GLOBSEC
IDEAS SHAPING THE WORLD

Foreign Malign Influence in Slovakia

Factors, techniques and recommendations

Dominika Hajdu

Katarína Klingová

Miroslava Sawiris

Centre for Democracy
& Resilience, GLOBSEC

GLOBSEC
Vulnerability
Index 2021

www.vulnerabilityindex.org

Situational background

Slovakia's vulnerability to foreign malign influence can be broadly divided into three overlapping areas based on GLOBSEC's research findings.

- **a** Public perceptions
- **b** Information landscape
- **c** State and political actors

While significant improvements have been made both within the political environment and in Slovak public administration in recent years vis-à-vis the recognition of hybrid threats and the affirmation of Slovakia's place among Western liberal democracies[1], this process is fragile and could easily be reversed with a change in political representation.

At the same time, the COVID-19t infodemic in Slovakia has revealed the extent of gaps in crisis management and communication, which were either nonexistent or completely swayed by the impact of information operations and misinformation flows[2]. Such developments have threatened the handling of the pandemic and even the state's capacity to provide essential services, such as healthcare and education[3]. Information manipulation campaigns carried out by domestic and foreign actors further serve to reinforce stereotypical public perceptions and polarize public discourse[4], which leave Slovak society exposed to pro-Kremlin and other influences.

The following factors contribute to Slovakia's vulnerability to foreign malign influence:

- Lack of historical revisionism and systematic educational reform.
- Remnants of feudal premodern mentality, which translates into anti-democratic leanings and long-term sympathy with strong leaders.
- Outdated laws and security system (laws, structures and processes) that fail to effectively reflect changes in the security environment.
- Polarization of society driven by populist and anti-system political representatives.
- Vast number of actors on digital platforms spreading disinformation, coupled with swathes of Slovak society that lack digital skills.

Following tactics are used to exploit these vulnerabilities:

- Exploitation of divisive issues in popular problematic outlets to promote pro-Kremlin narratives and supporting these outlets[5] through establishing connections with specific journalists[6].
- Development of informal contacts with high-level politicians or security force representatives.
- Establishment and/or support of paramilitary and extremist organizations that posture as seemingly innocuous motorcycle or youth clubs but which receive training in Russia,[7] supplement the activities of security forces[8], and recruit fighters for the conflict in Ukraine.[9]
- Cooperation with and support of some historic organizations and veterans involved in the anti-fascist resistance to reinforce certain pro-Kremlin narratives and propaganda[10].

Public perceptions are Slovakia's weakest spot

Public perceptions in Slovakia pose the highest risk in terms of susceptibility to manipulation, according to the Vulnerability Index findings. Complex historical and social factors contribute to this reality. The lack of constructive debate about public policies, and problematic aspects of Slovak history - including the alleged "pan-Slavic heritage", the fascist Slovak State, and the Slovak Socialist Republic - are reflected in obsolete education curricula that reinforce misleading perceptions.

The combination of a diverse information landscape in which good quality mainstream media coexist with burgeoning disinformation outlets[11] and weak digital literacy/critical thinking skills among the general population[12] results in higher vulnerability to pro-Kremlin or domestic propaganda and disinformation.

Representative public opinion surveys conducted over many years have consistently demonstrated that Slovakia ranks among countries in the region with the highest tendency to believe in conspiracy theories, and the majority of the population does not trust mainstream media[13]. These deficiencies are exploited and further perpetuated by a range of actors.

The vast network of disinformation and pro-Kremlin actors online exert an almost uninhibited influence on their followers. The substantial proportion of this influence takes place on Facebook, as the digital network has over three million users in Slovakia[14], representing 60% of the population[15]. Popular posts on problematic Facebook pages (promoting disinformation and hate speech) generated 73% more interactions than posts on the pages of standard media outlets during the Slovak parliamentary elections[16].

Given this scope for audience engagement and the fact that anti-system actors have developed networks of cooperation which are both profitable and robust[17], the Kremlin's strategy to influence public perception in Slovakia is relatively hands-off.

The Kremlin exerts a direct influence on Slovak Facebook through official pages, such as the page of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia and the RF Defense Attaché Office page, which was criticized for sharing disinformation in the past[18]. However, this influence is rather peripheral compared to the impact of domestic actors the narratives of which mirror the Kremlin's interests[19]. Language proximities contribute to this situation as well. Given that 35% of visitors to Sputnik News Czech Republic are from Slovakia (an increase from 29% in June 2020)[20], the Kremlin does not need a Slovak version of this propaganda channel. 16% of pages found on Slovak Facebook also appear in the Czech network, and 10% are the same as on Hungarian Facebook, thus increasing Slovaks' exposure to disinformation and propaganda originating in these countries too[21].

Pro-Kremlin domestic actors are facilitating the dissemination of Kremlin's narratives as content from the periphery of Kremlin-affiliated Facebook pages travels through anti-Ukrainian communities, which in turn are picked up by Slovak and Czech disinformation channels. These have strong connections with anti-system political forces[22], which have become instrumental in bringing anti-system narratives into politics and the media mainstream.

Although not all sections of the Slovak population are receptive to manipulation campaigns, certain characteristics correlate with higher susceptibility such as lower education and higher age (55 years and over)[23]. Other factors include dissatisfaction with how the democratic system works, low trust in public institutions, and a willingness to trade human rights and liberties for other economic or social benefits[24].

Role of the state and political actors

Some political representatives have been capitalizing on these vulnerabilities in public perceptions and the information landscape to score political points. One of the key players is Andrej Danko, leader of the Slovak National Party (SNS). Serving as the Speaker of the Parliament and a leader of the coalition party between 2016-2020, he managed to influence Slovakia's foreign policy[25]. He has achieved this both symbolically with his frequent visits to Moscow and speeches at the Duma, and practically by stopping the adoption of defense and security strategies that label Russia as a challenge,[26] as well as preventing the expulsion of Russian diplomats after the Skripal case.

Political influence on state administration constitutes another vulnerability. The common practice of changing key administrative positions in the state apparatus after a change of government weakens institutions, and opens scope for political corruption and influence. Corruption continues to be perceived as a key challenge across all institutions, including the judiciary. While reforms and anti-corruption initiatives are ongoing, the pushback against these efforts points to a web of corrupt civil servants fighting to retain the status quo.[27] Furthermore, the lack of situational awareness regarding new security threats and information manipulation efforts enables malign actors to infiltrate state administration. All of these factors hinder the possibility of an effective whole-of-government approach in tackling foreign interference and hybrid threats.

→ Policy recommendations for Slovakia

1

Reform the security system by establishing clear coordination mandate to dismantle departmentalism

"The Slovak security system is like a headless octopus - each tentacle represents a branch with its own responsibilities and power, but there is no coordination because the head is missing," declared a National Security Authority expert during an interview conducted as part of Vulnerability Index research. The Slovak security system's reform thus needs to be top-down driven, ideally through the Office of the Government with strengthened capacities and responsibilities to coordinate and consolidate security institutions and processes, and establish an efficient exchange of information.[28] A clear distinction of competences, especially in times of peace, and setting up horizontal cooperation structures between various public institutions, are a must to diminish existing bottle-necks and provide better direction for institutions at the regional and local levels. Such a clear mandate for coordination will drive compliance among other public institutions.

2

Increase situational awareness

→ Civil servants, including members of the armed forces, represent a "human vulnerability" that can become both targets of influence operations as well as perpetrators. This needs to be recognized, and appropriate safeguards, such as education, should be established.

→ The Ministry of Interior, in cooperation with other public/ security institutions, should conduct an "audit of knowledge and situational awareness" to map out the susceptibility and vulnerability of public servants towards malign influence, whether domestic or foreign, and assess the resonance of anti-system and Kremlin narratives among them.

→ Security guidelines and curricula should be developed for civil servants, members of crisis management, and MPs.

→ The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with other public institutions, should initiate a substantial reform of the educational system so that teaching curricula include more history classes to enable critical engagement with contentious historical eras, with a particular focus on the 20th century. The concept of digital citizenship, along with the development of digital and critical thinking skills, needs to be fostered. Educational reform should also include life-long programs aimed at various age groups and marginal communities.

→ Updating security reports' methodology and data collection is crucial to increase situational awareness. Current security reports, especially those collected from regional public institutions, do not reflect changes in the security environment and thus lack information on hybrid threats and information operations. Improved reporting and data collection will not only increase situational awareness at all state levels, but could also provide data-driven policies and counter-measures.

→ The regular update of national strategies should become standard practice.

3

Strengthen the information landscape

→ Coordinated strategic communication efforts across all key state institutions should be institutionalized, ideally through the Office of the Government, responsible for coordinating know-how exchange and communication activities.

→ Key strategic narratives should be developed through putting in place data-driven processes and capacities to create efficient communication strategies. Individual public institutions should then develop specific communication strategies in line with the overarching strategy.

→ Initiating society-wide debate to critically assess Slovak history and national myths is needed to challenge their role in promoting pro-Kremlin narratives and autocratic tendencies. New frameworks emerging from this critical whole-of-society debate should be communicated in a coordinated manner across key state institutions.

→ Narratives that counter prevalent conspiracy theories and disinformation should constitute a key part of the communication efforts of all institutions. The pro-active communication of counter-narratives is more advisable than debunking, nonetheless, it is important to establish debunking capacities for cases of alarming messages dissemination.

→ More open and direct communication about current challenges should become the norm, while the rhetoric should be factual and empathic. While polarizing emotive messaging that elucidates fear and hatred may temporarily score political points, it also generates public vulnerability towards foreign and/ or authoritarian influence.

→ The Ministries of Culture and Education should play a more active role in increasing societal resilience and participating in the development and implementation of these strategic narratives and communication campaigns, as these institutions are instrumental in fostering essential frameworks for the way society's collective consciousness develops

→ Fostering an environment in which quality independent media can flourish in Slovakia should become a key priority. This includes communicating the importance of quality media to constituents, appropriate protections for journalists facing threats, as well as policies that contribute to favorable market conditions to ensure that independent media are financially sustainable and free from oligarchic influence.

→ **References**

1 https://www.mosr.sk/49526-en/rezort-obrany-predstavil-expertom-na-globse-cu-akcny-plan-koordinacie-boja-proti-hybrid-nym-hrozbam/

2 https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/20/pandemic-pushes-slovakia-to-finally-target-dis-information/

3 https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/ctwvmgq/koronavirus-nemocnice-sa-plnia-rychle-jsie-zacali-sa-prve-presuny-pacientov/

4 European Parliament: The impact of disinformation campaigns about migrants and minority groups in the EU, p. 29, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plm-rep/COMMITTEES/INGE/DV/2021/07-12/IDADis-information_migrant_minorities_EN.pdf

5 Such as Zem a Vek (Earth and Age) or Hlavné správy (Main News)

6 https://infosecurity.sk/dezinfo/sef-sis-rus-ki-diplomati-financuju-alternativne-media/

7 https://dennikn.sk/blog/1379854/pe-ter-svrcek-velitel-slovenskych-brancov/

8 https://slovensko.hnonline.sk/1783859-slov-enskymi-brancami-sa-zaobera-aj-ministerst-vo-skolstva-je-pripravene-ich-nepustat-na-pred-nasky

9 https://dennikn.sk/57900/rozhovor-s-branca-mi-co-je-zle-na-tom-cvicit-v-lese-zbranou/

10 Hybridné hrozby na Slovensku: Polovojenské a extrémistické skupiny. Analýza legislatívy, štruktúr a procesov, p. 10, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Hybridn%C3%A9-hroz-by-na-Slovensku-Polovojensk%C3%A9-a-ex-tr%C3%A9mistick%C3%A9-skupiny.pdf

11 Visualising influence: Information bubbles and ideological proximities on Czech, Hungarian & Slovak Facebook, p. 20, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/up-loads/2020/10/Visualising_influence.pdf; https://euractiv.sk/section/buducnost-eu/news/falosne-spravy-vo-v4-vlady-su-casto-sucastou-problemu/

12 OECD Skills Strategy Slovak Republic: Assessment and Recommendations, p. 13, https://www.oecd.org/skills/centre-for-skills/OECDSkillsStrategySlovakRepublicReportSum-maryEnglish.pdf

13 GLOBSEC Trends 2021: Central and Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic, p. 55, https://www.globsec.org/publications/glob-sec-trends-2021/

14 https://www.statista.com/statis-tics/1029968/facebook-users-slovakia/

15 https://www.worldometers.info/world-popu-lation/slovakia-population/

16 Slovak parliamentary election 2020 Liberalism as a threat, Facebook as a battlefield, p. 10, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Slovak-parliamentary-elec-tion-2020.pdf

17 https://freedomhouse.org/country/slovakia/nations-transit/2018

18 http://www.antipropaganda.sk/minister-stvo-zahranicia-si-predvolalo-ruskeho-diplo-mata-za-sirenie-dezinformacii-status-na-face-booku-vsak-neskor-stiahlo/

19 Visualising influence: Information bubbles and ideological proximities on Czech, Hungarian & Slovak Facebook, p. 55

20 https://www.similarweb.com/website/cz.sputniknews.com/#overview

21 Visualising Influence: Information bubbles and ideological proximities on Czech, Hungarian & Slovak Facebook p. 24

22 Visualising influence: Information bubbles and ideological proximities on Czech, Hungarian & Slovak Facebook, p. 7

23 Klingová, Sawiris, Hajdu, Kortiš (eds.) War on People's Hearts and Minds, 2021, non-public report

24 Voices of Central and Eastern Europe, p. 25, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Voices-of-Central-and-East-ern-Europe-read-version.pdf, Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Slovakia Country Report, p. 5, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/up-loads/2020/09/Voices-of-Central-and-Eastern-Europe_Slovak-country-report.pdf

25 https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Default.aspx-?sid=poslanci/poslanec&PoslanecID=929&Ci-sObdobia=7

26 https://dennikn.sk/1166628/sns-blokuje-pri-jatie-dokumentov-ktore-oznacuju-putinovo-rus-ko-za-hrozbu/

27 https://dennikn.sk/2569266/kym-pcolin-skemu-nasadili-puta-zacal-vojnu-v-policii-inter-aktivny-sprievodca-kto-je-kto-video/

28 Expert interviews