies, politicians were found to be common actors sharing election-related disinformation, it is questionable whether exempting politicians from fact-checks is appropriate.

- **Re-consider privileged treatment of media outlets during content moderation processes.** Article 19 of the Media Freedom Act, which is now close to adoption, enforces a 24-hour moderation exemption for content provided by media service providers. Disinformation researchers, experts and civil society organisations have previously highlighted the role of both alternative and established media outlets in the dissemination of disinformation.[13] The key actors identified in the case studies above, who frequently self-identify as media outlets, give further credence to the argument that a media exemption may be exploited by nefarious actors seeking to spread disinformation during time-sensitive events such as elections.

- **Improve integration of fact-checking and content moderation processes by online platforms.** The analysis shows that some posts containing mis- or disinformation intersect with other types of harmful or illegal content, such as gender-based insults and misleading content about protected groups like migrants or the LGBTQ+ community, which fuels hate in comments below posts. If posts with mis- and disinformation target protected groups, such posts should not be only labelled as misleading, but should be considered for stricter enforcement of content moderation policies.

Understanding the disinformation ecosystem

- **Acknowledge that disinformation is a strategy deployed by both foreign and domestic actors, sometimes in lockstep.** The above analyses have shown that the majority of disinformation circulating on social media is distributed by domestic political actors, frequently on the far-right of the political spectrum. While some of these may be connected to foreign actors, disinformation campaigns are not the sole domain of authoritarian states and their larger geopolitical struggles. While the influence of state-linked influence operations, including their overt propaganda and covert information manipulation strategies, must be acknowledged, domestic actors are often ideologically, strategically or financially aligned with these foreign interests, and hence are frequently producers of, and vectors for, disinformation.

- **Recognise that AI-generated pieces of disinformation are complementary to technically less advanced strategies.** Even though this research highlighted one of the first widespread disinformation campaigns using generative AI technology, the findings suggest that AI-based disinformation will complement rather than completely replace popular "low-tech" disinformation strategies like decontextualisation. While policymakers and platforms must be vigilant of AI-use for disinformation purposes, the development of technical capabilities and content moderation practices to combat disinformation campaigns should not only be limited to "high-tech" manipulation attempts.

- **Be aware that disinformation is just one part of the wider toolbox deployed by foreign and domestic actors seeking to attack opponents and undermine democratic institutions.** An exclusive focus on disinformation risks overlooking the way in which political opponents are attacked through other types of strategies, including hate speech and (gendered) online harassment. The deliberate dissemination of falsehoods is therefore only one of many ways in which social media platforms are used to undermine democratic processes, including political participation more generally. This includes far-right campaigns targeting minorities in their campaign against liberal democracy. These campaigns must therefore also be understood through the lens of, globally-networked but nevertheless domestically-rooted, extremism, not exclusively foreign disinformation.

- **Ensure robust researcher access for public-interest research.** The analyses above are based primarily on data provided by fact-checking organisations. However, in order to allow for a broader understanding of how social media platforms are used to spread falsehoods, hate and extremist propaganda, researchers must be given systematic access to platform data as envisioned in Article 40 of the DSA (see also Article 40 of the GDPR). This is particularly relevant for research that seeks to compare social media phenomena over time and across geographies - without systematic data access, comparisons cannot be accurately made, and conclusions drawn from the analyses will remain anecdotal. On the other hand, regulatory bodies cannot ascertain if platforms are complying with relevant laws if information on platform activity is withheld. The provisions contained in the Digital Services Act are a step in the right direction, but it is now up to the platforms to implement those requirements.

- **Improve new DSA-mandated databases in dialogue with researchers to better understand how for-profit platform features affect content recommendation and moderation systems.** Future research will also show how useful data provided by platforms via the new EU DSA Transparency Database[14] and the Transparency Centre of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation[15] is in holding platforms to account. More information about platforms' own internal processes are needed in order to determine how accurately platforms moderate content, and whether measures to combat "systemic risks" are effectively implemented. For example, while Meta states that Facebook and Instagram 'reduce the distribution' of posts labelled with a fact-check warning,[16] there is of yet no independent data available to assess how rigorously this policy is applied across platforms, and whether this demotion is an effective way to reduce the spread of disinformation. Improved DSA-mandated databases may also allow for more systematic research into how newly introduced platform features affect existing efforts to combat disinformation and hate speech online, such as for-sale blue checkmarks introduced by X Premium and Meta Verified.

- **Consider a real-time transparency database of online election advertising for online platforms during election periods.** Policymakers should consider extending the scope of the various databases currently under development to include targeting parameters and demonetisation mechanisms in the advertising system, to ensure platforms are not directly profiting from disinformation campaigns or targeted harassment.

- **Support fact-checking initiatives across different geographies and languages, and implement common data structures.** In the absence of systematic data access, fact-checking databases formed the foundation of this study. While fact-checks are no panacea to combat disinformation, they provide an important service both to social media platforms, disinformation researchers and the public at large. The number of fact-checks available for this study varies across the observed countries, influenced by the size and potentially the significance of the markets. It is crucial that such initiatives are supported across the EU, and as such are available to both large and smaller linguistic communities, informing systemic risk assessment, and mitigation, as set out in the DSA (Article 35). In addition, the adoption of common data structures for fact-checks, such as the ClaimReview schema[17] used by Google's Fact Check API,[18] should be encouraged. A transnational database of fact-checks would further facilitate comparative research across different fact-checking organisations and regions to hold both platforms and disinformation actors to account, without solely relying on the goodwill of platforms to provide such data.

- **Provide legal safeguards for researchers and journalists conducting public interest investigations.** Civil society, academia and journalism provide a crucial public service by exposing those engaged in disinformation campaigns. This work is, however, increasingly threatened not just by a lack of data access on behalf of platforms, but also strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP). Most organisations and individuals conducting research into disinformation do not have the appropriate legal resources available to combat such ill-intentioned litigation. Policymakers should therefore maintain the momentum on legal instruments such as the EU Anti-SLAPP Directive to ensure public interest research is not threatened by unfounded and abusive litigation attempts.

Introduction

Online electoral campaigns are increasingly vulnerable to information manipulation and disinformation, be it from internal or external actors which use various techniques and behaviours in their attempt to manipulate public opinion. These methods and behaviours continually evolve, incorporating new technologies to enhance the impact of information operations, and adapt to mitigation measures implemented by governments, civil society and platforms. Consequently, research into these phenomena is required to better protect electoral processes, particularly in the realm of social media, where the production and dissemination of false and misleading information to broader audiences are prevalent. Recognising the negative impact on electoral processes, the Digital Services Act - the recently adopted European legislation governing online services - underscores the negative implications of disinformation as a major systemic risk.

This study evaluates the 2021 German federal election, the 2023 Spanish snap election and the 2023 Slovak parliamentary election by applying the ABCDE framework to analyse actors, behaviour, content, distribution, and the effects of mis- and disinformation. The researchers compiled datasets based on the work of fact-checking organisations in all three countries, subsequently analysing these data per country and in a comparative way to identify common threats. Additionally, the study integrates findings from research applying different methodologies to investigate online risks, aiming to mitigate gaps in the selected methodology and provide a broader, more comprehensive overview of online risks during elections.

The selected countries offer diverse examples of democratic processes that were subject to information manipulation. While the German elections occurred before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Spanish and Slovak campaigns were influenced by these international events. By comparing these three events, a more profound understanding of trends across the selected countries emerges, offering researchers and policymakers more precise information about actors, behaviour, content, and effects to better prepare for the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Methodology

Conducting a comparative analysis of disinformation campaigns targeting three elections that span more than two years of social media data is no trivial task. To be able to draw meaningful comparisons, data sources must ideally be identical across all three cases. However, due to both the ephemeral nature of social media data, as well as recent decisions by social media companies to significantly limit researcher access to their platforms, it was not possible to construct a full database of election-related public social media activity across all three cases. Instead, this study is primarily based on a database of election-related fact-checks and the corresponding social media footprint of election-related disinformation.

The election-related fact-check dataset was constructed by manually reviewing fact-checks published by members of the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN) that were either tagged as election-related by the publishers themselves, or determined to be election-related based on a combination of keyword queries and manual verification. These fact-checks were deemed to be useful to understand what type of mis- and disinformation was shared (**content**) and how it was shared (**behaviour**) in the context of three different election periods across three different countries. The majority of fact-checks reviewed also included archived links to the social media posts or online articles that contained mis- or disinformation, which allowed for an approximation of where and how widely a piece of mis- or disinformation was shared (**distribution**) as well as who shared it (**actors**).[19] Additionally, manual searches and queries using the social listening tool Crowdtangle were conducted to identify any additional social media posts containing the same type of disinformation that were not linked in the fact-check articles. While the actual effect of disinformation activity on voting preferences and attitudes cannot be assessed through social media data alone, the type of content shared, including tone and target, paired with a measure of distribution allows for an approximation of potential harm caused (**effect**).

To supplement the comparative analysis, data sources that were not available for all cases but nonetheless considered relevant to the research question were also consulted. This included a specific dataset of X posts by major state-affiliated accounts relevant to the German election archived by the German Marshall Fund, as well as a systematic review of media reporting on disinformation campaigns via MediaCloud. Additionally, social media posts and engagement data was collected both manually and via the social listening tool Crowdtangle. To situate the findings of the primary analysis within the wider research on election-related disinformation, secondary sources such as specialist reports and survey studies were consulted, which are referenced where appropriate.

The fact-check datasets, in combination with the additional data sources described above, were hence used as proxies to take stock of the content, behaviour, actors, distribution and the likely effect of disinformation and information manipulation activity targeting the German, Spanish and Slovak elections. Any conclusions drawn from this study should therefore be put in the context of the data that was available to the researchers at the time of analysis.

Case Study: 2021 German Federal Election

In the run-up to the German federal elections due to take place on 26 September 2021, many commentators warned of an impending onslaught of disinformation attacks and foreign influence campaigns targeting Germany. In an analysis published in March 2021, the EU External Action Service concluded that "[n]o other EU Member State is attacked more fiercely through disinformation than Germany".[20] German politicians, in response, called on citizens to be vigilant and urged the government to protect the election against Russian disinformation campaigns. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, former General Secretary of NATO, similarly warned of foreign actors, most notably Russia and China, seeking to influence the outcome of the election to ensure the next government would act in their geopolitical and economic interests.[21] The dispute around the construction of the Russo-German gas pipeline 'Nord Stream 2', which was hotly contested among German political parties at the time, was viewed as a particularly potent issue on which Russia would seek to influence public opinion. Notably, the Green party had taken the clearest stance against the construction of Nord Stream 2 among all major German parties in the run-up to the election.

Alongside overt disinformation campaigns, German authorities also warned of cyber attacks in the form of phishing attempts targeting mainly CDU and SPD MPs. The German domestic intelligence service suspected the attacks to be part of an ongoing effort by the Russian GRU orchestrated by the Russian hacker group "Ghostwriter". The group had been notable in the past for its strategic use of hacking social media accounts or news websites in order to then publish disinformation through these authoritative channels.[22] Information obtained through data hacks could then also later be published to damage particular individuals as part of broader influence operations known as hack-and-leak campaigns, as seen in the US election 2016.[23]

The following case study provides an overview of election-related mis- and disinformation circulating on social media prior and immediately after the 2021 German federal election. Using fact-checks published by the three largest fact-checking organisations operating in Germany, as well as a novel dataset of social media posts containing election-related falsehoods shared on X, Facebook and Telegram, the analysis below describes the key actors, behaviours, content and distribution of disinformation campaigns targeting the election.

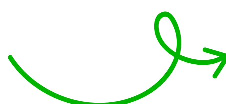
Fact-check datasets

In Germany, dedicated fact-checking arms have become an integral part of many major news organisations over the past years. Prior to the election, major social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube began to integrate fact-checks into their service to provide users with additional context or content warnings when engaging with posts that contain false information. Among them, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Deutsche Presseagentur (DPA) and Correctiv were the official fact-checking partners of Meta,[24] while DPA and Correctiv also partnered with Google to combat the spread of disinformation on YouTube.[25] As such, the fact-checks produced by these three organisations provide a useful source to gauge both the type and spread of disinformation campaigns in the context of the German federal election 2021.

In total, the three organisations published 113 fact-checks that were directly related to the election. Just under one third of these fact-checks were written in response to the same piece of disinformation or social media post, leaving 79 fact-checks covering a unique topic. The analysis below is based on these 79 fact-checks, and a sample of the most popular social media posts containing the false information which the fact-check was written in response to. In cases where the fact-check was written in response to a blog post or news article, the digital footprint of that piece of disinformation was reconstructed by identifying where, and by whom, the URL was shared using the social listening tool Crowdtangle.

113

Fact-checks about election-related disinformation were published by



- AFP
- DPA
- Correctiv

Actors

While it is difficult to attribute particular disinformation campaigns to specific actors given that they often attempt to obfuscate their involvement, the data obtained through the review of fact-checks by AFP, DPA and Correctiv provides an understanding of what social media accounts shared the false information, or which websites produced an article containing misinformation.

Smaller private social media accounts

Most commonly, mis/disinformation was shared on social media by private accounts. While the political leaning of some of these accounts appeared obvious from their public social media posts and other types of public commentary, it was not possible to ascertain a direct connection between these accounts and political parties or foreign actors. Notably, the majority of these accounts shared mis/disinformation publicly on Facebook and X under what appeared to be their real name, and frequently targeted individual politicians.

Political interest communities, far-right groups and conspiracy movements

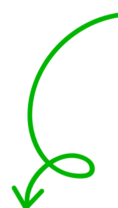
Other common actors sharing mis/disinformation were public Facebook pages and groups or public Telegram channels with a clear political leaning. While mainly attributed to the right of the political spectrum, these actors ranged from legitimate political interest groups all the way to extremist political movements. For the former, some pages appeared to be linked to specific political interest groups mobilising against wind power energy, rallying against a potential prohibition of Diesel cars, or calling for a halt of COVID-19 vaccinations. Some of these pages purported to be satire pages sharing humorous memes usually targeting politicians. A related category of Facebook pages and Telegram channels appeared to have initially been created to organise anti-lockdown protests, but increasingly began sharing mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories targeting individual politicians, parties and the electoral process more generally. Some of these pages could be attributed to the wider anti-lockdown movement in Germany, while others were more closely affiliated with protest communities linked to the far right. Other groups and channels used language and espoused conspiracy theories associated with the Qanon movement as well as the Reichsbürger movement, the German sovereign citizen group that was at the heart of an alleged coup plot in 2022.[26] These latter actors were mainly found on Telegram.

Alternative news sites, self-described journalists and conspiracy influencers

A third group of actors could broadly be categorised as alternative news sites, including affiliated journalists as well as well-known conspiracy theorists, with a significant online reach. While many of these actors may be linked to the movements described above, they distinguish themselves from other actors by describing themselves as news media, journalists or commentators, providing an alternative to what they view as the untrustworthy mainstream media. These news sites include a Russian-hosted website that has been found to share pro-Russian disinformation related to the war in Ukraine, [27] an Austrian-based news page that has previously been described as part of a right-wing 'Russian propaganda' cluster,[28] and a German newspaper originally founded by an association that paid for pro-AfD campaign ads,[29] the same association linked to the anti-Green offline campaign 'Grüner Mist', described in more detail below. Other actors included a journalist that had previously been found to share falsehoods related to the COVID-19 pandemic on his blog,[30] and two well-known conspiracy theorists espousing, among others, Qanon theories leading to an arrest warrant for allegedly inciting violence against politicians, [31] as well as investigations by the German domestic intelligence service.[32]

AfD members of parliament

Notably, some of the pieces of mis/disinformation that were fact-checked were originally shared by elected members of parliament or other formerly high-profile AfD politicians. These politicians include former members of the extremist wing of the party ("Der Flügel"),[33] those who have espoused pro-Russian disinformation during speeches in parliament,[34] and those formerly associated with the more moderate faction of the party.[35] The fact-check dataset provided no evidence of politicians of any other party sharing election-related disinformation. While the dataset provides only a partial picture and does not represent all actors engaged in disinformation campaigns, the lack of outright disinformation shared by other parties may also be a reflection of the voluntary commitments signed by all major parties except the AfD and CSU, in which they renounced the use of disinformation in their political campaigning.[36]



Foreign state-controlled media

Only one fact-check in the dataset corresponded to an article published by attributable foreign state-controlled media, namely RT DE, the German language version of the Russian state-backed news network RT (formerly Russia Today). This may suggest that these media are rarely the original source of disinformation, but rather use pieces of disinformation already circulating on social media selectively in their news articles. Hence, the fact-checks correspond to the original social media post or blog article, which may or may not be referred to in articles or reports published by state-backed media. Drawing from a dataset of archived tweets provided by the Alliance for Securing Democracy, it is nevertheless clear that Russian state-backed media in particular played an active role in the run-up to the election, with some of its most popular tweets highlighting alleged voting irregularities in Göttingen and Berlin, reporting on a poll published by INSA allegedling that 18% of German voters fear "widespread election fraud", and coverage of the AfD election campaign events.[37] In this sense, Russian-state backed media actors mirrored the behaviours and content described in more detail below, albeit framing their claims more carefully or referring to secondary sources so as to not adopt the statements containing mis/disinformation as their own.

Behaviour

In order to assess the behaviour associated with election-related disinformation attempts, each fact-check was assessed for the type of strategies observed on social media. A slight variation on the taxonomy proposed by Claire Wardle[38] was used to categorise the type of content each fact-check covered. It is important to note here that the categorisation merely functions as a heuristic intended to demonstrate the most common behaviour observed and variety of strategies deployed.

De-contextualising images, videos or quotes

The majority of posts or articles containing dis- or misinformation provided false context, where genuine images or partial quotes were used but were accompanied by a false or misleading text causing the image or quote being misinterpreted. In total, this strategy was observed 35 times, or in nearly half of all claims fact-checked. Examples of such content include posts that:

- falsely claimed photos from a Green party event showed party leaders violating pandemic containment measures, when really the photos were taken at a past event prior to the pandemic;[39]
- falsely claimed a still from a video showed evidence of AfD votes being cast away during the vote count, when really the video was showing poll workers in the US;[40]
- falsely claimed that a photo of the CDU candidate Armin Laschet showed he was not dialling in live to a talk show from the flood-struck city of Stolberg but was actually standing in front of a green screen;[41]

Two posts were also shared that included a mix of false contextualisation and fabrication. This included a list of alleged quotes by Green party politicians which was shared on Facebook. The post contains a mix of quotes that have been purposely decontextualised, or are completely made up.[42] A similar post that was widely shared on Facebook misinterpreted the election programme of the Green party, including false claims that the Greens are seeking to outlaw meat consumption.[43]

Omission of contextual information

A closely related behaviour was the omission of contextual information, where the initial claim did have some basis in reality, but was described in a way that could mislead the audience. This type of behaviour was observed for example when news broke around isolated issues at poll stations, such as initially incomplete candidate lists, or the initial attribution of postal votes to the wrong municipality. Notably, this also included a claim made in an article by Russian state-controlled news site RT DE that the 2021 German election would see only four OSCE election observers, while the election in 2017 saw 59 observers. While this is factually correct, the article omits that the number of election observation teams for past German elections was of similar size, and that the large team in 2017 presents an outlier as the observation mission was accompanied by a larger group of representatives that attended in a symbolic capacity.[44]

Deception through manipulated content

The second most common behaviour after decontextualisation was deception through the creation of manipulated content. This type of content made similar claims as those highlighted above, but presented the claims in ways that would make the claim appear authoritative through manipulated media, mostly images. The most common way to make the claim appear more credible was the use of alleged screenshots that mimicked the look of a news website. Other techniques included the fabrication of screenshots of tweets or letters, manipulating the text of election posters, or references to non-existent press agencies. Notably, this type of content also included a photo montage of

Green party chancellor candidate Annalena Baerbock that claimed to show her posing in a nude photoshoot. The image was fabricated by superimposing the face of Baerbock on a photo of a Russian model.[45]

Outright fabrication

Another common behaviour observed was the outright fabrication of claims, which often referenced non-existent or completely false interpretations of source material such as interviews, court cases or statutes. This behaviour was observed a total of fourteen times in the dataset, and saw a variety of applications. Related social media posts or articles included, for example:

- False allegations that flood donation money was funnelled into the campaign funds of the CDU chancellor candidate Armin Laschet;[46]
- False claims that the federal election is not valid when participation is too low;[47]
- False claims that the Constitutional Court invalidated all elections since 1956;[48]

Satire

Lastly, six of the fact-checks concerned social media posts that were identified as satire likely intended to mislead the political opponent and hence ridicule those who would share the post in the belief that the claim made was true. Most of the satire targeted AfD supporters. For example, a Facebook page claiming to be campaigning for the AfD suggested its followers should sign their ballot paper to combat voter fraud.[49] Others shared an alleged AfD founding contract signed by then chancellor and CDU leader Angela Merkel.[50] A fabricated tweet attributed to SPD politician Karl Lauterbach that claimed high AfD turnout in the east of Germany must be fought by increasing the share of refugees housed there was also originally created by a satire page.[51]

While these posts may have been created by parody accounts or websites, the satirical nature of the claims made may not always be obvious to those sharing them - indeed, that may be the very intent of their authors. In this way, content that was initially created as satire may end up as a piece of misinformation circulating on social media.

Content

The content of the actual social media posts and articles containing dis- or misinformation varied widely, but all dis- or misinformation contained in the fact-check dataset targeted either the electoral process itself, or specific parties or politicians. While the election campaign in 2017 was found to be dominated by disinformation targeting refugees,[52] disinformation circulating during the 2021 election saw a more diverse set of targets, including the emergence of falsehoods questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process itself, alongside personal attacks on politicians as was observed previously in the context of conspiracy theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic.[53] The analysis below describes the most common targets of disinformation as observed in the fact-check dataset.

Targeting female Green politicians

Based on an analysis of the fact-check dataset, the most common target of dis- or misinformation circulating on social media in the run-up to the election were individual politicians. Politicians were identified as the main target in 35 of the 79 fact-checks reviewed.

Almost half of these (17) targeted politicians from the Green party, specifically Annalena Baerbock (14), Claudia Roth (2),[54,55] Katrin Göring-Eckert (1)[56] and Anton Hofreiter (1)[57]. Notably, the majority of dis- or misinformation attacked female politicians, emphasising their alleged incompetence or questioning their intelligence by attributing made-up statements to them. Often, the content sought to ridicule the Green politicians, such as a false quote suggesting the Green party leader thought fibre optic cables were needed to charge electric vehicles.[58] Another piece of disinformation that sought to not only question the intelligence of the Green party leader but also to insinuate
mal-intent claimed that Annalena Baerbock purposefully lied on her CV about her education.[59] Notably, this claim also received some coverage in established media outlets at the time.[60] Beyond attacks on her intelligence, some pieces of disinformation also generated significant outrage, such as a video falsely claiming to show Annalena Baerbock advocating for a legislation of sex with minors.[61]

Politicians of the CDU party were the second most common target (12 out of 35), with six pieces of dis- or misinformation targeting CDU leader Armin Laschet, followed by two targeting Angela Merkel, and one each targeting Julia Klöckner,[62] Friedrich Merz,[63] Erwin Rüddel[64] and Jens Spahn.[65] The content targeting Laschet was mostly associated with the flood disaster in West Germany, claiming his visit to the affected area was staged and misquoting his statements in a live interview.[66] Other content sought to make Laschet appear disingenuous and out of touch with the 'common people', such as a claim that he made people stand in the rain while he

himself was protected by an umbrella.[67] A more serious charge was levied against Laschet in a social media post, which claimed, without evidence, that donation funds for flood victims were misappropriated for his campaign.[68]

Politicians of the SPD party were only targeted three times, with false quotes used in a claim that the SPD leader Saskia Esken asked Germans to learn how to make do with less,[69] or a false quote attributed to SPD politician Aydan Özoğuz demanding an alleged "integration tax".[70] While the chancellor candidates of the Greens and CDU were the most targeted politicians, pieces of mis- or disinformation targeting the SPD chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz were noticeably absent from the dataset. To mention here is also that, while high-profile SPD politician Karl Lauterbach had become a key target of verbal attacks online during the COVID-19 pandemic, few pieces of dis-or misinformation targeting him in the specific context of the election emerged.[71]

Lastly, CSU leader Markus Söder was targeted by only one piece of disinformation, which falsely claimed he had used pandemic containment measures to hinder access to a referendum in Bavaria.[72]

These findings also mirror the assessment made by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue,[73] Democracy Reporting International,[74] and Avaaz,[75] which all found that Baerbock in particular was targeted by disinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech. More broadly, the analyses all highlight how disinformation, negative campaigning and outright hate speech are often intertwined, suggesting that disinformation is only part of a wider arsenal of strategies deployed to target politicians during election campaigns.

Targeting the validity of the election by claiming foul play

The second most common target of pieces of dis- or misinformation was the election itself, with 33% of all fact-checks analysed dedicated to such content. This included attacks on the integrity of the electoral process specifically, as well as broader claims around the validity of the election in the first place.

Many of these claims alleged electoral fraud through images or videos that purported to show manipulated ballot boxes.[76] Some of the alleged evidence used in false claims of electoral fraud originated in the US, such as a video showing US poll workers[77] or conspiracy theories targeting companies providing voting booth software, even though such voting booths do not exist in Germany.[78] Some of the content also alleged electoral fraud through postal votes, suggesting people may vote twice because postal voting slips were allegedly sent out automatically to households in many regions.[79] A glitch that saw the German public broadcaster air dummy election results two days prior to the election gave further credence to false claims that the results of the votes were predetermined.[80] The majority of these types of claims suggested that the entire electoral process would be manipulated to disadvantage the AfD party.

Beyond these specific attacks on the integrity of the electoral process itself, around a third of content targeting the election purported more wide-reaching conspiracy theories around the validity of the election. These types of content misinterpreted judgements by the Federal Constitutional Court concerning electoral law,[81] or misinterpreted the results of a mathematical analysis published in a study on electoral fraud.[82] One notable false claim targeting the election suggested that a low voter turnout would invalidate the election results.[83] Social media accounts sharing these types of disinformation frequently made reference to the occupation statute that is allegedly still in place in Germany, suggesting this disinformation is linked to the sovereign citizen movement described in more detail in the actor section. In contrast to the specific allegations of ballot box tampering or postal voter fraud, these broader conspiracies did not only question the validity of the election, but often sought to spread doubt around the legitimacy of the German state and its institutions more generally.

Targeting the Green party on- and offline

Parties were the least common primary target of dis- and misinformation content, making up only 18 of all 79 fact-checks in the dataset. To note here is that, while the claims falling under this category primarily focused on the party overall, many of the associated social media posts used images of the party leaders to illustrate their claim. Here, again, the Green party was the most common target, with fourteen of the 18 pieces of mis- or disinformation containing falsehoods about the election programme, political ambitions or actions of the party. Among the most common false claims were alleged demands by the Greens to outlaw private barbeques, meat consumption and car trips.[84,85] These types of claims were also central to an offline campaign targeting the Green party, with over 3,500 billboards rented across Germany spreading disinformation about the electoral programme of the Green party and promoting the hashtag #GrünerMist ('green crap').[86]

Some content on social media also alleged the Greens lacked economic competence by suggesting the election programme miscalculated energy consumption needs.[87] Other pieces of disinformation accused the party of hypocrisy, suggesting the Greens violated pandemic containment measures,[88] while others used fake quotes from made-up Green politicians[89] or old tweets from an ex-Green party member to accuse the party of "anti-German" sentiment.[90]

Notably, the only piece of disinformation targeting the SPD in the fact-check dataset also attacked the Green party. The article in question suggested that there was a secret deal between the SPD and the Greens that would see the more left-leaning SPD leader Saskia Esken replace the more centrist SPD chancellor candidate Olaf Scholz after the election.[91] AfD and CDU were only targeted once through satirical content that manipulated the text of election posters.[92,93]

Distribution

In order to gauge the main distribution channels for disinformation, the most common social media platforms on which pieces of dis- or misinformation were shared, based on the fact-check dataset, were assessed. A total of 177 individual social media posts were identified via the fact-check dataset and subsequent research, corresponding to a total of 79 different pieces of disinformation.

The majority of social media posts containing disinformation were shared on Facebook (122), followed by Telegram (36), X (18) and YouTube (1). To note here is that the fact-check dataset only included social media posts from Facebook, X and Telegram. This does not mean that less disinformation was shared on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok or other social media platforms, but rather that the fact-checking teams did not focus on these platforms when sourcing evidence of disinformation campaigns. Additionally, the high number of social media posts found on Facebook may be the result of the partnership between Meta and the fact-checking organisation Correctiv. Notably, it was not possible to explore the impact of platform recommendation systems on the spread of disinformation due to limited data availability. Please consult the comparative section of this report for a short literature review on the issue of algorithmic amplification of harmful content.

Falsehoods on Facebook mainly targeted parties, but majority with warning label

On Facebook, a total of 71 different types of dis- or misinformation were shared, with the average post containing disinformation being shared 931 times (median 264). In general, disinformation that targeted parties were most widely shared (mean 1655 shares, median 697) followed by disinformation that targeted politicians (mean 1058, median 404). Posts targeting the validity of the election more generally were least shared on Facebook (mean 185, median 6). Overall, posts containing disinformation targeting politicians were shared 33,857 times, posts targeting parties were shared 28,136 times and posts targeting the validity of the election were shared 4,075 times.

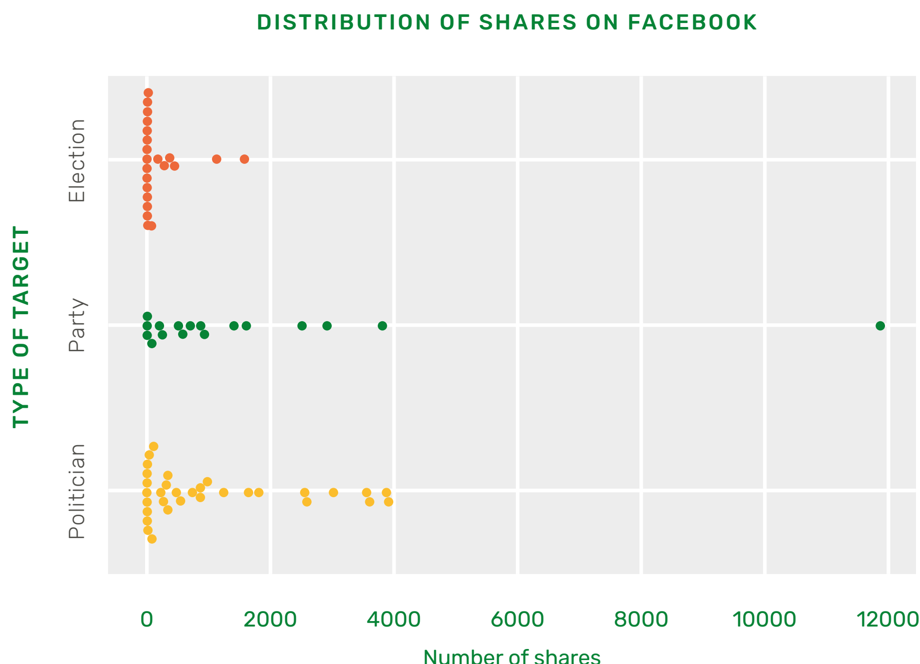


Figure 1. Distribution of number of shares for each piece of disinformation on Facebook targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.

The most widely shared piece of disinformation alleged that Germany has the lowest average income and pension across all of Europe.[94] These posts usually blamed the ruling coalition made up of the SPD and CDU/CSU at the time, and were shared a total of 11,835 times.

Figure 2. Screenshot of post on Facebook claiming Germany has the lowest average income and pension payments in all of Europe. Text overlay by fact-check organisation reads: "Does Germany have the lowest average income? FALSE". Source: AFP Deutschland.

Out of all 122 posts containing disinformation, a total of 54 were no longer available at the time of analysis, either because the original account deleted the post or Facebook removed the post or account. 48 posts were still available, albeit labelled with a fact-checking notification highlighting that the post contained disinformation. A total of 20 posts were still available without a warning label.

Falsehoods on Telegram mainly targeted the validity of the elections, viewed over one million times

On Telegram, a total of 21 different types of dis- or misinformation were shared, with the average post containing disinformation being viewed 100,590 times (median 76,200). In general, disinformation targeting the validity of the election was viewed most widely (average 114,883 views, median 86,700). Politicians were targeted by eight different types of disinformation, receiving on average 61,562 views (mean 61,500). Only one post targeting a party was shared, which suggested that the Greens were planning to prohibit the use of cars for private use. This post alone received a total of 241,300 views. Overall, disinformation targeting the validity of the election was viewed 1,378,600 times and posts targeting politicians 492,496 times.

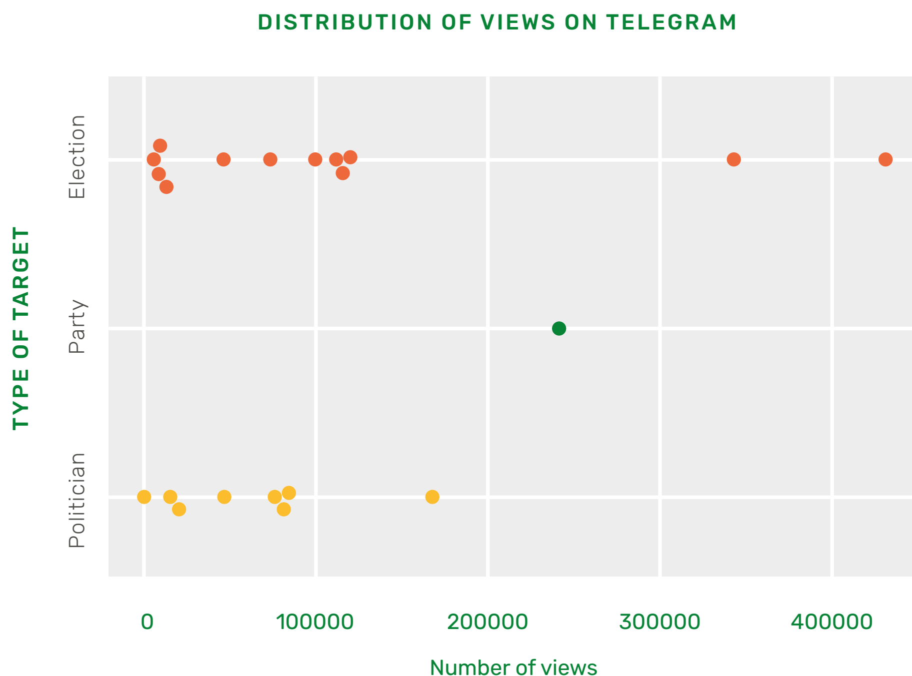


Figure 3. Distribution of number of views for each piece of disinformation on Telegram targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.

The most widely viewed piece of information alleged that ballot boxes without a lock were evidence of ongoing election fraud.[95] Posts containing this type of disinformation were viewed 431,000 times alone.

Figure 4. Three images used to make false claims about manipulated ballot boxes. Source: Correctiv.

Out of all 36 individual posts on Telegram, 10 were no longer available at the time of analysis, either because the post was deleted by the account or the account had changed its visibility setting.

Falsehoods on X mainly targeted politicians, but overall low prevalence in dataset

On X, a total of 14 different types of dis- or misinformation were shared, with the average post containing disinformation being shared 516 times (median 254). The only types of disinformation shared on X, based on the fact-check dataset, targeted either the validity of the election or individual politicians. In general, disinformation targeting politicians was shared most widely (average 716 shares, mean 458), while posts targeting the election were only shared 250 times on average (mean 208). Overall, posts containing disinformation targeting politicians were shared 5,727 times. Posts targeting the validity of the election received a total of 1,501 shares. The most widely shared individual post attacked CDU politician Julia Klöckner for allegedly transporting an e-car to election campaign events in a diesel transporter.[96]

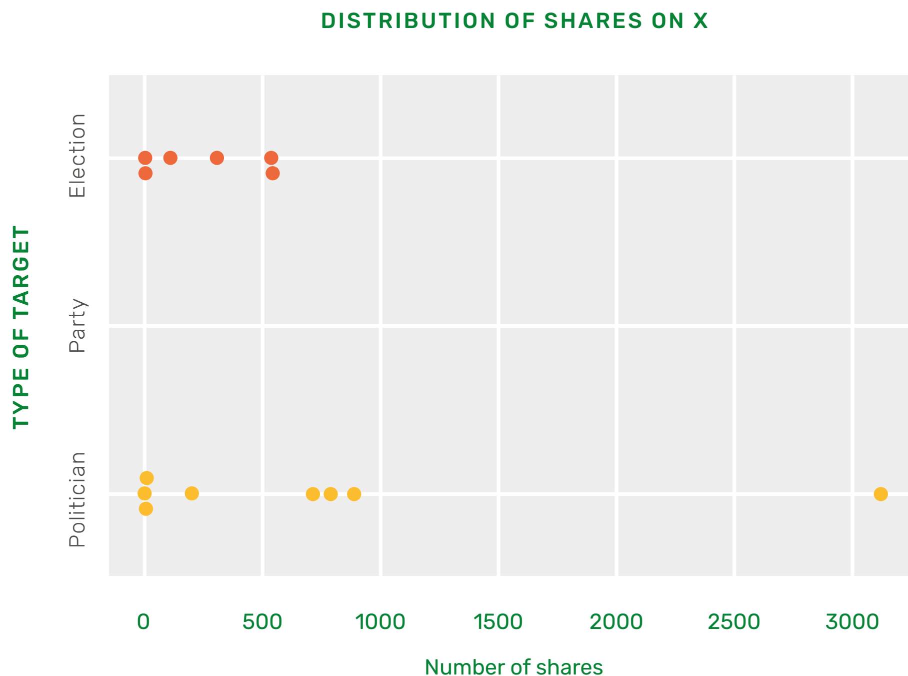


Figure 5. Distribution of number of shares for each piece of disinformation on X targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.

Out of all 18 posts, only seven were still available at the time of analysis, while 11 were either removed by the original account or X. Notably, none of the tweets containing disinformation that were still available contained a fact-checking label at the time of analysis.

Figure 6. *Screenshot of X post making false claim about CDU politician Julia Klöckner. Post text reads: "Julia #Klöckner has her electric campaign car driven to the appearance with the diesel truck and that is a nice symbol of the climate protection ambitions of the #CDU." Source: Screenshot by authors, 29 January 2024.*

Effect

The effect of disinformation on the outcome of the election, or attitudes towards political parties and processes more generally, cannot be ascertained from social media data alone. However, polling data can provide an initial understanding of the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs in German society, trust in the news media more generally, and their relation to party preference.

In this regard, a representative survey conducted by the Centre for Monitoring, Analysis and Strategy (CeMAS), found that, between April 2022 and October 2022, the share of the population subscribing to pro-Russian conspiracy narratives regarding the war in Ukraine increased by up to 7%.[97] Notably, those voting for the far-right AfD were most susceptible to pro-Russian disinformation narratives, with almost half of all AfD voters surveyed agreeing that Ukraine has, historically speaking, no right to any territorial claim and belongs to Russia.[98] In a similar vein, a survey by INSA published prior to the election in 2021 indicated that up to 18% of voters feared "widespread voter fraud", with that share going up to 67% among AfD voters.[99] The rise in pro-Russian conspiracy beliefs and disinformation targeting the election's integrity occurs during a period when mistrust in journalism and the news media more generally is becoming a growing concern in Germany. Based on annual representative surveys conducted as part of the Reuters Digital News Report, 'trust in news' has seen a steady decline in Germany, from 60% in 2015 down to 41% in 2023.[100] At the same time, concerns about the negative effect of disinformation have only increased among Germans since 2021, with 64% of those responding to a 2023 survey by the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation voicing significant fears about the impact of "false information" on society.[101]

Aside from gauging the correlation between disinformation beliefs, party preference and trust in institutions, another important but often less discussed effect of disinformation campaigns is political participation more generally. Concerns around how disinformation affects the intended target audience, namely voters, are high in Germany. Yet, the analysis above, alongside previous studies, has shown how female politicians in particular are targeted by disinformation and online harassment more generally. The disproportionate targeting of women, the LGBTQ+ community or immigrants, in turn, may affect the willingness of those members of society to run for public office, or participate in politics more generally - a consequence of disinformation that is likely intended by those spreading it. Similar dynamics have previously been discussed in regard to willingness to run for local public office, where hate campaigns and personal attacks online, often orchestrated by far-right groups, are part of a wider campaign to undermine democracy itself.[102]

Out of all 18 posts, only seven were still available at the time of analysis, while 11 were either removed by the original account or X. Notably, none of the tweets containing disinformation that were still available contained a fact-checking label at the time of analysis.

Case Study: 2023 Spanish General Election

The 2023 Spanish general election took place on 23 July 2023. This election came as a surprise, following the dissolution of the Spanish parliament triggered by the government in response to the left-wing coalition's poor performance in the May 2023 regional and local elections.[103] The decision by then prime minister Pedro Sanchéz to call an early election soon became subject of controversy, with some social media users accusing Sánchez of purposefully scheduling the election during the summer holidays to minimise in-person turnout and encourage postal voting - the later of which would become a key target of disinformation campaigns alleging a "pucherazo".[104]

Originally, the election was planned for December 2023,[105] which would have made Spain one of the first countries in the EU to run an election with the requirements of the Digital Services Act partially in place for Very Large Online Platforms. Instead, the election took place two days before the DSA started to apply for VLOPs. The Spanish election could therefore serve as a 'dress rehearsal' for social media platforms and their readiness for the upcoming new major regulation.

This case study offers an insight into the spread of disinformation on social media platforms surrounding the 2023 Spanish general election. It examines a sample of fact-checks from three of Spain's main fact-checking organisations, combined with a novel dataset of social media posts containing election-related falsehoods found on platforms like X, Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The analysis delves into the key actors, patterns of behaviour, nature of the content, and dissemination methods of these disinformation campaigns targeting the election.

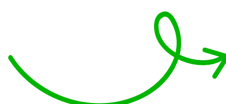
Fact-check datasets

Just like in Germany, dedicated fact-checking arms have become key to the work of many newsrooms in Spain, including news agencies. Some of the most prominent ones, such as AFP España, EFE Verifica and Maldita.es have entered into agreements with social media companies like Meta to check social media posts for disinformation, which are then labelled accordingly on the platform. Other initiatives include the creation of informative social media content that is prominently displayed to users in a dedicated electoral information centre on TikTok.[106]

In total, 55 fact-checks about election-related disinformation were published by AFP,[107] EFE Verifica[108] and Maldita.es.[109] After reviewing each fact-check, it was discovered that approximately every tenth fact-check covered the same piece of disinformation, leaving 49 unique fact-checks in total. The analysis below is based on all these fact-checks and disinformation debunked by them, including a sample of the most popular social media posts that contained the false information in response to which each fact-check was written.

55

Fact-checks about election-related disinformation were published by



- AFP
- EFE Verifica
- Maldita.es

Actors

Just as described in the case study on Germany, attributing specific disinformation campaigns to particular actors can be challenging due to their frequent efforts to conceal their involvement. However, analysing the fact-checks conducted by AFP, EFE, and Maldita.es sheds light on which social media accounts disseminated the false information, and hence allows for the identification of recurring actors or types of users involved in spreading disinformation.

Smaller private social media accounts with and without clear political leaning

Most of the disinformation shared on social media was, at some point, shared by private accounts that, while posting publicly, cannot be directly linked to any specific organisation, party or government. Many of these users frequently shared political content through their social media accounts, often on X, and some had also amassed thousands of followers. On Facebook, many of these accounts shared disinformation in self-described 'patriotic' groups. Others were smaller accounts that only intermittently shared overtly political content. The latter type of users were mainly found on Facebook, with their posts often receiving little engagement.

A related type of actor sharing disinformation on social media were accounts that explicitly and publicly communicated their political leaning through symbols, keywords or phrases in their profile description. These users, commonly found on X, often described themselves as 'anti-communists', 'patriots' or 'anti-feminists', many of whom also identified as supporters of the far-right VOX party. A smaller subsection of these accounts described themselves as anti-fascist and mainly shared pro-left content, although these accounts were in the minority.

Right-wing social media influencers, "agitators of the extreme right" and conspiracy theorists

Besides private or smaller social media accounts, the most common actors sharing disinformation on social media were individual users with significant numbers of followers that variously described themselves as 'influencers', 'journalists', 'authors', 'activists' and 'lawyers'. The majority of these users were active on X, followed by Telegram and YouTube, with some amassing up to half a million followers on their social media profiles. Notably, some users appear to have previously been banned from X and had only recently been allowed to re-activate their accounts there, with one account thanking Elon Musk for restoring his 'freedom of expression'. Many of these accounts now also featured a blue checkmark, indicating they had subscribed to X Premium to further increase their reach on the platform.

Other actors frequently sharing disinformation had previously been described as 'agitators of the extreme right'[110] or were arrested by the police at a demonstration at the headquarters of the Socialist PSOE party.[111] One actor had previously been found guilty of spreading false information on social media about former Madrid major Manuela Carmena[112] and journalist Ana Pastor,[113] violating their 'right to honour', while another has been described as the head of the conspiracy movement in Spain ("el jefe de la conspiración en España") sharing, among others, pro-Kremlin propaganda.[114] Many of these actors reshared images, screenshots or texts produced by one another to further substantiate their claims and reach a wider audience.

Blue checkmark accounts on X posing as news outlets

A third type of actor frequently observed spreading election-related disinformation on social media were accounts on X posing as legitimate news outlets. These accounts all had purchased X Premium at the time of analysis, and therefore featured a blue checkmark next to their account name - a symbol previously reserved for verified celebrities, journalists or news outlets. The blue checkmark used to signal to users that the account is an authoritative source, but now that it can be purchased may exacerbate the spread of disinformation.[115] These accounts variously described themselves as "independent newspapers" sharing 'politically incorrect' news covering "business, politics and social" and featuring "minute-by-minute" coverage of the "most important elections". Besides frequently sharing disinformation, some of these accounts also generated a large amount of content attacking female politicians, journalists and feminists. These accounts have amassed a significant following, ranging from 60,000 up to more than 700,000 followers per account on X. All these actors were also present on other social media platforms such as YouTube and Telegram, albeit with less followers.

Politicians

Lastly, a less prominent but still frequent type of actor found to share election-related mis- or disinformation were party leaders, policy advisers and regional party delegates. All of these actors except for one can be linked to the right of the political spectrum, including the youth organisation of the conservative People's Party, the far-right Vox party or the right-wing extremist National Democracy Party.[116] The only politician found to share election-related falsehoods from the left of the political spectrum, based on fact-check dataset, was a member of congress of the Socialists' Party of Catalonia. For all of these actors, and in particular for the latter, however, it is unclear whether they were aware that the information they shared was false, and hence an active intent to disinform cannot be ascertained.

Foreign state controlled media mainly focusing on Latin America, but Spanish website still available in the EU

None of the fact-checks in the dataset included claims that could be directly attributed to RT or any other foreign state-controlled media. RT did provide election coverage on their Spanish-language website, and the Russian state-controlled news network Sputnik published an article calling Pedro Sanchez an autocrat.[117] However, the Spanish-language outlet of RT, RT en español, is primarily focused on, and consumed by, Latin American audiences - especially since the EU sanctions against RT after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has blocked RT broadcasts in the European Union. Data from web analytics company SimilarWeb covering the months of September to November 2023 estimates that the top five countries accessing the Spanish-language RT website are Paraguay, Mexico, Ecuador, Guatemala and Colombia, making up approximately 80% of all traffic to the website. Unlike the German- and English-language online editions of RT, however, the Spanish-lanuage RT websites *actualidad.rt.com* and *actualidad-rt.com* were still accessible within the European Union at the time of analysis.

Behaviour

To gain a better understanding of how election-related disinformation attempts were put in practice, all fact-checks and associated social media posts were categorised according to the type of behaviour observed. Just like for the German case study, a slight variation on the taxonomy proposed by Claire Wardle was used.[118]

De-contextualising images or videos and misrepresenting figures

Just as observed for the German federal elections, the majority of mis- or disinformation shared on social media de-contextualised real images or videos, and used them to make claims that had no basis in truth. One common observation of this behaviour was the use of photos of ballot papers that did not include Vox candidates to claim voter fraud, when in reality Vox did not run in those constituencies. The most widely viewed falsehood in this category targeted the Green Más Madrid party, alleging a photo of a trash-filled plaza showed the aftermath of a party campaign event, when really the photo was taken after a crowd of Scottish football fans visited Madrid.[119] Other very common behaviours were the misrepresentation of figures or decontextualisation of statistics to falsely claim millions of votes had gone missing[120] or that there was a suspicious increase in votes by Spanish citizens living abroad.[121]

Omission of contextual information

A related but less frequently observed behaviour was the omission of contextual information, where the claim made may have had some basis in truth, but important caveats were missing so that the conclusions drawn were false. These types of claims included the distribution of a campaigning leaflet by the PP in Arabic, which was real but wrongly described as the official electoral programme.[122] Another claim targeting the PP wrongly suggested that the party was proposing to increase the retirement age for the entire population to 72, while in reality the PP had only proposed a voluntary delay of retirement for the primary care sector.[123]

In general, however, the distinction between behaviours of de-contextualisation and omission of important contextual information is not clearcut. What can be ascertained from the analysis, however, is that almost half of all pieces of election-related disinformation were the result of either of the two behaviours.

Outright fabrication, sometimes supported by manipulated media

The second most common behaviour observed was the outright fabrication of claims, such as a completely made-up story of 1,600 immigrants registered in a flat in Barcelona to cast illegal votes,[124] claims that Sumar candidate Yolanda Díaz had called for the removal of the border between Ceuta and Melilla,[125] or the falsehood that PSOE candidate Sánchez had requested to be interviewed on a tv programme without an audience.[126] Notably, the majority of these claims did not use any type of evidence to back up their claims. The few pieces of disinformation that did make use of manipulated media were:

- A hoax video from Mexico purporting to show that the ink used in voting booths can be erased by heat[127]
- A photo montage showing PP candidate Feijóo having a drink with drug trafficker Marcial Dorado[128]
- A manipulated video purporting to show a club in Madrid playing the fascist anthem 'Cara al Sol'.[129]

Notably, however, two of these pieces of disinformation using manipulated media were also the most shared on social media (see distribution section below).[130]

Fabrication of media to impersonate credible sources or political opponents

A less frequently observed behaviour was the manipulation of mainly photos to mislead viewers into believing that a completely fabricated claim was backed up by credible sources. These pieces of disinformation included:

- A fake banner allegedly displayed on the façade of the PSOE headquarters;[131]
- A photo montage of an PSOE election poster with the image of Basque separatist Arnaldo Otegi;[132]
- A fabricated image purporting to show a tweet by Podemos politician Irene Montero;[133]
- A faked screenshot of an alleged El Mundo article;[134]
- A manipulated image of the election results with the logo of Indra, the company distributing provisional election results;[135]
- False ballot papers shared with the intent to get Podemos supporters to inadvertently invalidate their own votes (see content section);[136]

Figure 7. Screenshot of X fake El Mundo article shared on X. Text overlay by fact-cecking organisation reads: "El Mundo published an article about the echo in Morocco of a proposal by the Spanish Yolanda Díaz? FALSE". Source: AFP España.

Satire

Just like in Germany, a common type of mis- or disinformation shared was originally meant as satire or parody. The most widely viewed falsehood of this type was meant to parody the Vox party. A well-known author and professor joked on X that Vox would hire a bishop to restore a Francoist censorship office. While the original author later clarified that he was joking, the original post was shared and viewed widely.[137] Other types of election-related falsehoods originally meant as satire circulating on social media were:

- A manipulated video from a satire tv programme in which PP candidate Feijóo mistakenly quotes Lincoln;[138]
- A tweet purporting to announce that Podemos was proposing to allow masturbation at work to improve mental health[139]
- A fake campaign poster in which former liberal Citizens party leader Rivera announces he is running for the new party of former Vox deputy Macarena Olona[140]
- A fictitious interview with former Spanish vice president and PSOE politician Alfonso Guerra published by El Mundo in 2018 criticising PSOE candidate Sánchez[141]

As already noted in the case study of Germany, even if the original intent that led to the creation of the image, video or post may have been to parody political opponents, the content nevertheless often ends up being consumed uncritically by social media audiences who are unaware of the satirical nature of the post. Additionally, it is sometimes difficult to ascertain if a piece of dis- or misinformation was originally created as a piece of satire, or whether satire is later claimed by actors to avoid responsibility.

Content

Although the content of the social media posts containing mis- or disinformation varied widely, the majority of posts contained falsehoods that sought to undermine the legitimacy of the elections, attacked specific parties, or targeted individual politicians.

Targeting the validity of the elections by alleging 'pucherazo' through postal, CERA and migrant votes

Based on the fact-check dataset containing 49 different pieces of election-related mis- or disinformation, half of all falsehoods circulating on social media targeted the validity of the election itself. One widely shared claim alleged that the temporary suspension of trains due to a fire on tracks into Valencia was an attempt by the government to suppress voter turnout on election day.[142]

However, the most common type of disinformation circulated well before election day, and almost immediately after the snap election was announced. The key claim: that voting by mail, which many Spanish citizens would likely opt for given the election day coincided with the summer holidays, would invite widespread voter fraud. A wide array of alleged evidence was presented on social media in support of this claim. For example, 354 envelopes of electoral advertisements for the People's Party found discarded at a construction site in Badajoz were wrongfully described as undelivered postal votes.[143] Other posts showed an old video from 2015 in which a batch of mail-in ballots are delivered to a post office in Melilla and an altercation over identification checks ensues, claiming that this was evidence of a 'vote bump' through unauthorised mail-in ballots in the 2023 election.[144] Another video widely shared on social media produced incorrect statistics on mail-in ballots requested and mail-in ballots delivered to wrongfully allege that a large share of mail-in votes for the Vox party in Madrid were not counted.[145] Other posts alleged that missing Vox candidates on ballot papers was evidence of a 'pucherazo' - when in reality no Vox candidate was registered in those specific constituencies.[146, 147]

Another common claim of voter fraud rested on misinterpretations of the ballots requested and votes cast by Spanish nationals living abroad (CERA). Many social media users wrongly claimed that millions of votes had gone missing, when in truth the CERA votes had not yet been counted and were responsible for differences in votes cast and votes reported.[148] Another strand of voter fraud claims based on the votes cast by Spanish nationals living abroad alleged that there had been a large increase in CERA votes. However, this increase was not due to actual votes cast but electoral documentation sent to permanent residents abroad. The increase in figures compared to 2019 is due to a change in law, which now means documentation is sent out automatically to potential CERA voters and no longer needs to be individually requested by those living abroad.[149]

This latter claim was closely related to mis-or disinformation shared on social media that alleged the government was preparing to naturalise immigrants living in Spain on a 'massive' scale prior to the election. A similar hoax circulating on WhatsApp alleged that 1,600 North African immigrants were registered in a flat in Barcelona to vote and receive welfare benefits.[150] Both these claims were shared widely, particularly by self-proclaimed Vox supporters, and are part of the wider far-right conspiracy theory of 'elites' across the globe orchestrating a 'great replacement' of white European populations with immigrants to maintain political power.[151]

Targeting left-wing parties

The second most common target of election-related mis- or disinformation were individual parties, with the PSOE being most commonly targeted, followed by Sumar/Podemos, and the PP.

Some of the most widely viewed disinformation alleged collusion between the IT company Indra and the ruling PSOE party to rig the election, with users claiming that the government had contracted Indra to count the votes - when really, Indra would only disseminate provisional results with no legal validity.[152] Notably, a subset of the disinformation shared also sought to exploit pre-existing tensions within the left block. Podemos supporters, for example, were targeted by disinformation that tried to motivate supporters of former minister and Podemos politician Irene Montero to write her name on the Sumar ballot.[153] This piece of disinformation was shared by Vox affiliates purporting to be Podemos supporters, with the likely intent to cause Sumar supporters to inadvertently invalidate their vote.

Other types of disinformation appealed to xenophobia and racism, targeting parties by alleging they had abandoned 'native' Spanish voters. Some of these

claims alleged voter fraud, such as a post shared widely on Telegram and X that wrongfully claimed that a photo of NGO volunteers offloading food from a truck showed people queuing to sell their vote at PSOE headquarters in Cuenca.[154] Others shared a video of an event by the Movement for Dignity and Citizenship (MDyC) in Ceuta, during which a municipal candidate list with Arabic names is read aloud. Social media users wrongfully claimed the event was organised by Sumar, electing its candidates for the Spanish general election.[155] The People's Party was targeted by a similar type of disinformation, which saw the circulation of an alleged PP electoral programme in Arabic and suggested the party was campaigning for immigrant votes, abandoning 'native' Spanish voters. The leaflet in fact is only a PP campaign leaflet, not the official electoral programme, and has been published in multiple languages to cater to the diverse population of the target constituency, the capital of the Canary Islands.[156]

Targeting progressive politicians

Other widely observed targets of election-related mis- or disinformation were individual politicians. The majority of falsehoods targeted politicians on the left, namely Prime Minister and PSOE candidate Pedro Sánchez, and Sumar candidate Yolanda Díaz.

For the former, some of the most widely viewed and shared falsehoods alleged Sánchez had requested to be interviewed for the popular television programme 'El Hormiguero' without an audience to avoid being booed - a claim with no evidence, and that was immediately denied by the programme directors.[157] Other common falsehoods claimed Sánchez had admitted he had called for an early election for his own political gain.[158] His colleague, Minister of the Green Transition Teresa Ribera, was similarly accused of hypocrisy by falsely claiming she took a domestic flight to an EU meeting. For Díaz, disinformation mainly used fearmongering against immigrants, as commonly observed for disinformation targeting parties. Some of the most widely shared disinformation wrongly alleged that Díaz had said "illegal immigrants" would receive a one-off payment of 20,000 EUR,[159] and that she had announced a plan to remove the border between Ceuta and Melilla.[160]

The PP candidate Alberto Núñez Feijóo was also targeted with falsehoods on social media, which used a manipulated image to make it look like the PP candidate was having a drink with drug trafficker Marcial Dorado while on holiday, and a manipulated video, originally produced for a satirical tv programme, in which he appears to misquote Abraham Lincoln.[161]

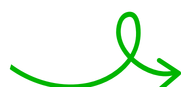
Distribution

The primary distribution channels for spreading disinformation were analysed by reconstructing the social media footprint of fact-checked disinformation, revealing 178 social media posts for 49 distinct pieces of dis- or misinformation posted on seven different social media platforms.

X was the most prevalent platform for these disinformation posts, with 74 instances, followed by Facebook with 58, TikTok with 21, Telegram with 13, Instagram with 7 and YouTube with 4. Only a single reference was found that indicated a piece of disinformation was shared on WhatsApp, although crowdsourced research by Avaaz has shown the significant role the messenger service played in the distribution of disinformation in the run-up to previous Spanish elections.[162]

An important caveat is that the distribution described in this section is not representative of all election-related disinformation shared on social media, but rather shows where the fact-checkers from AFP, EFE and Maldita.es and the researchers of this report discovered disinformation. A second caveat is that the role of platform recommendation systems in the distribution of disinformation could not be investigated based on the available data. However, a discussion of secondary literature on the issue of algorithmic amplification can be found in the comparative section below.

X was the most prevalent platform for disinformation posts



Falsehoods on X mainly targeted politicians and immigrants, mostly without warning label

On X, a total of 38 different types of dis- or misinformation were shared, with the average post containing disinformation being viewed 338,428 times (median 58,200) and shared 1,508 times (median 533). In general, disinformation that targeted politicians was most widely viewed (mean 315,008, median 125,300), followed by disinformation that targeted parties (mean 253,138, median 77,600). Posts targeting the validity of the election more generally were least viewed on X (mean 84,881, median 9,876). Overall, posts containing disinformation targeting politicians were viewed 2,835,070 times, posts targeting parties were viewed 2,278,241 and posts targeting the validity of the election were viewed 1,612,744 times.

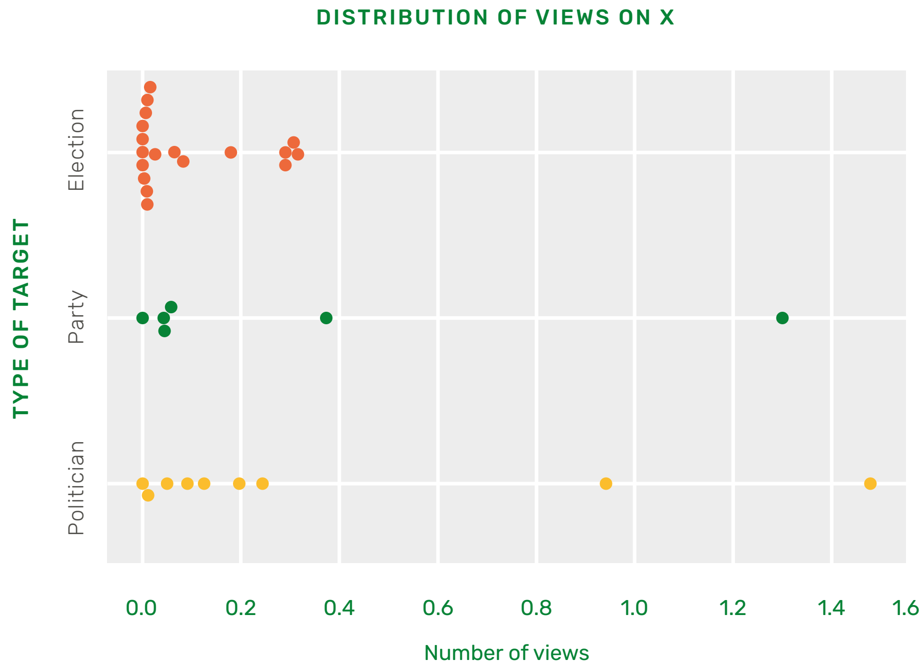


Figure 8. Distribution of number of views for each piece of dis- or misinformation on X targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.

However, the most widely shared falsehood was not directly related to the election, but targeted immigrants more generally. A variety of posts, which were also found on Facebook, wrongfully suggested that the killer of a shopkeeper in Madrid was an immigrant. The falsehood was shared a total of 11,572 times on X, amassing a total of 6,472,100 views. The most widely shared and viewed post was from Vox party leader Santiago Abascal, who shared a now removed post from a news portal that claimed the killer was North African. He later acknowledged his mistake,[163] but the post was still available without correction at the time of analysis.

Figure 9. Screenshot of X post by Santiago Abascal, leader of the Vox party. Text post reads: "Neither Sánchez nor his vice president will remember this woman. There will be no minutes of silence, no covers, no special programs... Only VOX remembers that there are Spaniards who are suffering from the immigration nonsense endorsed by all parties." Source: Screenshot by authors, 29 January 2024.

Out of all 74 posts containing disinformation, a total of 8 were no longer available at the time of analysis, either because the original account deleted the post, X removed the post or the account itself was deleted. Four posts were still available, albeit labelled with a notification highlighting added context provided by readers fact-checking the claim made. The remaining 62 posts containing disinformation were still available, without warning labels.

Falsehoods on Facebook mainly targeted politicians, but mostly with warning label

On Facebook, a total of 29 different pieces of dis- or misinformation were shared, with the average post containing disinformation being shared 898 times (median 6). On simple average, disinformation that targeted politicians was most widely shared (mean 2,718, median 7 shares), followed by disinformation targeting the election (mean 92, median 3), and disinformation targeting parties (mean 81, median 11). Overall, posts containing disinformation targeting politicians were shared 24,464 times, posts targeting the validity of the election were shared 919 times and posts targeting parties were shared 644 times.

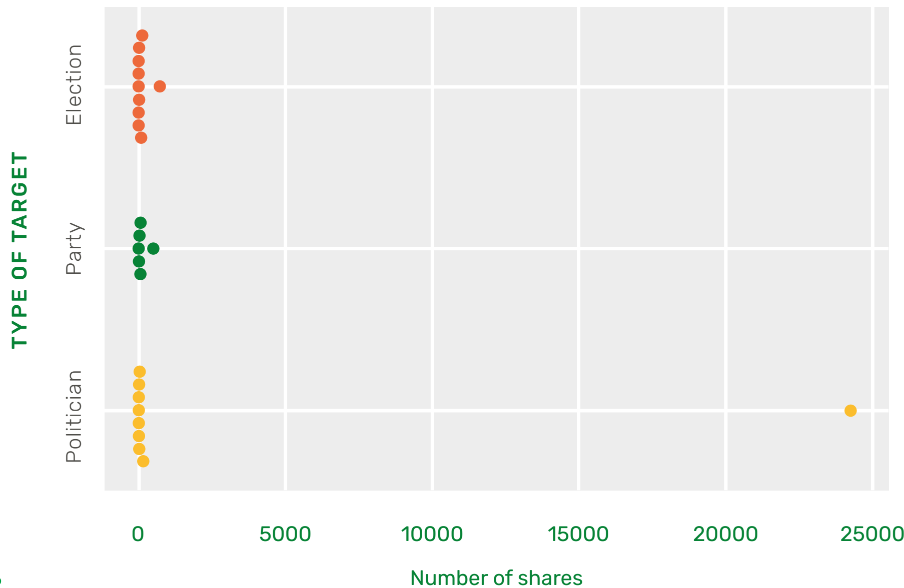


Figure 10. Distribution of number of shares for each piece of dis- or misinformation on Facebook targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.

The most widely shared piece of disinformation was a manipulated photo that purported to show the conservative Partido Popular candidate Alberto Núñez Feijóo having a drink with drug trafficker Marcial Dorado. The manipulated image, usually posted in combination with real images showing Feijóo and Dorado together,[164] was shared 24,252 times on Facebook.

Out of all 58 posts containing disinformation, a total of 12 were no longer available at the time of analysis, either because the original account deleted the post, Facebook removed the post or the account itself was deleted. 39 posts were still available, albeit with a warning label notifying the viewer that the claim had been debunked by fact-checkers. The remaining 7 posts containing disinformation were still available, without warning labels.

Figure 11. Screenshot of Facebook post containing manipulated image of Partido Popular candidate Alberto Núñez Feijóo. Text overlay by fact-checking organisation reads: "The Popular Party candidate and a Galician smuggler took these three images? MISLEADING." Source: AFP España.

Falsehoods on TikTok mainly targeted the election, but overall low prevalence of TikTok posts in dataset

On TikTok, a total of 19 different pieces of dis- misinformation were shared, with the average clip being shared 487 times (median 65). In general, disinformation that targeted the election was most widely shared (mean 542, median 294) followed by disinformation targeting parties (mean 169, median 144), and disinformation targeting politicians (mean 31, median 2). Overall, clips containing disinformation targeting the validity of the election were shared 6504 times, clips containing disinformation targeting parties were shared 506 times, and clips containing disinformation targeting individual politicians were shared 93 times.

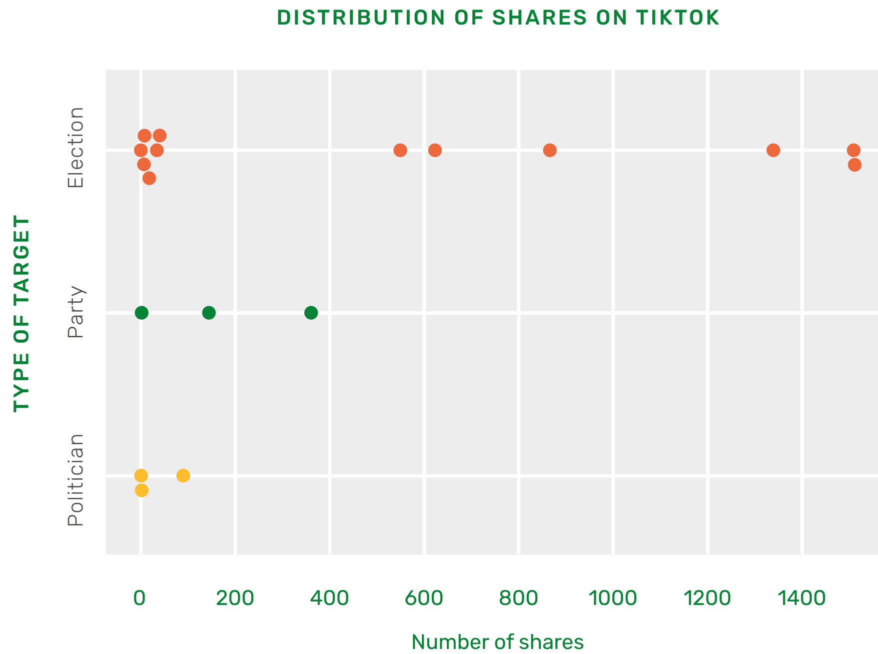


Figure 12. Distribution of number of shares for each piece of dis- or misinformation on TikTok targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.

The most popular piece of disinformation was not directly related to the election, but instead purported to show a club in Madrid playing 'Cara al Sol', one of the former national songs of the fascist Francoist regime.[165]

Out of all 21 TikTok clips in the dataset, six were no longer available at the time of analysis, while the remaining 15 were still available without warning labels.

Figure 13. Screenshot of TikTok video. The overlay text reads: "What seemed impossible, the Left has achieved: Cara al Sol is already playing in all the clubs in Madrid. In the image, Capital nightclub, in Madrid". Source: Maldita.es.

Falsehoods on Telegram mainly targeted the validity of the election, albeit dominated by a few but widely viewed posts

On Telegram, only 13 posts containing 8 different pieces of dis- or misinformation were identified in the dataset. The most viewed disinformation targeted the validity of the election (mean 134,250, median 85,500). Only two posts targeted parties, namely the socialist PSOE, being viewed 51,100 times on average. Only a single post in the dataset targeted a politician, namely Pedro Sánchez. In total, posts targeting the validity of the election were viewed 805,500 times, while posts targeting the PSOE were viewed 102,200 times.

The most viewed election-related disinformation on Telegram alleged that the number of Spanish voters living abroad had seen a suspicious increase in 2023 compared to the 2019 election, and this would invite widespread voter fraud.[166] All of the Telegram posts in the dataset were still publicly available at the time of analysis.

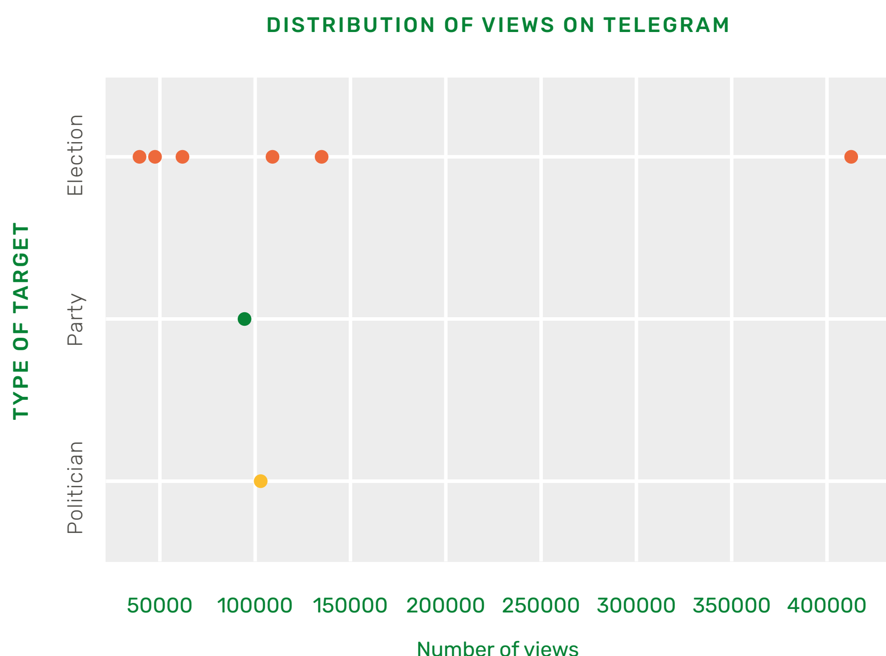


Figure 14. *Distribution of number of views for each piece of dis- or misinformation on Telegram targeting the election, a party or an individual politician.*

Falsehoods on Instagram and YouTube

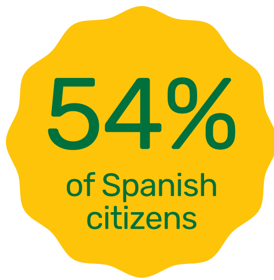
Dis- or misinformation on Instagram and YouTube was less common in the analysed dataset, although the majority of Instagram posts targeted politicians - in particular Pedro Sánchez and Yolanda Díaz. On Instagram, there was also evidence that disinformation was shared not just via regular posts but also via the story function. On YouTube, all four videos in the dataset targeted the validity of the election, and amassed 213,000 views in total. Notably, one of the videos was no longer available at the time of analysis, and the archived version included no information on the number of views. More generally, it was frequently found that YouTube videos were shared on other platforms such as X, Facebook or Telegram. As such, the significance of YouTube may be undercounted here as the same four YouTube videos were shared across multiple posts on other social media platforms.

Figure 15. *Compilation of screenshots of election-related falsehoods shared on Telegram. Text overlay by fact-checking organisation reads: "HOAX". Source: Maldita.es.*

Effect

Spanish authorities expressed a high level of concern about the impact of disinformation, particularly regarding disinformation campaigns seeking to undermine credibility of elections.[167] These concerns had already been voiced ahead of the regional elections in May 2023, and gained new momentum for the general election in August that year.[168] The analysis above confirms that disinformation about election manipulation was widely shared on social media during the election, and claims of a "pucherazo" reached more than 1.6 million of views on X alone. Mirroring the concerns of public authorities, Spanish society at large has also expressed concerns about the problem of disinformation. According to recent Eurobarometer data, 54 % of Spanish citizens said they were often or very often exposed to disinformation online, compared to 20% in Germany and 39% in Slovakia.[169]

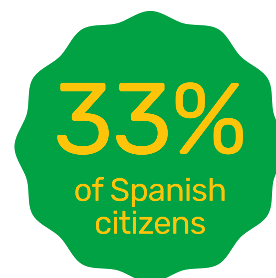
Disinformation about election manipulation was widely shared on social media during the election, and claims of a "pucherazo" reached more than 1.6 million of views on X alone.



said they were exposed to disinformation online

Spain's trust in the government and media is also among the lowest in the EU, with only 28% of Spanish citizens expressing trust in their government,[170] while trust in news media is nearly at the lowest it's been in years, with only 33% of Spanish citizens expressing 'trust in news' according to the 2023 Reuters Digital News Report.[171] The low trust in government and comparatively low trust in news media, paired with high concerns about disinformation, coincides with the findings of this study showing politicians and political parties were also regularly targeted by mis- and disinformation. For example, Pedro Sánchez was one of the most commonly targeted politicians online, with individual pieces of disinformation, like the alleged request to be interviewed without an audience for fear of being booed off stage, being viewed nearly 1.5 million times on X alone. In this climate, disinformation about individual politicians and their alleged collusion with journalists may serve to confirm pre-existing sentiments and further entrench widespread distrust of the political system and the media.

expressing trust in their government



expressing 'trust in news'

Case Study:
2023 Slovak Parliamentary Election

WARNING: This case study includes examples of hateful and offensive content. They do not represent the views of the authors.

The 2023 Slovak parliamentary snap elections were called amidst a profound political crisis experienced by Slovak society during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and a war in a neighbouring country. OĽANO (recently renamed to Slovakia), an anti-corruption movement led by Igor Matovič, surprisingly won the 2020 elections and formed a coalition with three other parties, establishing a government with a constitutional majority. However, the ruling of the government was often chaotic and marred by personal conflicts within the cabinet and ruling parties, which dominated public discourse. Declining parliamentary support prompted the formation of a new government in spring 2021 by the same parties, albeit with personnel changes. Despite this, personal conflicts persisted, leading to a minority government in the latter half of 2022. The decision for snap elections garnered bipartisan support, and after PM Eduard Heger's resignation in May 2023, President Zuzana Čaputová appointed an expert government, paving the way for snap elections in September 2023.

From February 2020 to September 2023, Slovak society underwent turbulent times with four different governments. Conflicts were notable among opposition parties during this period too. Former PM Peter Pellegrini decided to split from Róbert Fico's Smer, establishing a new social-democratic party called Hlas with other former Smer members. Internal conflicts within the far-right spectrum resulted in a group of politicians leaving the prominent far-right party Kotleba-ĽSNS and forming a new party named Republika, led by MEP Milan Uhrík and former MP Milan Mazurek. Slovakia faced further challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic due to low vaccination rates and a strong anti-vaccination movement supported by various political parties, including ĽSNS, Republika, and Smer.[172] In regard to the war in Ukraine the Slovak public was initially supportive of Ukraine, however the conflict later strongly polarised the society. In October 2022, Slovakia experienced its first terrorist attack by a far-right extremist linked to the accelerationism movement, targeting an LGBTQ+ bar in Bratislava. Despite calls for solidarity, researchers noted numerous hateful comments towards the LGBTQ+ community.[173] Opposition populist and far-right parties exploited divisive issues like LGBTQ+ rights to discredit political opponents, mainstream media, and civil society organisations.

The following case study provides an overview of election-related mis- and disinformation circulating on social media before and after the Slovak parliamentary election in 2023. Using fact-checks published by the three fact-checking organisations operating in Slovakia, as well as reports from other organisations focusing on disinformation and other online threats, this analysis offers insights into the threats of disinformation by categorising actors, behaviour, content, distribution, and effect.

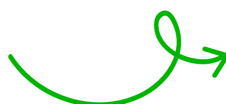
Fact-check datasets

In Slovakia, fact-checking organisations had dominantly focused on political debates. With increased impact of social media on public discourse, fact-checking of social media has become an integral part of fact-checking organisations' activities in recent years, whereas some of them collaborate with social media platforms. Among them, Agence France-Presse (AFP), and Demagog were the official fact-checking partners of Meta, whereas Meta started the collaboration with Demagog shortly before the elections.[174] Another organisation conducting fact-checks in Slovakia is Infosecurity.sk, which produced regular reports during the election campaign that included fact-checking as well as broader narrative analysis. As such, the fact-checks produced by these three organisations provide a useful source to gauge both the type and spread of disinformation campaigns in the context of the Slovak parliamentary election 2023.

In total, the two organisations published 23 fact-checks that were directly related to the election, whereas one fact-checked story was covered by both organisations. The analysis below is based on a sample of 22 fact-checks of the most popular social media posts that contained the false information, and reports of organisations focusing on disinformation such as Reset, Globsec or infosecurity.sk. Their reports were used to contextualise the threat analysis and to add additional information to the fact-checks, of which there is a much smaller number in comparison to Spain or Germany. Furthermore, reports also cover content that falls within a larger category of online threats such as hate speech or online harassment.

23

Fact-checks about election-related disinformation were published by



- AFP
- Demagog
- Infosecurity.sk

Actors

Based on the fact-checks dataset as well as other reports, domestic actors play a dominant role in distribution of mis- and disinformation in Slovakia. Slovakia has a large number of alternative media outlets, political interest communities, influencers and politicians that regularly spread false or misleading information.[175] Attribution to other international actors and application of FIMI remains a challenge, as there is only a very limited number of actors in Slovakia where the link to foreign countries such as Russia can be clearly established. From the international scene, actors from Czechia can easily enter and have an impact on the Slovak information ecosystem due to language proximity.

Political parties and politicians

In the sample of fact-checked posts, political parties and their candidates emerged as predominant actors, constituting half of all scrutinised posts. There are several political parties in Slovakia employing conspiracy theories, ad hominem attacks and/or disinformation. Notably, the party responsible for the highest number (4) of fact-checked posts was the far-right party Republika. Together with Kotleba-ĽSNS,[176] Republika articulates critical views of the EU[177] and NATO,[178] disseminating anti-governmental and anti-western narratives. While officially avoiding endorsement of the Russian invasion, members of these parties frequently propagate narratives aligned with Kremlin propaganda, particularly those reflecting anti-Ukrainian sentiments.[179] In terms of social media following, accounts associated with MEPs Milan Uhrík (171K) and Milan Mazurek (200K) surpass the official party page followers of Republika (17K). Reports from Reset indicate that the pre-election content of these accounts specifically targeted refugees and LGBTQ+ communities. While some content did not explicitly qualify as disinformation, these actors often exaggerated news about migrants and spread misleading information, resulting in hateful comments, including incitement to violence or hate based on protected characteristics (example below). Reports of Reset also show, that although Kotleba-ĽSNS and its party witnessed a decline in political relevance over the past year, they continued their hateful rhetoric during elections, particularly against migrants (Figure 20).

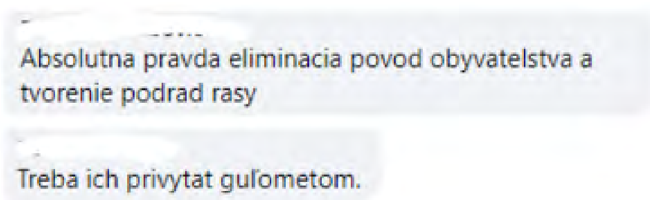


Figure 16. Example of hateful comments below the Republika´s video about migrants. Translation of the upper comment: Absolute truth, elimination of original citizens and creation of inferior race. Translation of the lower comment: We need to welcome them with a rifle. Source: Facebook screenshot by authors, 4 October 2023.

> political parties and their candidates emerged as predominant actors, constituting half of all scrutinised posts" instead of the "Reports from Reset indicate that the pre-election content of these accounts specifically targeted refugees and LGBTQ+ communities

Another significant category of political actors exerting a strong influence on the online information space can be classified as nationalist, populist and/or conservative parties. Notable examples in this group include the eventual election winner, Smer-SSD (Facebook 157k followers), and the nationalist Slovak National Party (97k followers). Despite their longstanding presence in Slovak politics, representatives of these parties disseminated harmful content. In the case of Smer-SSD, party representatives including party leader Róbert Fico regularly targeted NGOs, mainstream media, and political opponents.[180] Their narratives often involve conspiracy theories[181] such as links to George Soros as shown in the Demagog fact-check from July 2023.[182] These findings mirror the findings of pre-election monitoring by Globsec.[183] Ľuboš Blaha, an MP for Smer-SSD, had his Facebook page banned for repeated violations of the platform's Terms of Service, and a court ordered him to remove false and misleading information about the president.[184] The dataset sample includes two posts attributed to Smer-SSD. The Slovak National Party is also featured in the fact-checking dataset with two posts,[185][186] in which they attempted to undermine economic sanctions against Russia.

Alternative news sites, self-described journalists and conspiracy influencers

Slovak National Party had many candidates in the election representing anti-system alternative media.[187] These individuals, while not official party members, were included on the party list aiding the party in surpassing the threshold required to secure a place in the parliament. Active across various topics, from COVID-19 to the war in Ukraine, the information shared by these influencers was frequently misleading or false, often aligning with pro-Kremlin propaganda.[188] In the dataset, these accounts are associated with five fact-checked posts.

The final group of accounts disseminating harmful content represented alternative media in itself, including media affiliated with the Kremlin. Slovak alternative media form a complex ecosystem of Facebook pages and websites. However, following the complete Russian invasion of Ukraine, certain outlets endorsing Kremlin propaganda faced prohibitions, compelling them to embrace diverse strategies to circumvent these restrictions.[189] These accounts consistently propagate disinformation and conspiracy theories, with a particular focus on the Russia-Ukraine conflict and narratives opposing LGBTQI+ rights and migrants. In the dataset, two posts[190][191] were produced by an alternative media outlet with unknown owners and editors, and spread disinformation about election candidates.

Foreign state influence and state-controlled media

The Slovak language market is relatively small, possibly contributing to the absence of official Kremlin-controlled media outlets, such as Sputnik or RT, in the Slovak language. State actors seeking to influence the Slovak information environment can count on channels in other languages close to Slovak and widely understood by its citizens, such as Czech. However, the Czech version of Sputnik is only operational in disguise due to the restrictions applied to Kremlin-controlled media for the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine.[192] Despite this, none of the fact-checked posts have been directly attributed to foreign state media, and the Russian Embassy's accounts are the only ones definitively linked to the Russian Federation. In 2022 the Russian Embassy faced accusations by Slovak authorities[193] of spreading disinformation, particularly when falsely accusing the mayor of Ladomírová, a village in eastern Slovakia, of intentionally destroying graves of Russian soldiers.[194]

Beyond official accounts, a group of domestic actors in Slovakia including alternative media, NGOs, influencers, etc. collaborates with the Russian Embassy in Bratislava. The nature of this collaboration remains unclear, with only a few documented cases. In a reported incident from the previous year, Bohuš Garbár, a contributor to an alternative media outlet, engaged in a conversation with an officer from the Russian Embassy in Bratislava regarding Garbár's service and his mission to recruit like-minded individuals.[195] This example is one of the few instances where confirmed links between the Russian Embassy and anti-system actors involved in malign activities have been documented. Therefore, attributing disinformation operations to state actors in Slovakia continues to pose a significant challenge.

Private accounts

Another significant group of accounts in the dataset were private accounts that shared misleading or deceiving content, mostly about political parties[196] or election manipulation.[197] There were five posts which were spread by this type of account. Although the political orientation of certain accounts was evidently on the radical right spectrum based on their public social media posts and other forms of public commentary, establishing a direct link between these accounts and political parties or foreign actors remains challenging. Moreover, a significant portion of these accounts appeared to be openly disseminating disinformation on Facebook using what seemed to be their real names. Despite the private character of their accounts, they achieved a wide reach that prompted fact-checkers to verify their claims.

Another significant group of accounts in the dataset were private accounts that shared misleading or deceiving content, mostly about political parties.

Behaviour

In order to assess the behaviour associated with election-related disinformation attempts, each fact-check was assessed for the type of content that was observed on social media. A slight variation on the taxonomy proposed by Claire Wardle[198] was used to categorise the type of content each fact-check covered. The categorisation merely functions as a heuristic intended to demonstrate the most common behaviour observed and variety in strategies deployed.

Deepfakes

The Slovak election was the first European election where advanced deepfakes were used to mislead the audience. In the week leading up to the election, four deepfake videos surfaced.[199] These videos employed voice-generating technology and targeted the liberal Progressive Slovakia party (Progresívne Slovensko) and its lead candidate, Michal Šimečka. Notably, two of the videos were created by the Republika party as part of their official campaign, with the appearance of satire. These videos were shared as advertisements[200], helping the content to be prioritised by algorithmic systems of the platform. One video[201] featured Šimečka's voice, while the other[202] incorporated the voice of President Čaputová, promoting anti-LGBTQ+ narratives and encouraging people to vote for Republika. Despite a disclaimer at the video's conclusion stating that the voices resembled voices of other people only by coincidence, the high-quality voice cloning had the potential to mislead voters, especially those who did not watch the entire clip. These two videos were not fact-checked, most likely due to their satirical context.

The other two videos with voice cloning also occurred in the fact-checks dataset. These videos initially circulated on Telegram and were later reposted on Facebook (which added a label after fact-checker review). One video used only the voice of Michal Šimečka and claimed to increase the alcohol tax,[203] and the latter used the voices of Šimečka and journalist Monika Tódová.[204] This video spread false claims of election fraud. These videos were spread during the moratorium, leaving very limited space for affected actors to react and debunk such false claims. Given that the moratorium in Slovakia lasts 48 hours and applies also to media, damage may be larger and requires platforms to act quickly against such content.

Figure 17. Screenshot of AFP fact-check of the video recording including voice cloning technology. Source: AFP Fakty.

Outright fabrication, sometimes supported by manipulated media

While the manipulation of media using voice cloning gained the most significant attention, fact-checkers also identified simpler methods of manipulating media or creating stories. This behaviour was observed in

- Four fact-checked posts, which included the manipulation of pictures,[205]
- Manipulation of party posters,[206]
- Fabricated numbers from polling stations.[207]

These instances contribute to the prevalent narrative of election fraud, a theme that emerged in the Slovak parliamentary election.

Decontextualisation, partially misleading information and exaggeration

Threat actors employ a more sophisticated approach to deceive. Instead of relying solely on explicit dis- and misinformation, threat actors have adopted a nuanced strategy wherein they blend verified information with exaggeration and misleading details. Decontextualisation was identified in seven cases, with examples including misattributing older pictures to events that never happened.[208] Political actors were also seen to exploit false and misleading information, particularly in the context of migration issues. In the latter part of August 2023, reports emerged about a notable increase in refugee arrivals, putting significant pressure on Slovak authorities. Exploiting this situation, the far-right party Republika falsely insinuated that refugees were involved in illegal activities[209] — a claim debunked by Slovak police.[210]

Other behaviour observed beyond fact-checking dataset

Reports from Reset highlighted further behaviours pointing to diverse strategies of threat actors. Having encountered bans from social media platforms in the past, multiple actors have learned how to navigate content moderation systems and adapted their language and strategies accordingly. Additionally, political parties with ambitions to enter the parliament may face negative reporting and potential legal consequences. This could explain why the observed content in the 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections was on the borderline of violating the Terms of Service, existing in the grey zone between what is considered a violation and what is not. Examples of such content included posts from Republika on the topic of migration, where they also disseminated false and misleading information that marginalised refugees coming to Slovakia. This content was provocative and elicited an outrageous response from their followers, including hate speech and incitement to violence in the comments section below such posts. As a result, most of the Terms of Service violations were observed among comments, sometimes even featuring illegal content calling to "welcome migrants with a rifle."

A significant observation elucidates how actors facing bans from social media platforms attempt to circumvent platform actions. Facebook removed the page and personal profile of Smer-SSD candidate Ľuboš Blaha due to repeated violations of the platform's terms of service. Even before the ban, Blaha had shifted to Telegram, where his subscriber count experienced a significant surge following the Facebook suspension. Blaha is known for directing inflammatory and hateful content towards his political opponents, and despite the Facebook ban, content generated by Blaha remains widely accessible on the platform. Material is routinely replicated from his Telegram channel and disseminated through the Facebook page of the Smer party, among others. This arguably represents a circumvention of Facebook's policies. Consequently, Blaha continues to reach extensive audiences on Facebook, including the 145K followers of the Smer-SSD party's page. The Telegram post on the left has garnered 32K views, while the corresponding Facebook post has accumulated 36K views.

Figure 18. Comparison of content targeting Progressive Slovakia posted by Ľuboš Blaha on Telegram and on Facebook page of Smer. Source: Telegram and Facebook screenshots by authors, 8 September 2023.

Content

The primary types of content featuring false or misleading claims were about migration, LGBTQ+, political candidates and parties, and the election's integrity. In the former three topics, threat actors mixed verified and misleading information, avoiding sharing of obviously misleading content, which resulted in hate speech comments violating platforms' Terms of Services and occasionally even law. Targets of attacks against the political parties and candidates were primarily liberal and progressive politicians, who are presented as a threat to "normal people".

Election manipulation

Narratives about manipulated elections were also significant in Slovakia.[211] In the sample, it was the second most discussed topic, with fact-checked posts mentioning either manipulation through pre-election polls[212] or manipulation with counting votes.[213] The election manipulation narratives emerged shortly after the snap election was called. One of the main actors attempting to build their campaign on this narrative was Republika.[214] At the end of May, election manipulation was discussed across the entire political scene in response to information published by the Minister of Defence about Russia attempting to interfere in the Slovak election.[215] Additionally, Smer-SSD accused civil servants and NGOs of attempting to manipulate elections by agitating against the opposition in Brussels during a meeting with the European Commission and NATO.[216] According to the Government's office and Slovak police,[217] the information presented by Smer-SSD was taken out of context and used to attack civil servants and experts.[218] Before the election, manipulation was discussed in connection to election polls[219] and vote manipulation, which was the topic of one of the aforementioned deepfake videos.

Political parties and candidates

Political candidates and parties were the most common targets of fact-checked pieces of disinformation (13). From the available data, it can be observed that the most attacked party was Progressive Slovakia, along with their leader Michal Šimečka. Out of 22 fact-checks relevant to the Slovak parliamentary elections, eight covered falsehoods directed against Progressive Slovakia or Michal Šimečka. The most notable examples included deepfake videos that used Šimečka's voice,[220] which was featured in three video/audio recordings. While one of them attempted to appear as satire, the other two videos were presented as genuine. Of these latter two videos, the first included false information suggesting that Progressive Slovakia was willing to increase the tax on beer,[221] and the second video presented a fabricated conversation between Denník N journalist Monika Tódová and Michal Šimečka discussing how they manipulate election votes.

Other attacks on Progressive Slovakia included content on the party's programme taken out of context.[222] The Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová was also targeted in the pre-election campaign,[223] even though she was not an election candidate. Such attacks included fabricated content involving fat-shaming[224] and provoked hateful comments below the post. In the dataset, there were also examples of manipulated pictures targeting the party Smer-SSD,[225] and one story from an alternative media outlet claiming that a candidate of OĽANO, Jozef Pročko, was caught driving drunk.[226]

Figure 19. Comparison of original picture with manipulated one. Source: AFP Fakty.

Anti-Migrant

In the summer of 2023, Slovakia experienced an increased influx of migrants. The number of migrating people surpassed expectations, causing challenges for Slovak authorities in processing all registrations. As a result, many people had to wait in front of institutions responsible for these procedures. This situation was exploited by multiple actors for the election campaign and occasionally to spread fear.[227]

One of the first parties to address this issue was Smer-SSD, which criticised the government for its inability to manage migration and advocated for closing the borders and implementing stricter immigration rules. Other parties, including Republika, also recognised the potential in this topic and joined the discussion with even stronger language, often involving the exaggeration of facts and misleading interpretations of events, as shown by Reset. They reported on alleged illegal behaviour of migrants in Slovakia, citing specific cases that were later denied by the Slovak police. Kotleba-ĽSNS went even further, posting propaganda pictures depicting migrants of colour as savages threatening Slovak society.

Figure 20. *Examples of anti-migrant narratives by Kotleba-ĽSNS and Republika. Translation of the post on the left: We are not going to wait, until they kill someone. Stop illegal Migration. Let's show them, we don't want them here. We will meet on September 10 in Veľký Krtíš. Slovaks and Hungarians, you are all welcome. Translation of the post on the right: We will stop migrants immediately. Vote for Republika. Slovakia suffers under the invasion of illegals, which are not welcome here, they break our laws and have nothing to do here. Republika refuses to continue. We will send the police and army to the border. We won't let illegal migrants come here. Vote number 25! Vote security, stability and prosperity. Source: Facebook screenshots by authors, 10 September 2023.*

While political actors primarily spread misleading information and disinformation, hateful comments were observed in the comments section after such posts, featuring hate speech and incitement to violence and hatred. Some of these posts were also fact-checked, such as the one by Milan Mazurek,[228] in which he claimed unrest in Lampedusa, using a video from 2021 shot in a completely different location in Italy.

Anti-liberal / LGBTQ+

Liberalism and LGBTQ+ is often targeted by various parties, including nationalists, conservatives, and far-right movements.[229] Harmful content towards LGBTQ+ communities has surfaced in two main instances. The theatre of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav in Bratislava faced backlash for a poster portraying liberal society with rainbow and Ukraine flags, leading to protests. Additionally, the leader of the Christian Democrats in Slovakia sparked controversy by referring to the LGBTQ+ community as a plague.[230] The dataset includes two fact-checks of a video by the Smer party, making dubious claims about hormonal therapy[231] and children identifying as animals.[232]

Other content observed beyond fact-checking dataset

Slovak media also face adversarial narratives from political actors. Hateful comments like "anti-Slovak prostitutes"[233] continue to be spread by government representatives, affecting political discourse. Some candidates in the election refused to engage with selected media, spreading adversarial narratives about them. Denník N journalist Monika Tódová became a target, facing accusations of conflict of interest and homophobic attacks.[234] NGOs are similarly targeted by politicians. Ahead of the elections, civil society organisations countering disinformation and corruption were labelled as "Foreign agents" or "Soros agents",[235] whilst questioning their financing of NGOs and making misleading claims about them being supported by Open Society Foundation or Soros.

> civil society organisations countering disinformation and corruption were labelled as "Foreign agents" or "Soros agents"

Distribution

The primary distribution channels for disseminating disinformation were analysed by reconstructing the social media footprint of fact-checked disinformation, revealing 44 social media posts for 22 distinct pieces of dis- or misinformation across five different platforms. Facebook emerged as the dominant platform, used in 20 out of 22 instances of disinformation. Telegram followed as the second most used platform, featuring in six pieces of disinformation, and TikTok with three pieces. Instagram and X were only sporadically used to distribute such content. Despite Instagram's widespread popularity, the low number of posts on X may be attributed to its limited popularity in Slovakia.

The primary distribution channels for disseminating disinformation

Facebook as the main social media platform

Facebook's dominant position in the Slovak market[236] is reflected in the data from fact-checks, where Facebook was utilised in the vast majority of disinformation cases. Given Facebook's predominant role, the targets of fact-checked posts on Facebook are quite representative of the overall sample. The only two cases where Facebook was not used involved posts from Telegram and Instagram. Due to Facebook's widespread popularity, misleading and false information has the potential for a broader reach and impact on user behaviour. This amplifies the responsibility of the platform to respond to harmful and illegal content. Examples of such content include conspiracy theories about media, NGOs, or politicians being controlled by George Soros, which have neither been fact-checked nor removed. If a platform decides to implement different mitigation measures, these steps cannot be clearly identified by external researchers.

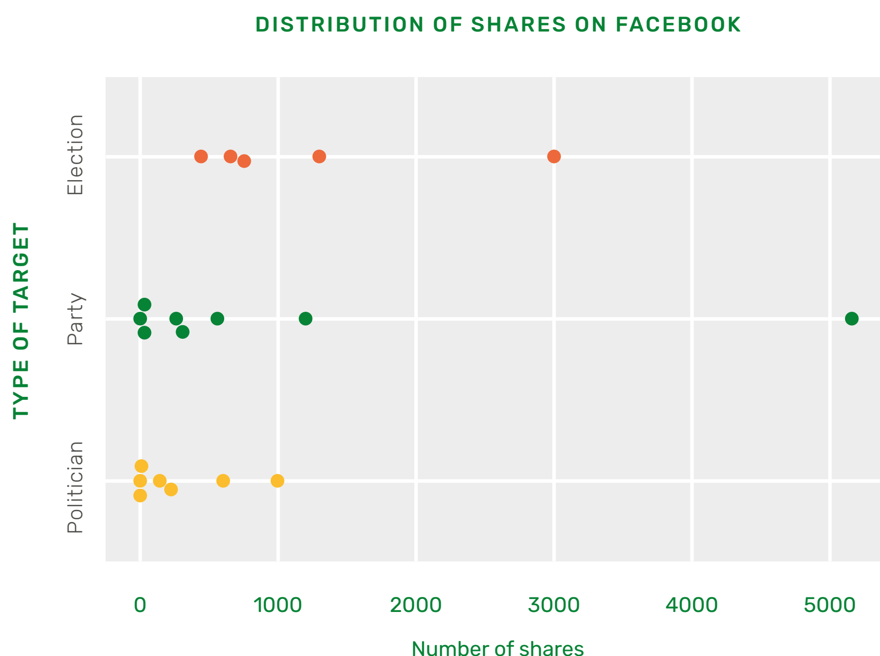


Figure 21. Distribution of shares of pieces of dis- or misinformation on Facebook targeting the election, a party or an individuapolitician.

The most widely shared piece of disinformation was targeting the Progressive Slovakia party, by taking their election program out of context or creating false information. This picture was shared by two different accounts and reached 5,158 shares. Originally, this post was shared by the Facebook page of political movement OĽANO, and later shared by a conspiracy and anti-mainstream media Facebook page.

Out of all 32 posts containing disinformation, a total of eight were no longer available at the time of analysis, either because the original account deleted the post or Facebook removed the post or account. 12 posts were still available, albeit labelled with a fact-checking notification highlighting that the post contained disinformation. A total of 12 further posts were still available without a warning label.

While shares help the content to spread across the platform, another important aspect are algorithmic recommendation systems. These recommend content to users based on what they follow, interact with or watch. They recommend content in the feed but can autoplay the next video based on recommended content, which may even further help to amplify harmful content.

Figure 22. Screenshot of the factcheck of the posts with the highest number of shares on Facebook Source: AFP Fakty.

Deceptive posts start to circulate on Telegram

Based on the data, there is not a distinct topic that is more relevant to Telegram than to other platforms. Telegram has gained popularity among Slovak anti-system actors, particularly far-right and alternative media. The dataset indicates that far-right actors predominantly contribute to Telegram posts, highlighting the prevalence of such actors on the platform when disseminating disinformation. They take advantage of the platform's low control environment to spread harmful content. Additionally, Telegram appears to be the originating platform for some deceptive posts that later spread to other platforms, such as Facebook. A notable example is the fake audio recording of Michal Šimečka, initially circulated on Telegram and later organically disseminated on Facebook.[237] Given the video's apparent organic spread across multiple channels, groups, and private accounts, the potential reach of the deep fake video is unclear due to data access limitations.

Effect

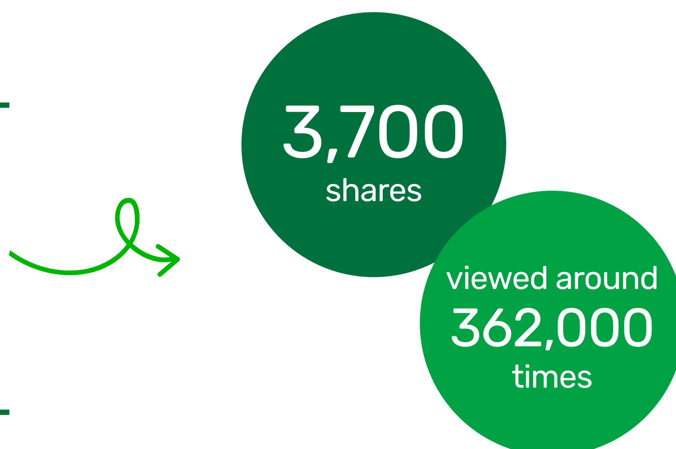
According to multiple polls, Slovak society is highly prone[238] to disinformation[239] and conspiracy theories.[240] Some polls indicate that up to 54% of Slovaks believe in conspiracy narratives, including the idea that the world is controlled by a secret Jewish elite[241]. These narratives find particular resonance among Republika voters[242], the party responsible for the highest number of false and misleading posts in the dataset. Globsec conducts an annual comparative study in Central and Eastern Europe, providing insights into the potential impact of observed cases.

The dataset reveals narratives undermining sanctions against Russia, shared by the Slovak National Party. While these posts did not achieve widespread reach, they echo a popular opinion in Slovakia, with 56% of people disagreeing with sanctions against Russia. Election manipulation was a major theme of disinformation, with 53% of Slovaks fearing potential manipulation, according to Globsec[243]. The Minister of Defence's warning about the risk of Russian interference in the parliamentary election could also have had a significant impact on public opinion.

The dataset also includes examples of disinformation targeting protected groups such as refugees and the LGBTQ+ community, widespread during the election campaign. A video by the Smer-SSD party about the LGBTQ+ minority and gender ideology, fact-checked and labelled as misleading or false, reached approximately 3,700 shares and was viewed around 362,000 times. Globsec Trends 2023 revealed that 55% of respondents considered LGBTQ+ as an immoral and decadent ideology.

Looking at targets of mis- and disinformation in the dataset, the Progressive Slovakia party was the most frequently targeted. While pre-election polls anticipated more votes, the impact of deepfake videos shortly before the election remains ambiguous among experts. Gender-based disinformation targeted Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, with harmful messages altering her appearance and exposing her family to online hate or deceitful narratives. Despite the higher interest in politicians, these attacks, including online hate and disinformation, partly influenced her decision not to run for presidential elections again[244].

A video by the Smer-SSD party about the LGBTQ+ minority and gender ideology, fact-checked and labelled as misleading or false, reached approximately



Comparison

Actors

In the analysis of actors spreading disinformation and harmful content during major elections in Germany, Spain, and Slovakia, trends applicable to all countries emerge. One notable characteristic is the prevalence of domestic actors spreading election-related disinformation, encompassing right-wing radical and extremist movements, alternative media outlets, and primarily political actors like parties and candidates. Private social media accounts play a significant role in spreading misleading content, often targeting individual politicians. This may pose a challenge for researchers because data from private social accounts are not accessible on all platforms (i.e. Meta platforms).

The data available does not allow for a clear evaluation of the significance of interference from foreign countries. One fact-check in Germany was attributed to Russian state media RT, and Spanish-language RT did provide coverage of the Spanish elections, although the outlet appears to primarily cater to Latin American audiences. In Slovakia, there is no Slovak version of Sputnik or RT. Accessibility to content produced by Russian state media was limited in Spain and Slovakia due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and corresponding EU sanctions. Moreover, Russian state media predominantly cover larger markets with languages spoken in more extensive EU countries, leaving smaller countries like Slovakia to access their content through proxies or foreign languages. Given that domestic actors played a crucial role in selected countries of this study, local proxies may be the key strategy by foreign countries to spread content in the EU. For example, there was one case in Slovakia where a contributor to an alternative media outlet was paid by a Russian spy for his services.[245] However, attributing domestic disinformation operations to foreign state activities remains challenging due to limited information regarding collaborations between foreign state actors and domestic entities.

Another aspect of foreign influence observed in all countries is disinformation entering from countries speaking the same or similar languages. In Germany, evidence pointed to election-related disinformation distributed by actors originating from Austria.[246] The Spanish election also faced disinformation about disappearing ink on ballot papers, a hoax originating from Mexican social media during the 2021 elections.[247] The Slovak conspiracy scene often draws on Czech sources.

Noteworthy is the involvement of alternative media outlets, self-proclaimed journalists, and conspiracy influencers presenting their content as an alternative to mainstream media, observed in all countries. Some media attempt to appear as credible sources, as seen in Spain, where they purchased blue-checkmark accounts on X to pose as news outlets. This tactic stands out as a unique feature, leveraging perceived credibility to disseminate election-related falsehoods.

Political actors spreading misleading and false information pose particular challenges in all countries. The contribution of elected members of parliament, especially from the far-right AfD party in Germany, to the dissemination of disinformation reflects a potential erosion of trust in political figures. Slovakia faces its challenges, with political parties, especially those aligned with far-right ideologies, dominating the spread of disinformation. In Slovakia, the far-right party Republika was the most active political party spreading disinformation, targeting migrants, the LGBTQ+ community, or spreading pro-Kremlin disinformation. Similar observations were made in Spain. While some content was labelled as misleading on Facebook, the majority of fact-checked information shared by politicians is not labelled by the platform.

Some media attempt to appear as credible sources, as seen in Spain, where they purchased blue-checkmark accounts on X to pose as news outlets. This tactic stands out as a unique feature, leveraging perceived credibility to disseminate election-related falsehoods.

Behaviour

False context and decontextualisation were prevalent across all observed countries, with actors intentionally manipulating the interpretation of genuine information. This strategy is easily applied and may not be apparent to many users. In Germany, Spain and Slovakia, decontextualisation involved the use of genuine images or quotes accompanied by false or misleading text, creating misinterpretations. In Slovakia, decontextualisation was aimed against migrants or the American army, forming fearmongering narratives against these groups. The deliberate omission of contextual information in all three cases showcased a strategic effort to shape narratives by presenting selective and misleading aspects of the truth.

While technologically advanced strategies appeared in our case studies, low-tech solutions still played an important role across studied countries. Germany, Spain, and Slovakia experienced outright fabrication of false information and manipulated media, such as manipulated pictures. Outright fabrication was evident in intentionally crafting false narratives, referencing non-existent or distorted source material. Actors used manipulated content creation to enhance the credibility of false claims, employing alleged screenshots resembling news articles or tweets, fabricated images, and manipulation of party posters. Besides outright fabrication and media manipulation, Slovakia also witnessed the use of AI tools to create deceiving content, including the introduction of deepfake videos, marking a significant advancement in media manipulation tactics. These videos, generated using voice-cloning technology, targeted political figures to spread misleading narratives. Although the technology exists and is easily accessible, it was not used in the majority of reported cases. Sometimes, disinformation that did not use any type of media manipulation achieved greater reach than disinformation that employed more or less advanced media manipulation techniques. In Germany, this included false allegations linked flood donation money to the campaign funds of CDU candidate Armin Laschet, while in Spain, fabricated stories included that of 1,600 immigrants registered in a Barcelona flat casting illegal votes, and Slovakia's fabricated stories focused on election manipulation. These disinformation narratives gained significant traction among certain groups, even if the content was only textual.

Slovakia also witnessed the use of AI tools to create deceiving content, including the introduction of deepfake videos, marking a significant advancement in media manipulation tactics.

The overall sophistication of disinformation tactics was on the rise, especially with advanced techniques like deepfake videos in Slovakia. On the other hand, the use of manipulated media impersonating credible sources in Spain and Germany did not necessarily require advanced technology. Nevertheless, the intentional blending of outright fabrication and credible information demonstrated a higher level of complexity in disinformation campaigns, making it challenging for audiences to discern between authentic and manipulated content. This complexity also complicates efforts to counter disinformation campaigns as it requires more time to check misleading nuances in cases where disinformation is combined with real information. As disinformation evolves, the need for adaptive countermeasures becomes increasingly crucial to address the multifaceted challenges posed by these more sophisticated strategies.

Lastly, some fact-checked posts did not introduce new narratives but instead replicated occurrences in other geographies or what has worked well in the past. Recycling false news seems to be an efficient way to spread disinformation, even if these claims have already been refuted. Examples of this were observed in all three countries. In Germany, content used to claim election manipulation in the US was reused, even though the ballot software allegedly miscounting votes is not in use in Germany. Similar narratives occurred in Slovakia, where those spreading disinformation regularly connected antivirus software ESET, liberal politicians, and the counting of votes, suggesting Eset is manipulating votes in favour of liberal politicians. In Spain, a Mexican disinformation video was reused. Therefore, it can be expected that well-known narratives and disinformation will reappear during the EP elections.

Content

Content targeting the integrity of elections was present in all countries. In Spain, it was the most common target of disinformation. Spanish election-related disinformation targeted the validity of elections by alleging 'pucherazo' (electoral fraud) through postal votes, CERA votes (votes by Spanish nationals living abroad), and migrant votes. Disinformation targeting the validity of elections already occurred immediately after the election was announced, and became the most common disinformation narrative by election day. A similar case was observed in Slovakia, where a deepfake video emerged only two days before the election day. Narratives about election manipulation in Slovakia were often connected to pre-election polls, media, and NGOs. In Germany too, a significant portion of disinformation sought to cast doubt on the validity of the election by alleging foul play. False claims included manipulated images of ballot boxes and conspiracy theories around postal votes. The broader conspiracy narratives sought to undermine the legitimacy of the German political system itself. Questioning the validity of elections is a globally widespread narrative pursued by threat actors, whereas these narratives may adapt to local context and events.

Another common target of disinformation in all countries were politicians. In Germany, election-related disinformation primarily targeted individual politicians, with a significant focus on female Green party members. Misinformation questioned their intelligence or competence, ranging from false quotes to fabricated stories. In contrast, the CDU and SPD were also targeted, albeit to a lesser extent. Attacks on CDU's Armin Laschet included claims of staged visits to flood-struck areas, and the misappropriation of funds. In Spain, female candidates were targeted too; however, as Sánchez was the party leader, the extent of targeting female politicians was not as significant as in Germany. Pedro Sánchez, for example, was targeted by falsehoods related to TV appearances. Falsehoods against Yolanda Díaz centred on fearmongering against immigrants. In Slovakia, the leader of the Progressive Slovakia party was targeted most often, including with a fake video recording that used his voice. His voice was used in three out of four deepfake videos that circulated on social media prior to the election. There were also false accusations against Slovak politician Jozef Pročko for driving drunk, which was re-used 15 years after the real incident. Also in Slovakia, there were gender-based narratives against female politicians, notably against the president Zuzana Čaputová. While attacks on German female politicians focused primarily on the party leader Annalena Baerbock and sought to spread doubt about her skills and abilities, attacks in Slovakia focused also on appearance by manipulating pictures of the president making her look appear larger. As Čaputová is regularly being attacked, including attacks on her family members, these attacks may have a negative effect on female participation in public affairs.

In many cases, the attacks were not focused on a particular candidate but instead on a party. Germany is an outlier, where parties were the least common primary target, although attacks on individual politicians, by association, also frequently targeted the party. In Spain, parties were the second most common target, with PSOE being the most targeted, followed by Sumar/Podemos and the PP. Disinformation included claims of collusion between the IT company Indra and PSOE, attempts to exploit tensions within the left block, and xenophobic narratives against parties accused of abandoning 'native' Spanish voters. In Slovakia, attacks against a party were the most common theme. While multiple parties were attacked by disinformation including Smer-SSD and OĽANO, the main target among parties was Progressive Slovakia, which was targeted in 73% of cases facing false claims about their smoking policies or sexual education. In Germany, the primary target among parties was the Green party. False claims included alleged demands to outlaw private barbecues and accusations of economic incompetence. This suggests that democratic pro-European parties representing values of gender equality and pursuing green policies, as well as those with a significant chance of electoral success have become the main target of false and misleading information, with these attacks frequently coming from far-right groupings but also more established parties.

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democratic pro-European parties representing values of gender equality and pursuing green policies, as well as those with a significant chance of electoral success have become the main target of false and misleading information,

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Next to the above-mentioned topics, Slovak elections were dominated also by other issues, such as migration or LGBTQ+ rights. These themes included exaggeration of verified information or misattribution of the media. While above-mentioned topics are not a new phenomenon in election campaigns, these groups were targeted on the basis of protected characteristics, which not only risk undermining fundamental rights in the EU, but also often violate the terms of services of social media platforms. Therefore, such issues should not be covered only by fact-checkers, but require content moderation as a means of Terms of Service enforcement.

Distribution

Examining trends in the distribution of disinformation in Germany, Spain, and Slovakia reveals national specifics. While in Germany and Slovakia, Facebook is the most used platform, Spain is largely dominated by X. In Germany, Facebook emerged as the predominant channel. Telegram played a significant role in Germany as well as Spain, particularly in disseminating disinformation questioning the validity of elections. Telegram was also the second-most used platform in Slovakia, whereas Telegram serves as the platform where manipulated information and media start to spread and are later shared organically on Facebook.

Spain's disinformation landscape demonstrated diversity across platforms, with X being the most prevalent (74 posts), followed by Facebook (58 posts) and TikTok (21 posts). On X, disinformation primarily targeted politicians, with the most widely shared falsehood targeted immigrants. Facebook's disinformation prominently featured a manipulated photo, alongside real photos, alleging ties between a conservative candidate and a drug trafficker. TikTok had a lower prevalence but included election-focused disinformation.

While some posts were not available, both X and Facebook displayed instances of available disinformation, with varying degrees of warning labels. Facebook had the highest share of labelled content in Spain reaching approximately 67%, while in Germany the share reached 39% and in Slovakia 37.5%. Fact-checked content on Facebook which was still available without any label was particularly visible in Slovakia with 37.5% fact-checked posts not labelled, followed by Germany with 16% and Spain with 12%. Fact-checked posts without labels were particularly prominent among posts of political candidates. Their posts, despite the fact-check, were labelled as disinformation only in two cases in Slovakia, where the actor was a less prominent candidate for Republika. Other fact-checked posts of Republika´s leaders remained unlabelled.

FACEBOOK

share of labelled content in

The role of platform design choices, including for-profit platform features and content recommendation systems

The data available for this report did not allow for an exhaustive analysis of the role of content recommendation systems, including targeted advertisement, in the spread of disinformation. This is due to the fact that data on the functioning of platform algorithms, including those involved in recommendation systems, are scarcely available for external researchers.

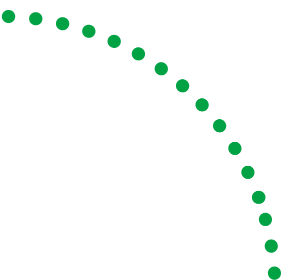
Despite these limitations, the key insight from the analysis above relevant in this regard is that many of the actors spreading election-related falsehoods in Spain were accounts on X that had purchased an X Premium subscription and therefore featured a blue checkmark next to their username. Aside from potentially misleading audiences as to the authenticity of the account, replies from accounts subscribed to X Premium are also boosted algorithmically.[248] This means content from accounts subscribed to X Premium will be prioritised over content from regular X accounts, and hence made more visible across the platform. Purchasing an X Premium account therefore provides an opportunity for those seeking to spread disinformation online to do so more effectively, using a paid-for platform feature.

The proliferation of disinformation online, aided by for-profit platform features, is not only observed on X. The role of targeted advertisement for disinformation purposes has been discussed widely since at least after the Russian Internet Research Agency was found to have used Facebook ads in their attempt to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election.[249] While beyond the scope of this specific study, it is noteworthy that disinformation actors often rely on paid-for platform features, and that, as a consequence, social media companies may in some cases directly profit from disinformation campaigns.

Beyond paid-for features, the content recommendation systems of social media companies more generally have been criticised for facilitating the spread of disinformation. The thrust of the argument is that, because social media companies profit from user attention, content recommendation systems are designed to optimise for user engagement. Hence, content that is likely to generate a response from users will be recommended more frequently. This is particularly pertinent for content that evokes strong emotions, which has been found to be shared more frequently by social media users, even in the absence of recommendation systems.[250] Similar findings have been made regarding the virality of falsehoods on social media, compared to truthful content.[251] As this study has shown, election-related falsehoods spread online frequently seek to shock or anger audiences, suggesting that these types of content may not only be shared more frequently, but also further amplified by the recommendation systems of social media platforms.

While the actual functioning of these systems could not be investigated within the scope of this research, evidence from other studies suggest that the design of content recommendation systems by social media companies is at least partially to blame for the spread of harmful content online. Research by Mozilla, for example, found that YouTube's recommendation algorithm frequently recommended content that violated the platform's own policies, including misinformation and hate speech.[252] Similarly, Amnesty International determined that "Meta's algorithms proactively amplified and promoted content which incited violence, hatred, and discrimination against the Rohingya".[253] Two studies published in 2023 by the Anti-Defamation League and Tech Transparency Report have additionally highlighted how Facebook, Instagram and X all would recommend ever more hateful content to users. Notably, this was not true for YouTube or other types of offensive content like pornography, leading the authors to argue that "this is not just a problem of scale or capability".[254] Leaked internal documents from Meta corroborate these findings, with one internal study concluding that "64% of all extremist group joins are due to our recommendation tools [...] Our recommendation systems grow the problem."[255] Related findings were made by Amnesty International as regards TikTok's algorithmic recommendation of self-harm content to young users.[256]

These findings show that the choices made by social media companies in the design of systems and features matter when it comes to the proliferation of harmful content online, including the spread of disinformation. Nevertheless, the exact role played by content recommendation systems, let alone the persuasive power of personalised content, is difficult to ascertain given the informational asymmetry between researchers and regulators on one hand, and social media companies on the other.



Effect

Evaluating the impact of disinformation can be challenging. While researchers can examine indicators of reach such as total impressions, shares, or views, such data provide only a limited understanding of the impact of a disinformation campaign. Another option is to compare disinformation cases to demoscopic studies measuring what society believes and thinks. However, tailored questions reflecting specific disinformation cases are available only sporadically, and hence measuring the impact provides more of an indication than a concrete answer. Moreover, even a relation between a specific disinformation and its impact on an individual may differ. Many views may not mean that viewers automatically believe in them, and high support for a claim may not be caused by the specific case. Given that all countries have their own national specifics when it comes to disinformation, and available surveys and research significantly differ, the comparison offers only limited insights.

In Germany, a notable aspect is the influence of alternative media, positioning themselves against mainstream sources and contributing to decreased trust in the latter. Conspiracy theories, particularly those related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, find traction, with 19% of Germans subscribing to beliefs aligned with pro-Kremlin disinformation.Answers on who is responsible for the war in Ukraine differ significantly between Germany and Slovakia. While 19% of Germans believe that NATO provoked Russia,[258] in Slovakia, 34% of people believe the West provoked Russia. However, the numbers for former East Germany are much closer to results in Slovakia, reaching 33%,[259] pointing to similarities in regions formerly under the influence of the Soviet Union.

In all case studies, election interference was one of the themes that occurred in both fact-checking datasets and wider pre-election discourse. In Germany, 18% of respondents were afraid of election manipulation in the 2021 federal elections,[257] and in Slovakia, this number reached 53%. For Spain, similar studies were not found; however, experts commented that in Spain, disinformation has a pronounced impact on undermining the credibility of elections and eroding trust in political parties and media. The difference may result from Slovak society being more prone to disinformation, but also from a higher awareness of disinformation, as the potential for Russian interference was communicated by governmental representatives during the campaign.

The gender-based aspect of disinformation was also exemplified in all countries. In Germany, 88% of people witnessed hate against women online,[260] and female politicians were attacked significantly more than male politicians. Similar attacks occurred also in Spain and Slovakia, where President Zuzana Čaputová faced attacks on her appearance but also threats towards her family. This may result in lower participation of women in politics, which may be a negative effect when trying to achieve higher equality in society.

believe that NATO provoked Russia

believe the West provoked Russia

Conclusion

This study, which focuses on the 2021 German federal election, the 2023 Spanish general election, and the 2023 Slovak parliamentary election, presents a comprehensive analysis of disinformation using the ABCDE approach—Actors, Behaviours, Content, Distribution, and Effect—employing fact-checks as the primary data source. The diverse nature of the chosen case studies aids in understanding common trends and challenges in disinformation campaigns leading up to the 2024 European Parliament elections.

The research reveals that primary actors involved in disseminating disinformation during major elections in Germany, Spain, and Slovakia are domestic. These entities encompass far-right actors, alternative media outlets, self-proclaimed journalists, conspiracy influencers, and political figures. Notably, the latter poses a particular challenge, as social media platforms often fail to label their content as misleading. In Spain, alternative media outlets seemingly bolstered credibility by obtaining blue-checkmark accounts. While overt foreign influence campaigns exist, they constitute a minor portion of the overall disinformation landscape. Foreign influence may be channelled through local proxies, but attribution remains challenging due to a lack of evidence.

The behavioural aspect unveils common tactics across all countries, including the omission of contextual information, decontextualisation, manipulated media, outright fabrication, and satire. Although the use of manipulated media and outright fabrication was observed universally, Slovakia faced the added challenge of advanced voice cloning technology being employed to discredit political candidates. This innovation, however, has not replaced older strategies but supplements them, posing additional challenges for audiences in discerning the truth. The recycling of false news narratives demonstrates the efficiency of well-known disinformation strategies.

Disinformation campaign content converged around undermining election integrity and targeting individual politicians and parties. Notably, female Green candidates in Germany were more frequently targeted than their male counterparts. Gender-based disinformation was also observed in Spain and Slovakia, albeit to a lesser extent. The questioning of election legitimacy emerged as a predominant theme, especially in Spain, but also played a crucial role in Germany and Slovakia, indicating a general trend across countries. In Slovakia, disinformation targeted protected groups such as migrants and the LGBTQ+ community, reflecting key topics during the electoral campaign.

Distribution trends revealed platform-specific patterns, with Facebook dominating in Germany and Slovakia, and X in Spain. Telegram played a significant role across all countries, as particularly in Slovakia the fact-checked content on Facebook occurred firstly on Telegram. Prolonged exposure to misinformation may have adverse effects on societies, as demoscopic surveys indicate that scepticism about electoral integrity negatively impacts trust in democratic institutions, with around one-fifth of Germans and almost half of Slovaks believing that elections can be manipulated.

As the European Parliament elections are due to be held in June 2024, this report provides valuable insights into the commonalities and divergences of disinformation campaigns in Germany, Spain, and Slovakia. This analysis can serve as a foundation for informed strategies to combat disinformation, safeguard democratic processes, and protect the integrity of elections at both national and EU level.

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Appendix

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Appendix

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60 rue Wiertz/Wiertzstraat 60
1047 Brussels, Belgium

www.greens-efa.eu
contactgreens@ep.europa.eu