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Online Extremism in Slovakia

Actors, Topics, Platforms & Strategies

Richard Kuchta

About the report

This report provides fresh insight into the types of discourses, actors, platforms and strategies found in the Slovak online extremist sphere. The online threat landscape in Slovakia appears to be increasingly hybridised where polarising and extremist content, largely directed at minorities, emanates from a broad spectrum of actors and online platforms. This report is intended for national, municipal and civil society stakeholders to better understand these challenges and provide an initial baseline for further research.

About the author

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Contents

Executive Summary	4
Key Findings	5
Recommendations	6
Introduction	7
Methodology	9
Who is Spreading Extremist Content in Slovak Online?	12
Which Topics Are Propagated by Extremist Actors?	15
What Online Platforms Do Extremists Use in Slovakia?	20
What Strategies Are Used to Spread Extreme Content?	24
Conclusion	26
Endnotes	27

Executive summary

In recent years, extremist groups and actors have become increasingly mainstreamed in Slovak society and politics. Members of far-right parties now occupy positions in the Slovak parliament and recent anti-lockdown movements, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, have given way to the amplification of extremist groups and narratives including antisemitism, anti-government and anti-media.¹ During these protests, there were several violent attacks on journalists, who have long been the target of hateful internet campaigns.² Indeed, narratives present at the protest mirrored hateful and extremist statements occurring in the Slovak online space.

The Strong Cities Network (SCN) conducted this analysis of social media in the Slovak language in order to better understand how extremist content is being spread online, what discourses are used by extremist actors, and on which platforms this content is being spread. While local governments and civil society know how polarisation and extremism affects their local community offline, there is less understanding of these issues online. The analysis this report presents therefore aims to fill a critical gap for local governments and municipalities in understanding the online ecosystem that feeds extremism at the community level.

This study maps Slovak extremism in the online space, specifically on the popular social media platforms Facebook and Instagram, and the ever more influential messenger platform, Telegram. The research identified 375 pages, groups, accounts or channels across these three platforms that were spreading extremist content, comprising 11,779 posts that contain extremist views. Included among the identified actors were known parties from the Slovak far-right, individuals and movements spreading both extreme right and extreme left ideologies, conspiracy theories and alternative media outlets actively spreading disinformation.

Most prominent was rhetoric and content online that is associated with the radical and extreme right and the most prevalent topics among these actors were nationalism, anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech, antisemitism, anti-media and anti-democratic rhetoric. Many of these topics are found to intersect, particularly anti-media discourses that are often embedded in antisemitic tropes and slurs, indicating that extremist and hateful content directed at and between different institutions and out-groups are becoming increasingly blurred. While the topics analysed on Facebook were often shrouded in softer or coded language, Telegram messages tended to be explicitly extremist. Hateful and polarising content online was often found to be amplified by coordinated activity among sets of pages and groups associated with a Slovak far-right party. This research provides a baseline for understanding the actors, discourses, platforms and strategies used to spread extremism online and opens new opportunities for further research to combat it.

Key findings

- **In total, 225 Facebook pages, 99 Facebook groups, nine Instagram accounts and 17 Telegram channels spreading extremist content in the Slovak language were detected during the research.** Most actors identified – 108 pages, groups, accounts or channels – were associated with the *Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko (ĽSNS)* party. The second-largest category was the radical right with 92 pages, groups, accounts or channels followed by the extreme right with 82.
 - **The most prevalent narrative among the content posted in these communities between 1 January and 31 August 2021 was nationalism, occurring in 49% of posts.** Other prevalent narratives were anti-LGBTQ+ (16%), antisemitic (15%), anti-media (11%) and anti-democracy (10%). There is also a clear intersection of narratives, especially between antisemitic and anti-media discourses and conspiracy theories.
 - **Telegram is becoming a prominent platform for extremist content, most likely due to less stringent community guidelines.** The number of channels sharing extremist content increased especially in 2021; 11 of 17 identified Telegram channels were created during the monitoring period and 36% of these new channels were determined to be in the extreme right category.
 - **Far-right actors use large networks of pages and groups to share content and amplify their reach.** The biggest network was identified in the *ĽSNS* category, which uses a network of 108 pages, groups and accounts affiliated with the party.
 - **It appears that extremists are adopting coded language to refer to minorities. Rather than using explicit slurs, they are using language with less overt extremist connotations.** This is potentially a tactic to avoid moderation.
 - **Private extremist groups on Facebook are trying to recruit new members from open Facebook groups.** For example, administrators share URLs posted in closed groups in various public nationalist or radical right groups to attract new members. These groups are often used to discuss alternative political systems to democracy.
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Recommendations

- **Municipalities and local actors need to be supported with the tools, data and analysis to harmonise what they know about extremism in their communities offline, with extremist content online.** Stakeholders at the municipal level often have to confront hate and extremism without a clear mandate in place and are generally distanced from dialogue between the national government and tech companies on issues of online extremism.
 - **There is a need to enhance the understanding of the online extremist ecosystem in Slovakia and provide further research on this issue.** This research shows new gaps in understanding of the dynamic behaviour of extremists who use new platforms. Ongoing monitoring of social media platforms is required to better detect emerging trends and to understand the nature of online extremism in Slovakia. This is crucial for civil society, municipalities and national government to build effective measures and enhance societal resilience.
 - **Government, municipalities and civil society need to strengthen engagement with social media platforms and tech companies to improve their capacity to regulate extremist content.** There was a high volume of hate speech and extremist content detected during the course of this research, indicating that the current approach to the enforcement of these policies is falling short. Moreover, there are gaps in understanding caused by limited access to data. This includes closed groups which are not actively monitored, enabling people to more freely spread extremist and violent content which could radicalise other social media users.
 - **There should be more investment in strengthening institutional and civil society capacities to monitor the online space for extremist content.** This requires the integration of online monitoring tools that can process large amounts of data using automated collection and natural language processing tools.
 - **There is a need to improve digital citizenship skills through civic education programmes to counter extremist narratives and strengthen societal resilience.** Providing individuals with knowledge and skills can strengthen resilience on an individual level and proactively limit the reach of phenomena such as online extremism and disinformation.
 - **Municipalities and local actors understand their communities and community-level risk.** Pairing this with enhanced knowledge of the online extremist sphere can help to identify and engage key partners, services and stakeholders needed for more effective coordinated prevention both offline and online.
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Introduction

Extremism in Slovakia has seen a shift in recent years. Once on the fringe, extremist ideas, groups and movements have increasingly moved to the fore in Slovak society, often seeping into mainstream party politics.³ While a few years ago some extremist groups were marching through Slovak towns in uniforms resembling the state militia *Hlinka Guard*, today some of these actors sit on the benches of the Slovak parliament.⁴ The political ambitions of many actors from the Slovak far-right have seen them soften their rhetoric to attract more voters and avoid legal consequences.⁵

Both far-right and far-left extremist actors lead successful online campaigns with a high number of followers on social media platforms. In the case of the far-right, these platforms were initially used to spread a malign ideology of racial, cultural or ethnic supremacy over ethnic minorities; this has now given way to more sophisticated efforts to push their agenda.⁶ Despite the change of language, social media has catered for the rising popularity of far-right political groups and provided a space for radicalisation and polarisation through extreme and hateful language. These phenomena create new challenges for both public institutions and civil society.

This research maps Slovak extremism online by focusing on the popular social media platforms Facebook and Instagram, and the ever more influential messenger platform, Telegram. The research identified 375 pages, groups, accounts or channels across these three platforms that were spreading extremist content, resulting in a set of 11,779 posts including those themes.

Crucially, this analysis highlights a diverse community of actors promoting hateful and exclusionary content online. In addition to extremists and individuals associated with radical politics, we also found conspiracy theorists, anti-vaccine activists and alternative media outlets promoting this material. This points to a hybridised threat landscape in Slovakia, where polarisation and threats to minority communities emerge from a broad spectrum of extremist actors. Importantly, this chimes with trends identified by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) in other contexts including the US, Canada and Germany, suggesting that the world is seeing a shift towards an amorphous extremist threat which transcends traditional hierarchies.

The research team used Method 52, a bespoke data collection and analysis tool developed by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM). Over the past five years, ISD and CASM have jointly developed analytical methods which allow for the close analysis of online data and a deeper understanding of who the extremist actors are, what topics they exploit, where extremist content can be found and the types of strategies deployed by extremists. This report is a snapshot of the current state of online extremism in the Slovak context and provides avenues for further research.

This report was prompted by a new engagement of the Strong Cities Network (SCN) in Slovakia. It was centred on a workshop in the capital Bratislava in October 2021, engaging Slovak municipalities for the first time in the SCN's global community of more than 150 cities working together to prevent hate, polarisation and extremism. The analysis this report presents aims to fill a critical gap for local governments and municipalities in understanding the online ecosystem that feeds extremism at the community level. As the SCN and other partners are working together to strengthen the role of cities in the prevention of extremism, they need a clear mandate. This includes combining their intimate knowledge of community-level offline risk with an up-to-date understanding of dynamic risk patterns online – positioning them to build a rounded and effective response.

Methodology

This research sought to map the online extremist scene in Slovakia and provide more data on how these actors operate. As such, the principal research question was:

What are the characteristics of extremist and hateful content in Slovakia?

To answer this question, the following methodologies for data collection and analysis were developed.

Platform selection

This research focused on Facebook and Instagram as the two most popular social media platforms in Slovakia.⁷ Telegram was also added on account of its increasing popularity among the general audiences in Europe and the increased presence of extremist actors.⁸

Seed list creation

Since there is no publicly available list of extremist individuals and groups in Slovakia, this research used a mixed-method approach that combined theme-based and actor-based research. The researchers created an initial list of extremist actors and seed keywords used by extremists. These were based on previous ISD research in Slovakia and other countries, interviews with local experts, academic literature and public authority reports.

The initial list of actors was created by reviewing the list of blbec.online and selecting Facebook pages associated with known extremist groups (frequently occurring in academic literature and mentioned in the expert interviews or the media).^{9,10,11} For Telegram, analysts used the public social media listening tool called Telemetrio. Researchers identified relevant accounts by filtering for content in the Slovak language. ISD researchers selected pages, groups or channels that belong to known extremist groups, have affirmatively shared the content of extremist groups at least three times, or have published content that clearly falls within the ISD definition of extremism.¹² ISD defines extremism as the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based “in-group” over all “out-groups”. It propagates a dehumanising “othering” mindset that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of Human Rights.

ISD researchers also identified keywords related to extremist groups in Slovakia, including references to communist and fascist regimes, slogans, names, or the language used to dehumanise ethnic minorities within Slovak society. The initial list was supplemented with the content analysis of known extremist actors in Slovakia by using a “surprising phrase detector” which identifies words that are statistically more likely in a given dataset than in general usage. This initial list was then used to snowball in order to identify new actors and keywords.

Data collection

For the data collection and analysis, the research team used CrowdTangle and the in-house analysis tool, Method 52. Post data was collected for this set of assets from 1 January to 31 August 2021, to provide current insights into extremist and hateful content in Slovakia. The created seed lists were added to Method 52 and used for a mixed-method approach. Firstly, an actor-based search was applied by collecting data from identified actors. For this step, components for piped accounts collection were used for both CrowdTangle and Telegram data. This collection was limited to the Slovak language only to collect relevant data.

During the second step, a topic-based approach was applied to collected data from identified actors. Groups of keywords were added to Method 52 and by using the topic annotation component, posts that matched words from the seed list of keywords were filtered to create the final dataset used for the quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Categorising the data

For the analysis, the research team grouped keywords in categories that represented social groups that are often targeted by extremists in the Slovak context and who regularly experience hate speech both online and offline. Identified posts included one or more categories of keywords. The categories were defined as:

- anti-Hungarian
- antisemitic
- anti-Roma
- anti-LGBTQ+
- anti-migrant
- anti-Muslim
- anti-media
- sympathetic to totalitarian regimes
- nationalist
- racist
- anti-democratic/system

Among the actors identified were also political parties, movements and individuals who share extremist content. These actors were also categorised into one of seven groups, encompassing a range of ideologies. Two political parties with a central role in the Slovak far-right scene were selected as specific categories. Far-right is an umbrella term that encapsulates both the radical right and the extreme right,

which were also included as specific categories.¹³ If an actor was discussing topics related to more than one category, the prevailing content was decisive for selecting the category. Identified actors were categorised according to the following definitions:

LSNS

- Accounts associated with the *Kotlebovci-LSNS* party and its members.

Republika

- Accounts associated with the *Republika* party and its members.

Extreme right

- Right-wing extremism is a type of nationalism defined by racial, ethnic or cultural supremacy. Right-wing extremist accounts are defined by a political outlook that is incompatible with pluralist democracy.¹⁴

Radical right

- This describes accounts, groups or individual persons 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.¹⁵

Extreme left

- This describes accounts, groups or individuals which openly support left-wing totalitarian ideologies and demand the change of the regime which is incompatible with pluralist democracy.

Alternative media outlet

- Accounts that belong to media outlets or share the content of a particular media outlet self-identifying as an “alternative” and “corrective to a perceived political and media mainstream.”¹⁶ The reason for this categorisation is that media outlets might have different posting strategies than activists or local groups.

Conspiracists

- Accounts that subscribe to and/or share various conspiracy theories and whose ideology – if it can be detected in a coherent form – is framed by different conspiracy narratives rather than by specific thinkers.
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Who is Spreading Extremist Content in Slovak Online?

Overview

In total 225 Facebook pages, 99 Facebook groups, nine Instagram accounts and 17 Telegram channels spreading extreme content were detected using the methodology outlined. Among identified actors were pages and groups associated with far-right political parties and politicians in Slovakia, and individuals closely connected to right-wing extremist movements. This research also identified Facebook groups spreading conspiracy theories; anti-vaccination groups and pages; conservative individuals and groups; and alternative media. Some of the actors identified belong to the left-wing extremist scene in Slovakia. The wide range of actors promoting hateful and exclusionary content online shows that extremist threats have become deeply hybridised. While some actors are known to wider society, such as accounts associated with *Slovenská Pospolitosť* or parties like *ĽSNS* and *Republika*, our analysis also identified actors who have emerged during the COVID-19 crisis and anti-government protests.

A common indicator among the vast majority of identified pages, groups, accounts or channels is nationalism. This is visible in titles, profiles and title pictures of identified pages and groups, which use phrases such as “motherland Slovakia”, “proud of the Slovak nation” and “Slovak patriots” or use symbols such as the Slovak flag or emblem. Other pages display the double-cross, associated with the clerical fascism (known as clero-fascist¹⁷) regime of the Slovak state during World War II and considered to be an extremist symbol within the context of Slovak history.

Identified categories of extremist actors in Slovakia

All of these actors are active in spreading extremist content, which ISD defines as the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based “in-group” over all “out-groups.” The volume of this activity differs, as do their political goals. The largest category of actors identified encompasses 108 pages, groups, accounts, or channels associated with the far-right party *Kotlebovci-ĽSNS* (Kotlebovci-People’s Party Our Slovakia). This category includes pages that represent party members, regional structures and groups established to support the party. Accounts affiliated with *ĽSNS* comprise around 30% of the dataset.

The second-largest category was the radical right, with 92 accounts. The radical right category comprised of pages, groups, accounts and channels that included pro-Russian Facebook groups, nationalist political movements and individuals, conservative organisations and disinformation pages. This was followed by those labelled extreme right, used to refer to accounts, pages, groups or channels which implicitly or explicitly demand political change and want to implement ideas altering the plurality of liberal democracy. In this category were identified political movements, paramilitary organisations, musicians from the extreme right scene or individuals openly supporting fascism. Most of these pages, groups or accounts show sympathy to totalitarian regimes and criticise democracy as a political system. Smaller categories were those involved in sharing conspiratorial content, often with an antisemitic or anti-liberal focus. The

alternative media outlets category consists of 17 pages, accounts or channels that predominantly share links to the website of alternative media, which often spread disinformation presented as verified fact. The extreme left was the smallest group; these 11 accounts shared sympathies for the totalitarian communist regime of the former Czechoslovakia in the second half of the 20th century.

Kotlebovci-LSNS

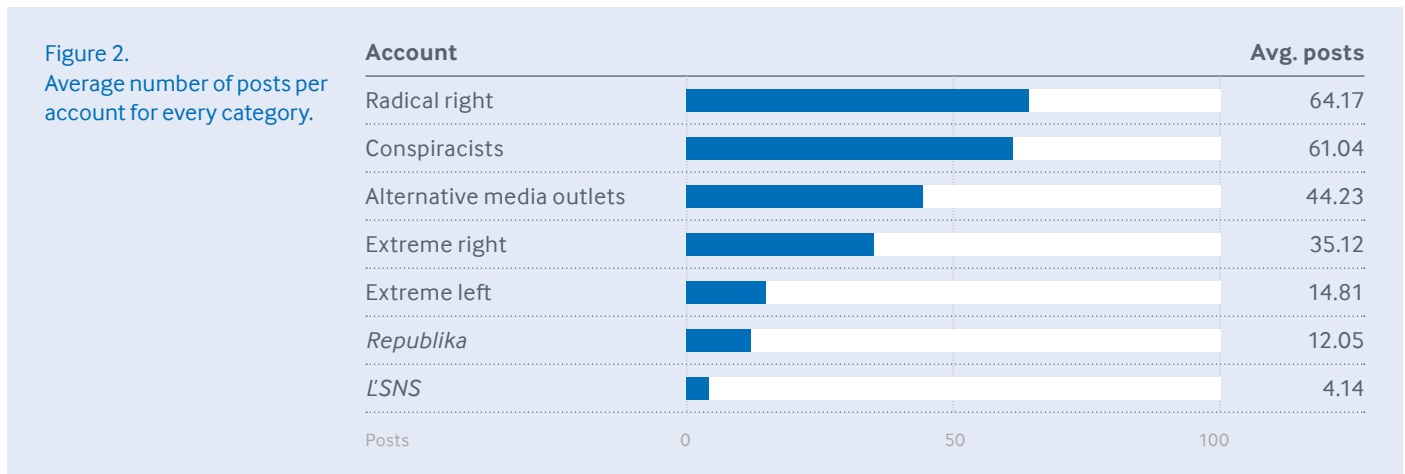
Figure 1. Identified categories of extremists.

Category	Facebook pages	Facebook groups	Instagram accounts	Telegram channels	Total
<i>Kotlebovci-LSNS</i>	90	16	2	0	108
Radical right	39	48	1	4	92
Extreme right	57	16	3	6	82
Conspiracists	7	14	0	2	23
<i>Republika</i>	15	0	2	2	19
Alternative - media outlet	12	1	1	3	17
Extreme left	7	4	0	0	11

The *Kotlebovci-LSNS* category consists of a complex network of pages and groups that predominantly operate on Facebook. This network of pages emerged between 2015 and 2017. The network has grown even after the seemingly official *LSNS* account was removed from Facebook – it is, therefore, difficult to ascertain which of these are official party groups or pages. To circumvent the loss of reach incurred by their ban from Facebook, *LSNS* announced a move to the VK platform. However, since VK remains a much less used social media platform, it appears that the party had to maintain an active presence on Facebook to reach and mobilise voters. Instead of creating one official page, several pages affiliated with the *LSNS* were created, including pages of regional chapters and party members. In some cases, the group name does not refer to the name of the party; however, the profile picture and content clearly aligns with *LSNS*.

This large network of pages poses significant challenges for the monitoring and analysis of content without the use of automated tools. Some pages in the network exhibit coordinated activity, and subscribers to more *LSNS* pages will more likely enter an echo chamber of *LSNS* content. Admins of Facebook pages also remain unknown, making it difficult to know if all identified pages belong to local chapters of the party or are operated by a party member. Some of these pages could also be operated by the party's supporters.

Most active categories



The data in figure 2 demonstrates which of these categories of accounts are the most prolific (i.e. share the most posts). The most posts per account were posted by the radical right group which is composed largely of Facebook groups. This suggests more posts originate from dozens of active group members instead of the more strategic approach in communication taken by Facebook pages, which are managed typically by only a few admins. Sixty-one posts per account were posted by the conspiracists group and 44 posts were shared by the alternative media outlet group.

Pages and groups associated with the *ĽSNS* party produced the smallest number of posts per account, despite it being a large and complex network of pages and groups affiliated with the party. Most of them share content from websites affiliated with the party, for example, the official party website, *Magazin1* or *Prehľad Správ*. The small number of posts may suggest that the network of pages tended to share content from a limited number of pages rather than create original posts. The research team found that of 214 identified posts, 122 were shared from the same source and only 24 were unique URLs.

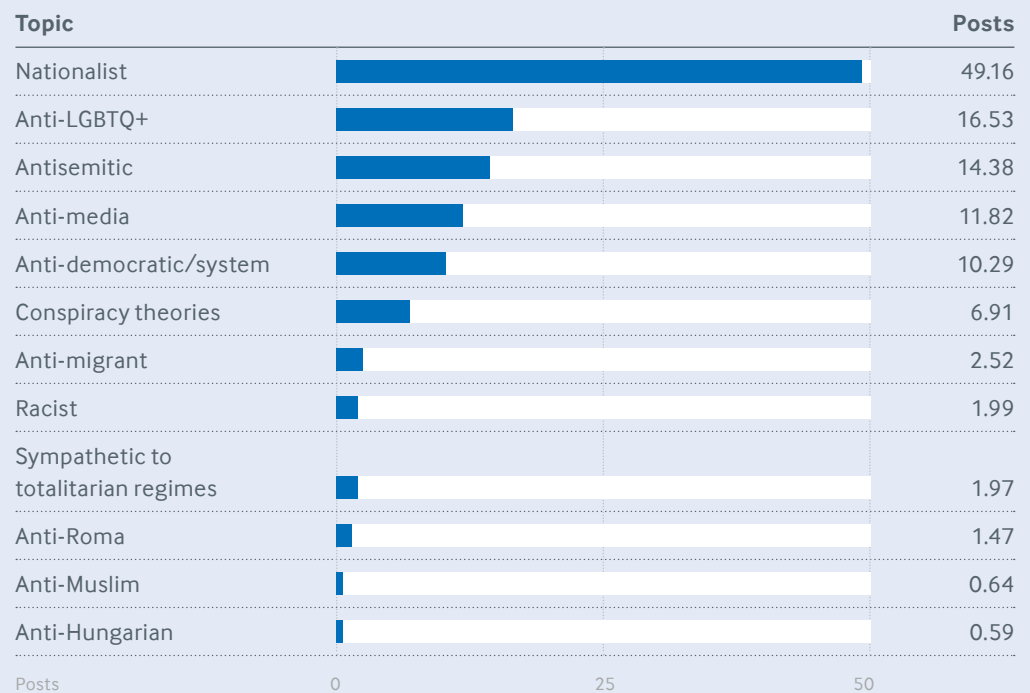
Which Topics Are Propagated by Extremist Actors?

Most prevalent narratives

In total, 11,779 posts contained one or more of our pre-selected keywords. Most identified posts were from Facebook groups (7,619 posts), followed by Facebook pages (3,588 posts), Telegram (529 posts) and Instagram (79 posts). The most common narrative was determined to be nationalism, which occurred in almost every other post (49%). Following this were anti-LGBTQ+ narratives, found in 1,947 posts (16.5%) and antisemitic narratives, which were noted in 1,694 posts (14.4%). The proportion of posts with anti-media narratives was also notable – 11.8% – while anti-democratic narratives were found at 10.3%.

Particularly prevalent in the anti-democratic narrative were sentiments against the non-governmental sector and liberalism, which is used as an adjective to encompass the political establishment (including conservative parties), progressive ideas and liberal democracy as a system. These are used to polarise society by spreading hate speech and are often intersect with other narratives, such as anti-LGBTQ+ discourse, which were found in 248 posts in the anti-democracy category.

Figure 3.
Most prevalent narratives
across the dataset.



Anti-Hungarian and anti-Muslim narratives

The data indicates a small volume of anti-Hungarian and anti-Muslim narratives. These numbers suggest that these narratives are not playing an important role in polarisation at present, and extremist content about these minorities occurs only sporadically. Anti-Muslim narratives in Slovakia were noted especially in connection with the European refugee crisis during the last decade. Both anti-Muslim and anti-migration narratives appear sporadically in our dataset, which suggests this topic is no longer a focus of extremists in Slovakia.

Tensions between Hungary and Slovakia have eased in the past decade and historical disputes are not discussed as much as in the past. On the contrary, Hungary is seen as an ally in the fight against the “common enemy” of Brussels, with most of the identified groups harbouring anti-EU sentiment. During the monitoring period, COVID-19-related government restrictions were an impetus for large protests, often violent, which took place in front of the parliament and blockaded several streets in central Bratislava, deepening a sense of polarisation in Slovak society. Posts that urged people to attend anti-government protests often included hate speech against the government and minorities. They call for action to “eliminate political paedophiles” or “eliminate [the] liberal visual smog in the streets of Bratislava”. This type of rhetoric can potentially provoke violence, particularly during demonstrations.

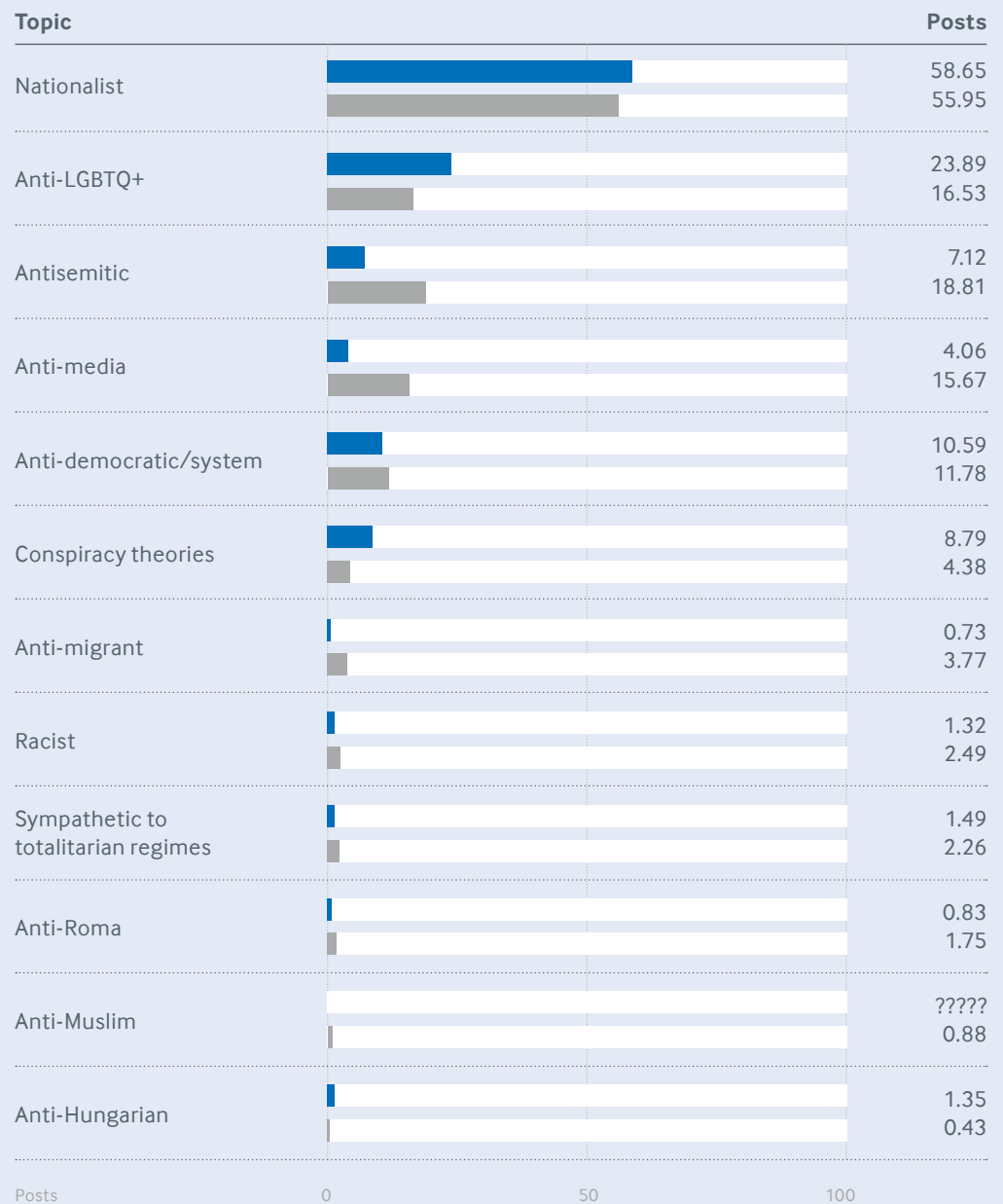
During these protests, some journalists were attacked, in line with much of the sentiment shared by actors across the different categories identified in this research. These groups often accuse the mainstream media of spreading lies and serving the interests of others. A prominent aspect of the anti-media narrative is its strong connection to conspiracy theories and antisemitism. Antisemitic tropes and slurs are commonly used about the Slovak mainstream media, labelled as “corrupt”, “Jewish” or “Zionist”, or accusing outlets of serving the interests of George Soros. This narrative occurred most often within the radical right group, largely operating on Facebook. The radical right category posted 798 messages containing anti-media narratives, which was followed by the conspiracy theorist category with 265.

Our data suggests that during the monitoring period, the anti-Roma narrative was not very prominent in the online communication of far-right actors. This may be due to the new focus of the far-right on polarising society with strong anti-government, anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown messages. As with countries such as France and India, researchers noted the occasional intersection of hate speech targeting minority communities and the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic.^{18, 19}

Most prevalent narratives in selected groups

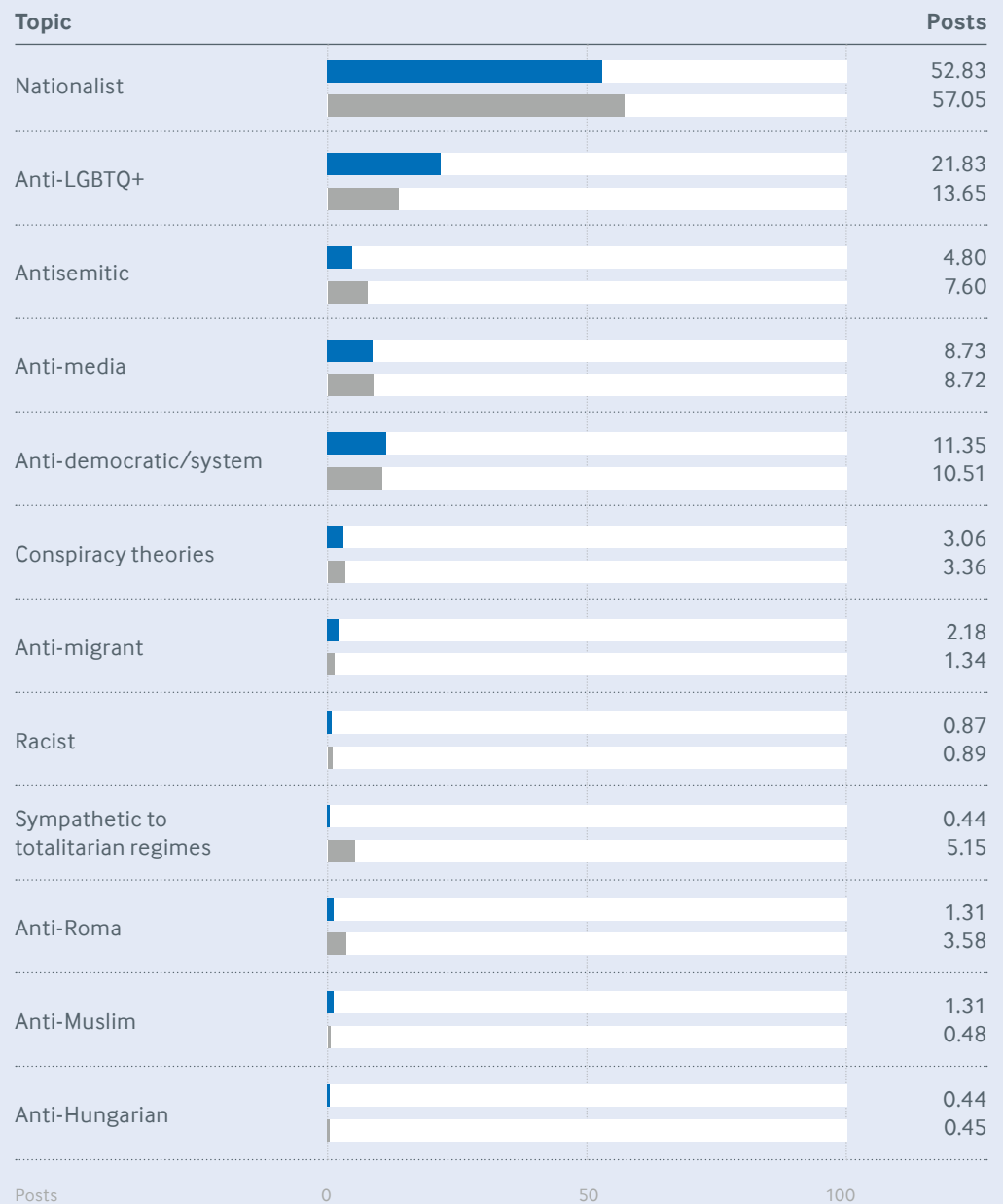
Comparison of narratives spread by two or more categories reveals the similarities or differences between groups, and the types of content they engage with. For example, figure 4 shows the comparison between the radical right and extreme right groups. While nationalism is a key element in the communication of both groups and occurred in more than 50% of all posts, differences can be highlighted by looking at the popularity of other topics, such as LGBTQ+, antisemitism or anti-media. The extreme right category seemed to focus more on LGBTQ+ communities in 24% of their posts, whereas the radical right group discussed this topic in 16.5% of posts. However, the radical right is more prolific in spreading antisemitism and anti-media narratives with a difference of 11.7 percentage points and 11.6 percentage points respectively. This might suggest that topics formerly associated with extreme far-right groups, such as antisemitism, are moving towards the centre.

Figure 4.
Comparison of narratives
by extreme right and
radical right categories.



Comparison between the two political parties, *ĽSNS* and *Republika*, shows how similar they are in choosing their topics. Former members of *ĽSNS* who left the party and established *Republika* claimed that Slovak politics needs a “drastic change in a polite way”. Our data show that these two parties differ in the topics they post about online with only small margins. The biggest divergence between the two (8.2 percentage points) is anti-LGBTQ+, which was communicated more frequently by *Republika*’s representatives. There is also a slight difference in antisemitic and anti-Roma narratives, which appeared more often in the *ĽSNS*’s messages (by 2.8 and 2.3 percentage points respectively). *Republika* also shied away from expressing sympathy for totalitarian regimes, which occurred only in 0.4% of posts, compared

Figure 5.
Comparison of narratives
by *Republika* and
Kotlebovci-L'SNS.

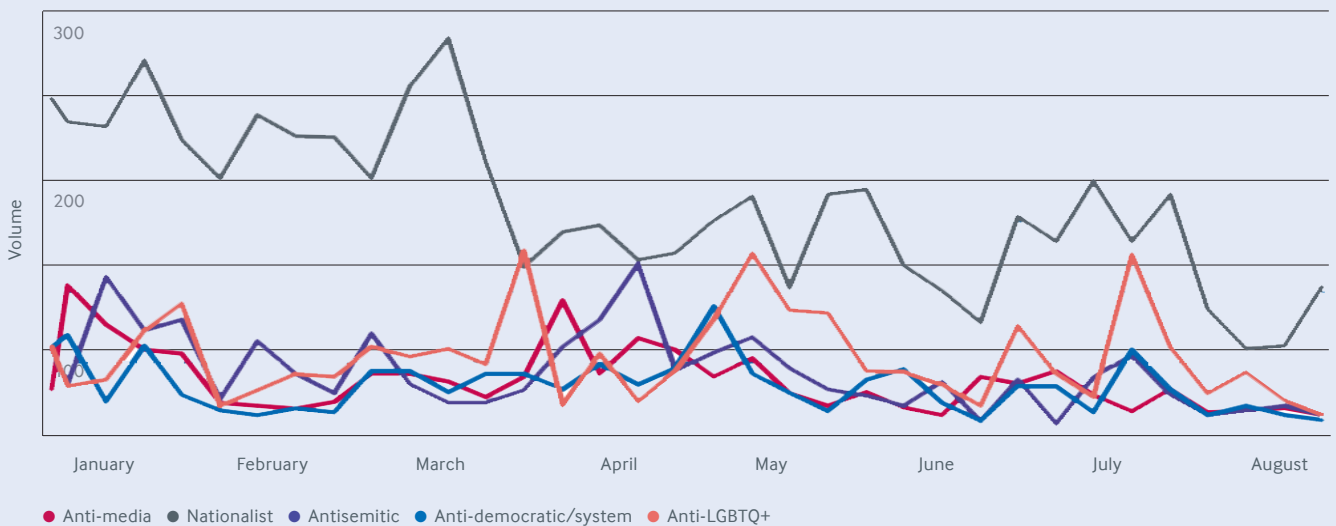


with 5.1% for *L'SNS*. *L'SNS* accounts traditionally commemorated the president of the Slovak state during WWII, Jozef Tiso, and regularly use the greeting phrase “*na stráž*” (on guard) which was used by the Slovak state militia group *Hlinka Guard*.

Volume over time

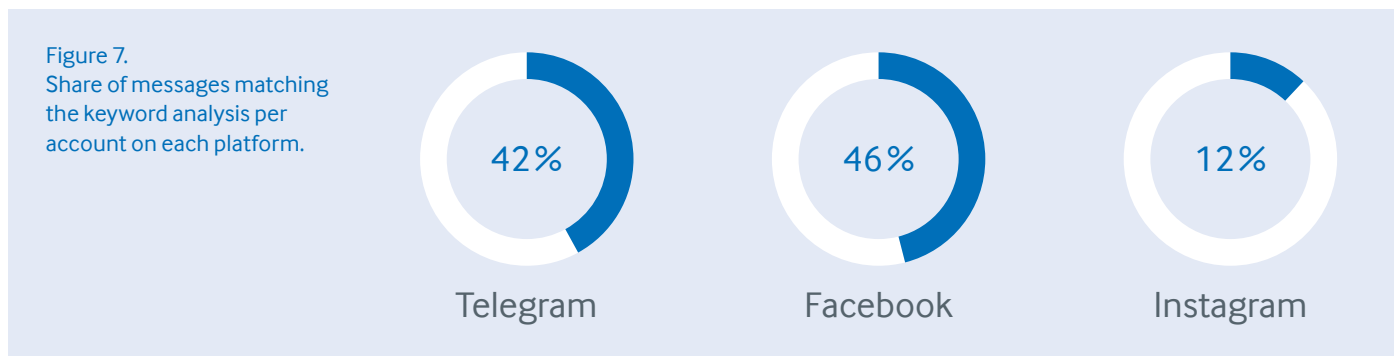
Figure 6 demonstrates the volume of posts over time for selected topics. Nationalism remained the most prevalent throughout, reaching its peak on 14 March 2021 which is the date marking when the Slovak clero-fascist state was established in 1939. Nationalism, alongside other topics, decreased significantly during the summer, likely giving way to anti-vaccination sentiment. At this time there were anti-vaccination demonstrations that blocked the streets of Bratislava, attacks on the street and attempts to break into the parliament building. Only during the first week of April were anti-LGBTQ+ narratives more prevalent than nationalism. This peak, which is also the highest peak of anti-LGBTQ+ content across the collection period, is connected especially with criticism of the government and president, who are presented as “progressive liberals who plan conspiracies and spread liberal propaganda”. The most significant peak for antisemitic narratives occurred in the week from April 19-23 April, when former prime minister, Robert Fico, organised a press conference in which he presented his findings on the connections of George Soros to the Slovak press. These narratives were especially prevalent in Facebook groups during this week in April, accounting for 69% of the total volume.

Figure 6. Volume over time for anti-media, nationalist, antisemitic, anti-democratic and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives on Facebook and Instagram.



What Online Platforms Do Extremists Use in Slovakia?

Most used platforms



Facebook appears to be the most used social media platform in Slovakia for the set of extremist actors identified. This study unearthed a total of 337 pages and groups spreading Slovak-language extremist content on Facebook – the activity from the platform accounted for 46% of the total posts. Our data shows that Telegram also plays an important role in the communication of extremist actors, especially those on the far-right spectrum. Telegram channels had an average post rate of 30.8 per channel, though this number could be even higher as there are limitations on parting text from images on Telegram.

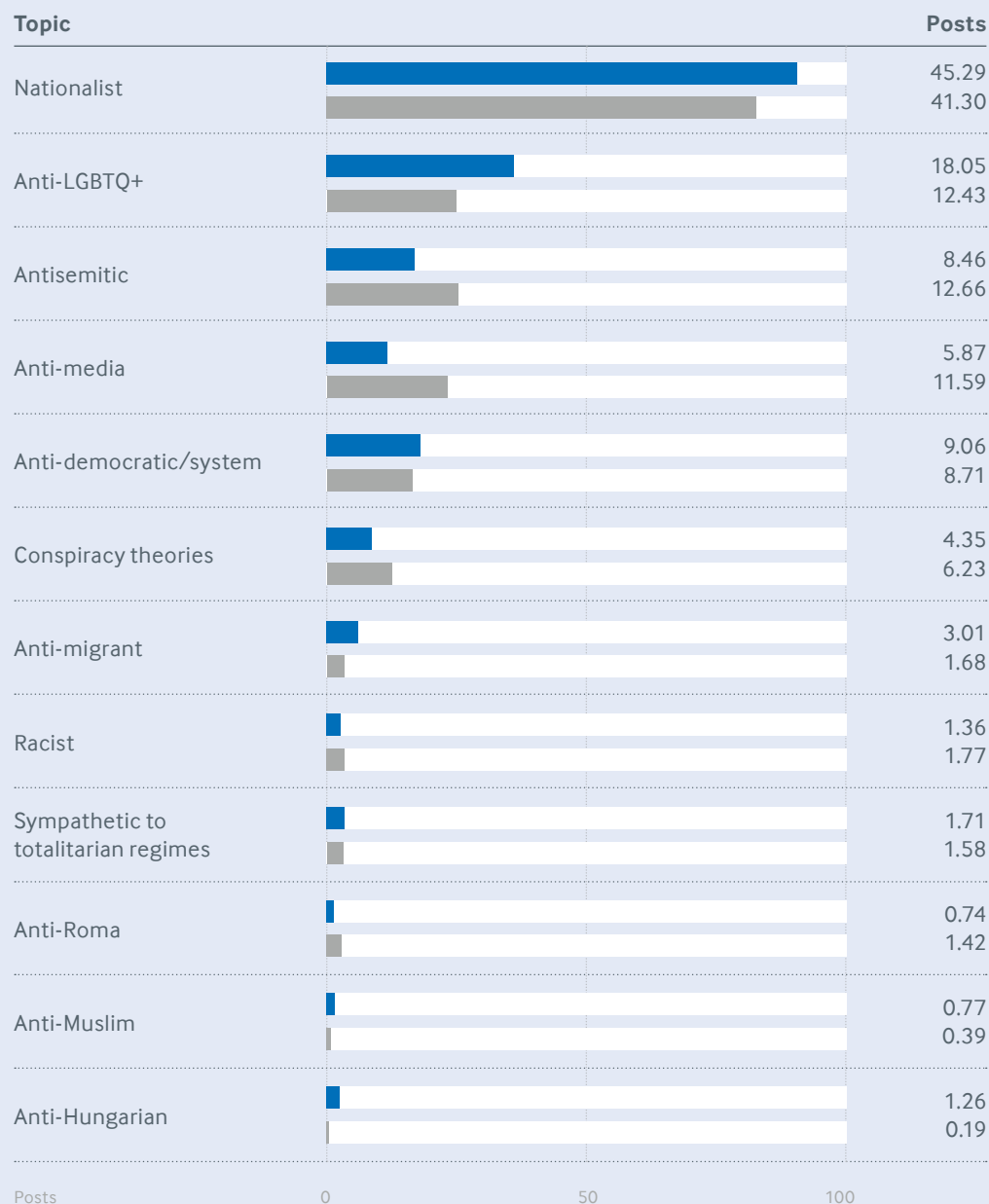
Facebook

Facebook is a platform that has been used by extremists ever since it became popular among Slovak citizens. Some of the identified pages were created between 2011 and 2014. This has resulted in many inactive pages that have not posted any new messages for months. Old pages and groups were replaced with new ones, which makes Facebook a very fast-changing environment for extreme content.

Facebook has stringent policies in place to restrict hate speech and extremist content on the platform. Because of its high popularity among the Slovak citizens, content on this platform is likely to be under tighter control than on platforms such as Telegram – any breach of the community standards can be reported and non-compliant content removed. Actors must therefore be careful how they formulate their messages and the language they use.

Extremists exploit Facebook to share their ideology with wider audiences, achieved through content amplification and access to groups with high member numbers. Facebook groups, in particular, spread a large volume of posts. This dataset contained 7,619 posts published by Facebook groups, whereas Facebook pages published 3,588 posts. With such a high volume, researchers need the help of automated systems to keep track of occurring narratives. The content analysis comparing Facebook groups with Facebook pages shows that the biggest differences are with anti-media, anti-LGBTQ+ and antisemitic content. Facebook groups posted more anti-media narratives with a difference of 5.7 percentage points and more antisemitic narratives with 4.2 percentage points difference. On the other hand, Facebook

Figure 8. Comparison of narratives spread by Facebook groups and Facebook pages.



pages included anti-LGBTQ+ narratives in 18.1% of posts, compared with 12.4% in Facebook groups. Anti-Hungarian narratives, though much lower in volume than some other narrative categories, occurred more often on Facebook pages (51 posts) than in Facebook groups (18 posts).

Instagram

Analysis of Instagram data found the least messages containing the pre-identified keywords. Instagram, compared to other platforms, is less used by Slovak political actors and only a few Slovak parties use the platform for political communication. Relevant extremist actors from the far-right scene in Slovakia appear to use it more for self-promotion rather than for the promotion of ethnic, cultural or racial

supremacy. This behaviour was observed across most of the categories, though only three accounts used Instagram to spread political messages. This behaviour was noted in the category of accounts associated with the *Republika* party and media outlets. This content was typically posted in the form of short videos, text descriptions under the post, or poster images.

Telegram

While previous ISD research has demonstrated that Telegram is prevalent among extremists in some Western European countries, it had not become popular in Slovakia until recently, with 11 out of 17 channels identified during the study having only been created in 2021.²⁰ The increased popularity of Telegram raises questions over the potential for exposure to extremist content.²¹ Telegram also appears to impose less control over the types of content shared on the platform and content is less likely to be removed than on Facebook, appealing to users concerned with the moderation of online speech.²²

While only 17 Telegram channels were identified during the study, their collective audience is increasing. For example, one channel from the extreme right category has experienced rapid growth in content views, from 200 in 2020 to almost 1,000 in August 2021. Within this list, the largest channel has 2,181 followers and the average number of followers is currently 702. Because Telegram includes the features of a messaging app, its users receive notifications about new messages on the channel, unless they change their default setting. This can increase the risk of radicalisation for channel followers, as they are more likely to be exposed to extremist content.

Extreme language

There is a high level of interaction between Slovak far-right channels, which openly share and discuss content with one another. Compared to Facebook, language on Telegram is far more extreme, not only in the words used but also in the types of ideologies referenced, as can be seen in figures 9, 10 and 11. The most dominant is antisemitic rhetoric, which occurred in 179 messages (29.8%).

Despite the lower volume of users, there were a high number of posts during the monitoring period. Over the eight months, 17 channels posted 27,473 messages, which amounted to almost 115 messages per day. Particularly active were those in the conspiracy and alternative media outlets categories, with 10,124 messages and 13,999 messages respectively. For comparison, channels in the radical right category posted 1,493 messages and channels in the extreme right category, 1,113. A closer look at the actors spreading these messages reveals that a channel associated with an online radio station broadcasting conspiracy theories and other channels were very active in posting.

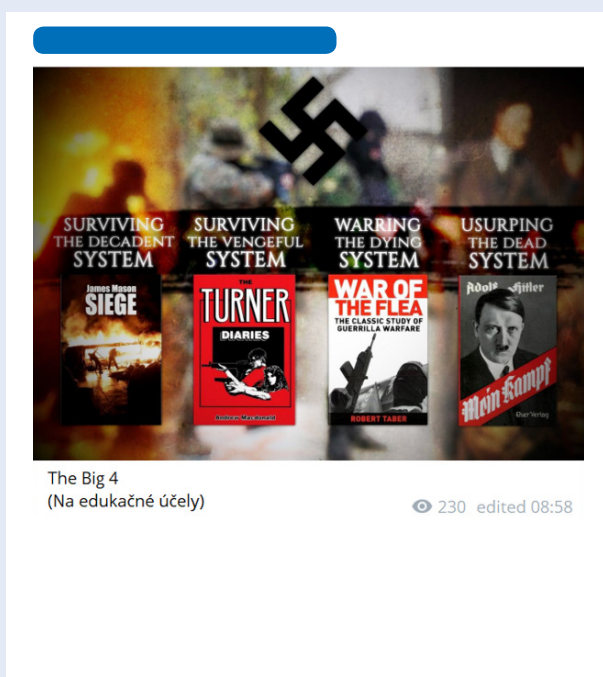
Figure 9.
Example post on Telegram affirmatively quoting Hitler's criticism of democracy.



Figure 10.
Example of a post in Telegram channel quoting Mein Kampf.



Figure 11.
Example of a post in Telegram channel



What Strategies Are Used to Spread Extreme Content?

Softening of language

While Facebook is the most used social media platform in Slovakia, users are compelled to watch their language to avoid breaching the community standards which could result in the suspension of their page or group. Throughout the analysis, researchers noticed softer language in public groups and pages in comparison to Telegram channels.

Compared to academic literature analysing the language of the *LSNS*, or data on right-wing extremists on Telegram, the language used on Facebook is far more sophisticated and views are not expressed as explicitly as they used to be. Actors on Facebook also create new terms to refer to minorities; these may have been implemented to evade Facebook's efforts to moderate hate speech. The word "cigán" (gypsy) for example occurred only in 29 posts out of 173, and extremists started to use the word "osadník" (settler) to refer to the Roma community or "paraziti" (parasites) which was used also for members of the Slovak government. Extremists use a high variety of adjectives for the LGBTQ+ community, which requires a longitudinal analysis of language, and the list of keywords in this research was the longest for this category of narrative.

Recruitment of new members to join private groups

While the content on public Facebook groups and Facebook pages are public, private groups remain unexplored territory. With the risk of having content removed, some actors try to unite in closed groups, however, they often recruit for these using several public groups. Figure 14 shows how this strategy works: the same account posted in ten different groups (representing four different categories) to join the private group. This group was created in 2016 and

Figure 12.
Example post in Kotlebovci-LSNS category referring to Roma as settlers.

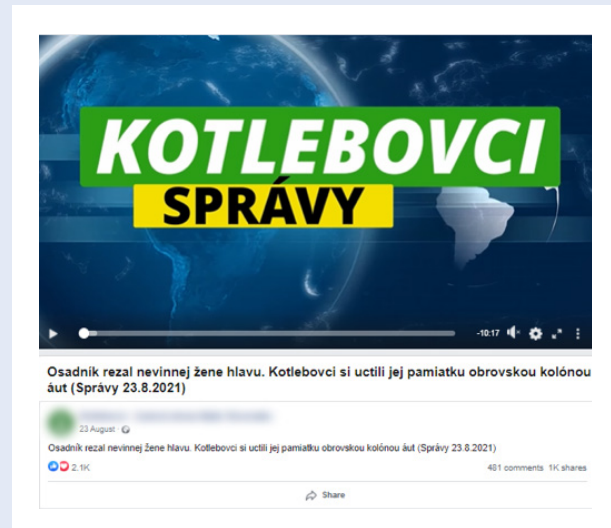


Figure 13.
Examples of language used to refer to Roma as gypsy by Kotlebovci-LSNS (Benčík, 2020)²³.



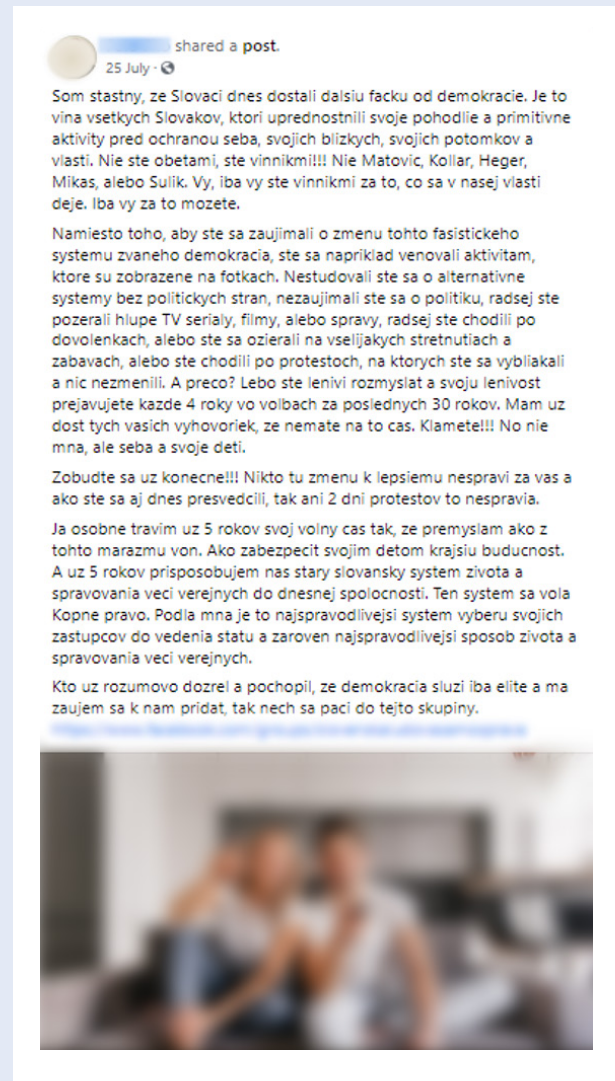
currently has 2,000 members. While the content posted by members of the group is not visible, administrators of the group use profile pictures with extreme symbols such as the swastika, which suggests a focus on fascism.

Networks of pages and groups

Political movements and parties within the identified list of actors tend to use a wider network of Facebook pages and groups to amplify their content in a coordinated manner. A significant outlier in this category is the *LSNS* party, to which 108 pages or groups are associated. Most of the sources shared on the social media platforms were from websites closely associated with the party. Of the 122 posts which were shared more than once, 24 were unique URL sources, representing an average of 5.1 shares per unique URL. There were signs of coordinated activity among smaller groups of three or four pages sharing the same URL at close intervals. In this study, two groups with a significant presence in the dataset were identified, which repeatedly shared the same posts at close intervals.

The first group includes three pages associated with municipalities in the Trnava region in western Slovakia, and one page representing the party branch of the Trnava region, which shows that coordination in this group happens on a regional basis. In almost all cases, these pages associated with the Trnava region shared each other's posts within two minutes. The second group consists of nine accounts representing different geographic regions in Slovakia, mostly located in the central or eastern part of the country. Coordination among this group is more difficult to determine. While three pages participated in all cases of coordinated posting activity, other pages were used sporadically. Posts were also shared in public groups affiliated with the party and this content was repeatedly shared by two accounts that have the same family name. This could suggest that these accounts have admin rights and operate some of the pages in this group.

Figure 14.
Example post of recruiting new members to a closed group community.



Meanwhile, the *Republika* party, which was established in the first quarter of 2021, seems to apply a different strategy for content amplification. While the ĽSNS network comprises a combination of pages belonging to party members and regional structures of the party, *Republika* relies mostly on the Facebook pages of its members who have large audiences. Even in this case, pages associated with *Republika* also share content from each other, though on a smaller scale than ĽSNS.

A similar trend was also observed with other political movements on the far-right spectrum. Former organisations which transformed into political parties try to use both of the aforementioned tactics: regionally-affiliated pages and party members. In contrast with ĽSNS, the structure of this network is clear and the content from the main page regularly occurs on regional and party members' pages. Close intervals of sharing the same URL was observed also within this far-right party, suggesting coordinated activity of pages.

Conclusion

This research examined online extremist and/or polarising activity in the Slovak context, exploring the types of actors engaging and spreading hateful, intolerant and extremist rhetoric, the topics they propagate and the main platforms they use to recruit members and spread their messaging. Included among the identified actors were known parties from the Slovak far-right, individuals and movements spreading both extreme right and extreme left ideologies, conspiracy theories and alternative media outlets spreading disinformation. This points to a hybridised online threat landscape in Slovakia, where polarising and extremist content, largely directed at minorities, emanates from a broad spectrum of actors. The most pages, groups, accounts and channels identified in this research were associated with *L*SNS. Some of the pages within this network seem to act in coordination, with regionally affiliated pages posting identical content in close intervals. Also prominent was rhetoric and content associated with the radical and extreme right. The most prevalent topics among these communities were nationalism, anti-LGBTQ+ hate speech, antisemitism, anti-media and anti-democratic rhetoric. Many of these narratives are found to intersect, particularly anti-media discourses that are often embedded in antisemitic tropes and slurs. This suggests that extremist and hateful content directed at and between different institutions and out-groups are becoming increasingly blurred.

The most identified posts containing the research keywords were found on Facebook. On Facebook, it appears that extremists are adopting coded language to refer to minorities. Rather than using explicit slurs (i.e. cigáň [gypsy]) they are using language with less explicitly extremist connotations (i.e. osadník [settler]). This is potentially a tactic to avoid moderation. Private extremist groups on Facebook were found to be recruiting new members from open Facebook groups, particularly public nationalist or radical right groups. Nevertheless, the number of extremist actors using Telegram is increasing where the content and ideologies are notably more explicit and extreme, likely due to less stringent community guidelines.

This report provides fresh insight into the online extremist environment in Slovakia and can be used by national, municipal and civil society stakeholders to understand these challenges better, and to develop effective offline prevention approaches cognisant of what is taking place online as well as what is manifest at the community level. This study also provides an initial baseline for further research, identifying emerging gaps and phenomena which merit further examination by researchers and analysts studying the Slovak hate, disinformation and extremism landscape.

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