



Report on disinformation in Slovakia in 2023





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STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

Facebook page *Hoaxy a podvody - Polícia SR (2023)*

2.837.752 unique visitors

1.100.000+ interactions with all posts

151.232 followers

152.431 published comments

12.000+ private messages received from the public

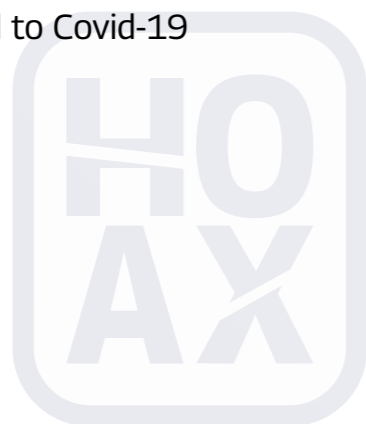
1.271 published posts (excluding reshared posts from other pages)

615 debunked disinformation related to the Russian war in Ukraine

140 posts warning about online fraud

112 debunked hoaxes concerning various topics

16 debunked hoaxes related to Covid-19



AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Dear readers, in your hands, you're holding the Report on disinformation in Slovakia in 2023. If you remember its previous two editions, you will immediately notice a difference in the title alone. This year's edition had to exclude the phrase "of the Police Force". Although this isn't a report of the Police Force, it is authored by the same person who created the previous two reports - me.

As reported by the media, at the end of November, I decided to leave the ranks of the police. This decision came following interventions into the strategic communication of "our" Department of Communication and Prevention of the Presidium of the Police Force not only by the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, but by its highest representative - its "boss" so to speak. I have been working as part of the communication of various departments of the ministry since 2015, yet I have never encountered anything like this in my entire career.

Since I disagreed with the politicization of the police's communication and refused to be transferred to a position to be tolerated on, one which had nothing to do with my specialisation, I decided to quit.

Events continued to unfold at a rapid pace ever since. The department lost two-fifths of its employees within a month. The popular "Hoaxes and frauds - Slovak Police" page ceased all operations on Facebook and Instagram. Workplace purges took place all across the state administration to such an extent that they affected not only executive employees, but ordinary civil servants as well. Why? Because they did their jobs and refused to participate in its politicization.

I couldn't resist the idea of creating the third edition of the disinformation overview, the previous releases of which garnered success not only in domestic, but in foreign professional circles as well.

In addition to a situational report on the state of disinformation, an annual overview like this can also provide laypersons and experts alike with a kind of behind-the-scenes look into the fight against hoaxes and frauds in the police, which, unfortunately, ended after almost seven years.

The actions and behaviour of those controlling these purges keep convincing me on a daily basis that they've never had a clue what our work entailed. With their ill-advised (or deliberate?) decision, they reduced the defence capability of our state in the fight against a new, modern enemy - hybrid threats.

I hold no grudges against these people, the world isn't falling apart and, sooner or later, all of this will catch up with them. The question is to what extent all of this will damage the security interest of the Slovak Republic, its system of government and the lives and health of all its citizens regardless of political affiliation.

In light of all this, I thought it appropriate to write such a preface, which would have never been part of any yearbook published under the Police Force. I wanted to clarify the situation and to emphasize that this is not an official product of the Slovak Police. This is why you won't find their logo in it. Should I present conclusions related to the Police Force at any point in this report, they will only be of descriptive character falling into the time of my work there and it will not be the opinion of the institution as such.

I wrote this yearly overview exactly like I wrote the previous two. It doesn't include any names of politicians, nor the names of political parties. The sole difference is this preface.

Last but not least, allow me to thank my closest colleagues for their long-standing cooperation in the fight against hoaxes within the framework of the police. At this point, I can't help but mention that I am proud that the police's activities against hybrid threats remained independent and apolitical for so many years. No member of our analytical team has ever succumbed to political pressure or threats coming from the mouths of unknown people, influencers of the disinformation scene or politically exposed persons. Despite their efforts over the years, there was no change in the scope of activities of the Department. The first change came only after a hard, direct political intervention related to the democratic results of the parliamentary elections.

I would also like to thank those who worked or are still working at other state institutions and were always more than helpful in our cooperation.

A thank you goes out to all professional capacities - institutions and individual experts alike - who provided us with expert opinions in the event that a given disinformation related to an area outside the direct scope of operation of the police.

The biggest thank you goes to everyone who supported us. Whether in the form of following our social media, likes, comments, shares or various other ways - it wouldn't make sense without you. If it weren't for you, the Slovak Police would've never created the most followed police social media accounts per capita in Europe, including the most followed anti-hoax platform in Slovakia. On behalf of our entire team, I would like to thank you for the countless messages of support we've been receiving over time, as well as during the difficult times towards the end of 2023.

Once again, a big thank you to you all. May this yearbook not only be a memento of our joint success, our true patriotism, but also a memento of hope that we will be ready to defend our country again at any time.

1 INTRODUCTION

By the end of 2023, following the parliamentary elections, there were substantial changes in strategic communication and the fight against disinformation in Slovakia. Representatives of the new government dampened long-term activities in this area, publicly attacked several civil servants, even going as far as firing or forcing many to leave, thus paralyzing the defence capabilities of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as "SR").

Said changes also affected the Police Force (hereinafter referred to as "PF"), within which the fight against hybrid threats *de facto* ceased to exist.

Within its framework, the Department of Communication and Prevention of the Presidium of the Police Force (hereinafter referred to as "Department") dealt with disinformation between 2017 and 2023. It carried out its activities inwards via cooperation with other domestic and foreign security forces and other bodies, and outwards through public communication in a proactive, preventive, educational and reactive manner.

The elimination of key departments and/or units across the state administration came despite the fact that 2023 saw the growth of various types of disinformation and manipulations, which significantly impacted the real lives of its recipients - whether in the form of various carried out activities, or in the increase of belief in several types of disinformation.

In comparison with the past, 2023 wasn't dominated by a single predominant topic (2021 - Covid, 2022 - the Russian war in Ukraine), but by a mixture of diverse, strong narratives with the same goals:

- 1. to create information chaos,**
- 2. to strengthen the distrust in state authorities,**
- 3. to fulfil personal goals of interest groups and individuals.**

Disseminators, carriers or creators of disinformation were not only Russian/pro-Russian groups, fake profiles, private accounts or real people, but politically exposed persons as well. From the PF's point of view, it was difficult to react to the disinformation of the last group mentioned previously, since it had to remain apolitical and couldn't be drawn into a political battle. In case of dangerous disinformation of this kind, the police never named their authors, nor their party affiliation.

Civil society remained a valuable source of information, as citizens continued to contact the police with tips on disseminated disinformation on a daily basis. This mutually built relationship between a state institution and citizens was one of the core pillars of success in terms of reaction time to fake news. A special chapter was the pub-

lication (with consent) of citizens' experiences in regard to the impact of disinformation on themselves or their family members.

It's possible to assume that the communication model built on the aforementioned basis contributed to the increase of public trust in the PF. Various survey results showed an unprecedented level of trust.

Security in the Slovak information space wasn't only undermined by foreign influences associated with the Russian-led hybrid war, but by domestic actors as well. The rapid pace of publishing dangerous fake and manipulated news, the mutual cooperation of the main actors with individuals and various proxy channels, and the inability of social network operators in combating disinformation and hateful content all served as the basis of success of influencing public opinion in favour of lies.

During the first 11 months of 2023, the Department continued its activities, pointed out specific disinformation, published numerous preventive-educational campaigns and cooperated with various bodies or authorities in order to build the country's defence and security capabilities within current legal possibilities.

The publication of specific disinformation as a warning by the police often discouraged its authors from similar actions and resulted in the deletion of said content by the authors themselves. This was the only successful tactic the Department could implement in terms of its competences.

In addition to the variety of disinformation, the Department also noticed a similar trend in online fraud as well. The number of warnings from citizens and intercepted methods reached record-setting numbers. Proactive communication by the police managed to save potential victims of modern crimes, which always involved the risk of losing substantial financial resources.

2023 also brought awards, achievements and the very first security conference organized by the Department, which had the opportunity to present its activities in several foreign media prior to the parliamentary elections.

This yearly overview encompasses the most widely disseminated narratives with regard to the activities of the PF at the time, which means that it doesn't represent a complex, institution-wide view of the topic of hybrid threats in Slovakia, nor does it map any similar activities after December 2023 and later.

2 MAIN DISINFORMATION NARATIVES

As the disinformation narratives related to the Russian war in Ukraine slowly receded, the police noted the popularity of some individual topics, which became the leitmotifs of the disinformation scene in their time. All of them were tied to a certain time frame. When said time frame elapsed and the disinformation was debunked, its main carriers stopped working with it and the recipients deliberately overlooked this fact, they did not inquire about its content anymore.

The police didn't prosecute any individuals for creating the following key disinformation narratives. Social media operators didn't take any action against these fraudulent and deceptive topics despite the fact that in the first three cases, these were strong narratives with the potential to cause panic, chaos and other negative effects or even specific actions of the population.

The spread of these messages was often accompanied by virtual attacks against specific persons, threats of violence or death, bullyish behaviour and other negative effects and expressions, all of which contributed to a proportional growth of tension within society.

2.1 MOBILIZATION IN SLOVAKIA

The most prominent disinformation narrative with the biggest overlap into real life and influence on the actions of tens of thousands of people in 2023 was a false report about the mobilization (i.e. conscription) of adult men from the SR to the front-lines in Ukraine.

It's possible to say that, in a way, this was an information operation directed by local disinformation sources, groups and individuals alike. Despite the absence of a notional head of operation, this disinformation spread massively among the public and had significant impact.

The fake report on mobilization had several phases and consisted of several elements, which fit together and, from the point of view of its recipients, represented a logical chain of events, was supposed to culminate into the deployment of Slovaks to war.

1st phase - mobilization exercise

In Slovakia, mobilization exercises for selected district offices are held twice a year with the goal to test their administrative readiness for possible mobilization of residents. These exercises have been held for several years and are in no way connected with the Russian war in Ukraine.

Disinformation sources have misused the spring exercise in 2023 to present it as evidence of the upcoming, real mobilization. To support their claims, they published real documents about the exercise, reinforcing their claim to authenticity.

The goal of the 1st phase of the disinformation was:

- to cause panic in countries supporting Ukraine about possible involvement in the war based on lies about mass mobilization,
- to cause a sense of need and urgency to immediately end the war in favour of the Russian Federation (hereinafter referred to as "RF"),
- to create general information chaos and distrust in local state bodies.

2nd phase - the involvement of Slovaks in the war in September

In the 2nd phase, fake news about the direct involvement of Slovaks in the Russian war in Ukraine with a specific date - in September - was disseminated. This date was also later used in connection with the early parliamentary elections, when the then government supposedly wanted to thwart the citizens' right to vote by mobilizing them.

By constantly spreading the mobilization narrative in various forms and publishing of articles and posts from anonymous sources, as well as specific persons on a daily basis, they were preparing fertile ground for the mass spreading of the narrative among the public.

3rd phase - mobilization refusal

Disinformation sources took the narrative to its imaginary peak when they published a manual on how citizens can proactively avoid possible mobilization. Every Slovak citizen has the right to submit a form proclaiming mobilization refusal to his local district office. In the event of war, this form of refusal of military service means that the submitting person won't be sent to fight at the frontlines, however said person can still participate in related activities, such as digging trenches etc. In most cases, disinformation sources didn't communicate the obligation of these persons to help during a possible war in an alternate way, even if they refuse mandatory mobilization.

This phase of information manipulation had the biggest impact on the real lives of citizens, as a massive increase in the number of submitted forms to refuse military service was recorded. In previous years, there were no more than a few thousands. In 2023, their number exceeded 40,000.

The police had information about overburdened district offices, which handled these forms and answered questions from citizens. Furthermore, there was an increase in citizens' experience with conversations with their relatives, who warned them about mobilization and encouraged them to sign and submit said form.

In this connection, the PF informed the public about the option to submit a different "form", directly to the contact e-mail addresses of the Ministry of Defence of the RF, which were published via the police's social media. The form's content was a request to stop the war in Ukraine, which will subsequently bring peace and avoid the possibility of any mobilization. It contained the following text in Russian:

"I, the undersigned, hereby request the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation to stop the mobilization process and any other subsequent mobilizations in connection with the war in Ukraine.

As a citizen of the Slovak Republic, I wish for peace in Ukraine, I am against the war and refuse to look at deaths of soldiers of the Russian Federation anymore. Deploying more and more Russian soldiers to Ukraine prolongs the entire conflict and peace will not come any time soon this way.

Thank you for your understanding.

With kind regards and wishes of an early end to the mobilization and the arrival of peace."

4th phase - accompanying disinformation

During their active duration, or at a later time, the previous phases were accompanied by related disinformation, which were supposed to confirm their credibility:

- Poľsko mobilizovalo občanov do ruskej vojny na Ukrajine, 70 000 Poliakov preto utieklo, občanom SR sú posielané povolávacie rozkazy (polícia zaznamenala aj prípady skutočne odoslaných, avšak sfaľovaných rozkazov),
- Poland mobilized citizens for the Russian war in Ukraine, 70,000 Poles had fled in reaction,
- Slovak citizens are sent military summons (the police even recorded cases of actually sent, but falsified summons),
- George Soros ordered the mobilization of citizens of the SR and Czech Republic (hereinafter referred to as "CR") to Ukraine,
- only vaccinated citizens will be mobilized,
- only unvaccinated citizens will be mobilized,
- Slovak textile factories began sewing uniforms due to the upcoming mobilization.

In this case, it was the most successful information operation in 2023. Even reactive communication of some state bodies and authorities, which could've been better at both qualitative and quantitative levels, didn't contribute to its elimination. No persons were prosecuted for spreading said disinformation, nor did Meta take any steps to delete or flag posts containing them.

Disinformation sources didn't return to the mobilization narrative in September, nor at any later date. When the PF retrospectively recalled the falsehood of this disinformation as part of a tactic to draw attention to the persistence of fake news, this post was deleted from the police's social media accounts by order of the Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as "Mol SR").

2.2 RADIATION FROM UKRAINE

In May 2023, disinformation about the spread of radiation from Ukraine began to spread massively on social media. The radiation leak was supposedly caused by the destruction of a Ukrainian warehouse in Khmelnytskyi by Russian forces. This disinformation was briefly circulated among the Russian public, where it didn't garner any success, as the leak as a result of a military strike was criticized as an irresponsible step towards Russia and its soldiers. In Slovakia, it was disseminated by extremist and disinformation, anonymous sites, as well as by some lower level politically exposed persons.

According to the disinformation, increased radiation levels were supposedly recorded in Slovakia and the radiation cloud was supposed to move deeper into the mainland. In order to prevent panic, the PF contacted the following institutions: the Nuclear Regulatory Authority of the Slovak Republic, Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic, Slovak Hydrometeorological Institute and the Centre for Countering Disinformation (Ukraine).

None of the institutions had recorded any increased measurements, which would indicate radiation either in Ukraine or Slovakia. Thanks to expert statements, the police prepared a brief and easily understandable summary for the public, in which it described the situation with currently measured levels and outlined several public sources, where said data could be observed. The debunking of this disinformation took place within 2-3 hours, which, considering the cooperation of so many institutions, even at international level, was very fast.

The goals of the disinformation about radiation:

- to induce fear in Ukraine and neighbouring countries,
- to utilise induced fear to create public pressure in connection with the suspension of aid to Ukraine,
- to create chaos within the fighting in Ukraine,
- to create information chaos in neighbouring countries

In connection with this narrative, the police intercepted several mass forwarded messages, mainly on WhatsApp, which warned about incoming radiation. The Department published screenshots of these messages, as well as screenshots of similar alarm messages from the past, in order to show the public, the regularity with which alarm messages are massively spread this way.

The public informed the police about the spillover of this disinformation into real life through messages on social media – these were cases where people warned their relatives about incoming radiation during phone calls or personal conversations. The police also publicly pointed out this aspect of the dangerous influence of fake news.

Some disinformation sources slightly twisted the narrative later on, when they shared fake news about increased radiation levels in Poland. Local authorities promptly refuted this, which was pointed out by the Slovak Police. Regarding Poland, a photo of border controls taken during implemented pandemic countermeasures was circulated as “evidence” of current controls in connection with the radiation leak, to which the PF also reacted.

The police returned to the fake news a month later, to recall its falseness in hindsight. In a new post, it published a virtual patch with the text “I survived the May radiation from Ukraine”. The aim of the post was to combine prevention and humour.

2.3 RIGGED ELECTIONS

In its annual report for 2022, the police proactively informed that the topic of rigged elections in Slovakia will become one of the main disinformation narratives.

In February 2023, the Department recorded the first attempts of its dissemination. Therefore, the police published a warning in March that such narrative could be massively spread via social media in the coming weeks. Several days later, it was first mentioned during a press conference organized by politically exposed persons.

What was interesting was the fact that this narrative was massively spread for the first time in the United States of America. The Slovak disinformation scene was thus inspired by a country, which it attacks in many cases through disinformation and manipulated posts.

The PF in cooperation with the Mol SR prepared a large-scale, preventive-educational campaign, the goal of which was to eliminate said disinformation. Based on the events from the US and Brazil, where belief in such fake news led to injuries and loss of life, this was a priority from the point of view of the ministry's strategic communication.

While the ministry explained the electoral system in Slovakia, including the counting and evaluation of votes, in a detailed series, the content of the police's communication included additional topics. The police published information from the US and Brazil via its social media in order to show the consequences of believing fake news. The police managed to create a video interview with a US policeman, who directly intervened during the so-called march to the Capitol in 2020. In another case, the police published an interview with an election expert, Rastislav Kužel from the non-profit organization MEMO 98, who briefly explained the rigged elections narrative and the electoral system in Slovakia in several parts.

Said narrative dominated the Slovak information space primarily in the spring of 2023. Its circulation was minimized in summer and it didn't reappear prior or after the elections in September. Its disappearance from the public space could also be explained by the fact that some of its disseminators from the ranks of politically exposed persons were aware of their potential electoral success, which would've ultimately been in contrast with the disinformation about the falsification of its results. Following the elections, the narrative wasn't disseminated in any way.

Another observation related to the early election referendum in January 2023. In connection with the referendum, there were no disinformation about the possible falsification of its results. The referendum was an initiative of the political spectrum, which included politically exposed persons that later spread the narrative of rigged parliamentary elections.

Examples of specific disinformation related to the elections:

- it's necessary to bring your own pen, because the one in the polling station can be erased (votes will be attributed to other candidates),
- votes are counted by an automated system,
- the company ESET has something to do with the election system,
- elections around the entire world are rigged, because the winners have almost identical results,
- ballots must have a red stamp only (in reality, it could've been blue/black as well, while there were cases when citizens actually called the police to polling stations when they saw a blue stamp).

2.4 TRIP TO BRUSSELS

In April 2023, the European Commission's Representation in Slovakia organized an official business trip for more than 20 invited participants. These were mainly employees of security and state agencies, supplemented by several participants from the third sector. The goal of the trip was to visit relevant institutions to exchange information, know-how and best practices regarding strategic communication and countering hybrid threats.

In May 2023, a politically exposed person organized a press conference, during which said person announced that trip was the "Slovak Watergate", directed against the political opposition at that time. This person quoted the statements of some of the trip's participants from a document that had the insignia of the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic (hereinafter referred to as "MoD SR"). At that time, the ministry refused to comment on the topic. Only the former minister, who was in office at the time of said trip, commented on it.

The quoted statements, which were included in the document and were made at the aforementioned press conference, were contrary to reality - they were either manipulated, falsified or taken out of context.

In the case of the PF, the politically exposed person named David Púchovský, a member of the PF at the time, whom the person initially identified as a high-ranking police official, which did not correspond to reality, as he was a rank-and-file lieutenant without any senior or high-ranking position.

According to the politically exposed person, Púchovský supposedly said during the meeting at the NATO headquarters in Brussels: "[He] requested NATO representatives to send Counter-Hybrid Support Teams to the Slovak Republic. In the event that he cannot request it as a representative of the Police Force, he asks what the appropriate procedure and processes are, meaning that he requested NATO to send a special team to Slovakia, which would deal with the opposition."

Said person completely fabricated the second part of the statement "about dealing with the opposition", since it wasn't found in any document, but the first part was. The authors of the document were Peter Ihnatišín and Tomáš Graňák from the MoD SR, who both took part in the business trip in question.

How were the statements in the document manipulated?

In the case of Púchovský, it concerned a meeting at the NATO headquarters, where he, as part of the entire delegation, learned from NATO employees about the existence of an analytical team that can be sent to a NATO member state in case it has problems with the influence of disinformation.

In response to this information, Púchovský reacted with a smile and asked "So when will they send it to Slovakia?", prompting the laughter of everyone present, including two employees of the MoD SR, as the question only described the bad situation in Slovakia regarding resistance to fake news.

Púchovský's quoted question was subsequently manipulated into the document of the MoD SR as evidence that he's requesting the deployment of such a team to Slovakia.

The document does not contain other statements by Púchovský from the same meeting. It was a comment, according to which the deployment of such a team prior to the parliamentary elections in September 2023 would be impossible, as it would provide an easily exploitable topic as part of the election campaign. The second comment related to the possible misuse of the meeting at the NATO headquarters by political actors as evidence of inviting "troops" to Slovakia - which was ultimately misused as such later on.

At the headquarters of another institution, Púchovský said that "if the govern-

ment governs chaotically, we, regular state employees, can try our best, but we won't be able to win the fight against disinformation." Not even this statement made it into the document of the MoD SR as it would've been evidence of the criticism towards the political opponents of the politically exposed person who used this business trip to its advantage.

Following the press conference, three representatives of state institutions, including Púchovský, were invited to the MoD SR. At the ministry, they received an apology from the head of the minister's office and the two authors of the document - for the "unfortunately worded statements" and for "the leak of the document into the hands of a politically exposed person".

No additional explanations were provided to them. Nor was it explained why an unofficial document formulated in such a manner, which had nothing to do with an official report from a foreign business trip, was even created. The ministry provided no comments on how it was possible that manipulated statements were leaked from a secure NATO workplace operating under a strict security regime.

During the following months until the parliamentary elections, cooperation and communication with the MoD SR remained only at necessary level due to the increased distrust of other agencies and institutions involved in building strategic communication in Slovakia.

Following the elections, in January 2024, Peter Ihnatišín, one of the authors of the document, was appointed as the new director of the Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats operating under the MoI SR.

3 RUSSIAN WAR IN UKRAINE

Even though disinformation and manipulations about the Russian war in Ukraine gradually receded from the information space for Slovak recipients at the expense of other topics, they were maintained in a stable position throughout 2023.

The following areas were among the primary goals of their effects:

- the support of the RF in the conflict,
- the support of public pressure to suspend aid to Ukraine,
- the support of the increase of hate towards refugees from Ukraine,
- the support of information chaos,
- the support of domestic actors with the potential to fulfil the interests of the RF in Slovakia,
- the increase of distrust towards local state institutions.

Due to capacity and logical reasons characteristic of every war or armed conflict, it was impossible for the PF to verify some information and label it either as true or as a disinformation. Therefore, the publishing of verified up-to-date reports and preventive-education campaigns became part of the Department's strategic communication.

For example, this included retrospectively pointing out of unfulfilled Russian threats (Europe will freeze without Russian gas), informing about the influence of propaganda for Russian audiences and its aspects (threats towards a plethora of countries, including the SR, absurd propaganda videos), publishing of up-to-date reports about the murders of civilians and specific actions of Russian soldiers, explaining the interconnection between politics and sports in the RF or sharing of real intervention of the Russian police against the domestic population demanding peace.

Even in 2023, some manipulative sources were hiding their affiliation with the RF by promoting the slogan "We want peace," which in their understanding meant Russia's victory. Peace was also mentioned when building the image of this country with the phrase "Peace comes from the East," which ignored all conflicts caused by Russia in the past. This is why the Department's activities also focused on the explaining historical context, as it was literally being twisted, turned and adapted to the needs of the current RF.

When informing about events from the warfront, a disinformation paradox often occurred. While some attacks of the Russian army were downplayed as a form of help to the "oppressed Russian minority" without any impact on civilian infrastructure and civilian lives, in many other cases, absurd and non-existent achievements or victories were mentioned.

Another category, for example, were repeatedly published predictions about an upcoming, all-decisive attack, after which the RF will win the war. The evidence of the advancing success of its army were supposed to be the deaths of foreign generals fighting in Ukraine or a convoy of vehicles en route from Kyiv as evidence of its inhabitants fleeing in panic. The first case involved people, who were never in Ukraine to begin with. In the second case, it truly was a photo depicting a convoy of vehicles, however, they were heading towards Kyiv.

Reports of destroyed foreign military equipment and tech were published on social media - these were often fake news.

The efforts of disinformers to strengthen Russia's position didn't only relate to the events on the warfront, but also to its positions abroad. Their common denominator was the fake notion of growing worldwide support of Russia and opposition to Ukraine. For example, according to fake news, some countries were supposed to impose sanctions for displaying Ukrainian flags. In Croatia, chanting the greeting "Glory to Ukraine" was supposed to have been made fineable. Anti-Ukrainian graffiti was supposedly appearing in many places around the globe. The Soviet flag was supposedly flying on the roof of the German parliament building. Statements made by foreign politicians were taken out of context in such a way as to act in favour of Russia or against Ukraine.

An interesting combination of disinformation was the information about a fire-fighting action during the large-scale wildfires in Greece. The action was supposedly conducted by Russian planes, because according to the authors of the fake report, NATO wasn't able to aid its member state. The adoration of Russian technology on one hand, the continuous attack on an international organization on the other one.

The "raid" of the leader of the Wagner Group towards Moscow in June 2023 attracted worldwide attention. During the next few hours and days, the activity of prominent disinformers in the Slovak information space was reduced to a minimum. They, too, were taken aback by the action, which at certain points seemed to be teetering on the edge of triggering a civil war. Only a few days later did the activity of these persons return to normal, mainly thanks to the published opinion instructions and arguments from the Kremlin.

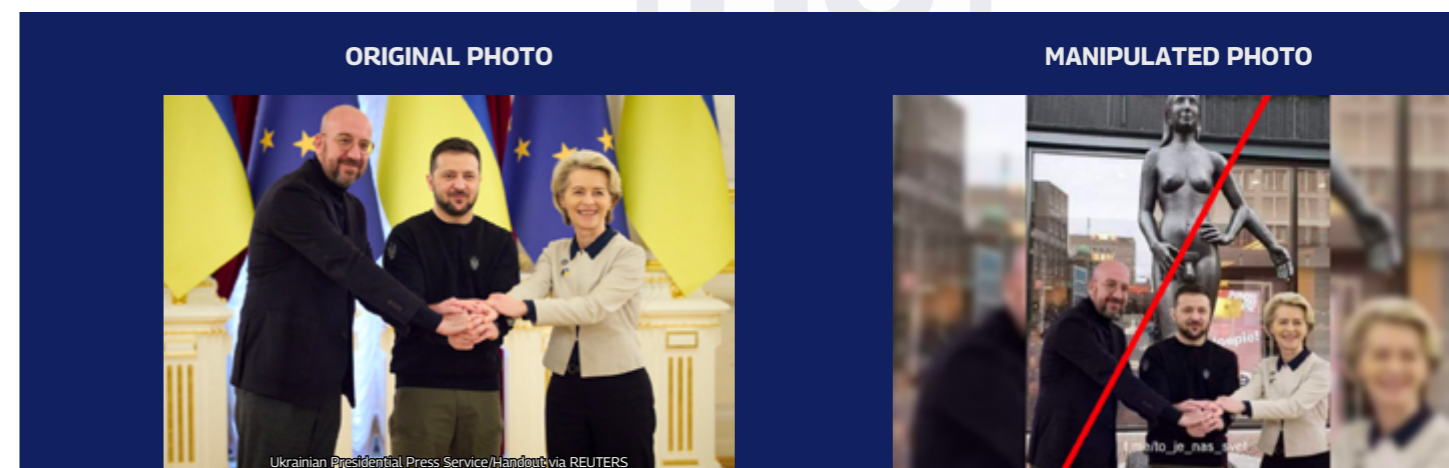
The same entities overlooked verified information about Russian losses and defeats on the frontlines with a similar degree of ignorance, while at the same time being more than happy to highlight every failure of the Ukrainian military. Moreover, there were moments, when, at the same time, they were spreading fabricated news about Russia's success and Ukraine's failures, respectively.

Even in 2023, some groups continued to share disinformation narratives from 2022, which had already been explained and debunked repeatedly by then. This was a group of people who, through this strategy, wanted to benefit as much as possible by asserting themselves in the political field. As an example, we can name a Facebook

post, according to which the massacre in Bucha was fabricated. The author of this disinformation was cautious in his actions and published similar fake reports exclusively by copying/resharing the opinions and videos of other sources, acting as though he wasn't sharing his own opinion, which could theoretically complicate his criminal liability. Among these persons, the initial sources of said opinions, were often controversial personalities - e.g. a paedophile and a racist.

Other tactics of disinformers included publishing of occasional posts about the war or promoting the RF in discussion groups, whose names had nothing to do with these topics (groups about cooking, retro memories). Another popular, new method included the use of media logo watermarks on manipulated photos - giving the reader the impression that the logo of a credible media outlet confirmed the photo's authenticity.

The last example is a manipulated photo of the President of Ukraine, the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission. The original photo depicted them standing in front of flags in Kyiv. The edited picture placed a sculpture of a transvestite from the Netherlands behind their back. The aim of the post was to attack the LGBTI+ community, while simultaneously perpetuating hatred towards the European Union and Ukraine. Meta didn't intervene against this post in any way.



3.1 REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE

Attacks against refugees from Ukraine continued online, there was no massive increase of related crimes from the "real world", or the number of their reports respectively. Disinformation accounts either put Ukrainians in the position of a group of people who receive disproportionately large benefits from Slovak authorities, or blamed them for various criminal activities without providing any evidence.

Mass-distributed narratives, for example, included the information that refugees supposedly received a financial contribution of 25,000 euros to purchase real estate.

This disinformation was initially shared via WhatsApp and subsequently as a screenshot on Facebook.

It wasn't just financial benefits Ukrainians were supposedly receiving from the state, but also other, smaller benefits forming a puzzle to incite hatred towards refugees. For example, another narrative informed about reserved seats at the train station in Bratislava only for Ukrainians or about their preferential treatment with mortgages.

Ukrainians became the target of false accusations of crimes not only in Slovakia. There was an increasing number of fraudulent phone calls, with Facebook accounts of specific persons warning about said calls and stating that the fraudsters on the other end of the line had a Ukrainian accent. Correctly identifying the difference between a Russian and Ukrainian accent is impossible for most people. It was rather a matter of instilling a negative sentiment towards refugees from Ukraine.

In another specific case, a real person published a post, informing about an attempted child kidnapping in front of a hospital in Slovakia. The kidnapping was supposedly attempted by a Ukrainian who offered the minor candy. In this case, the PF intensively checked the information published – it was discovered that the person in question was an Azerbaijani. This person was interrogated by a police patrol and stated that it's not unusual to give candy to minors in his home country. He did so in the presence of the child's mother, who informed about the case. Following the publishing of the original post with a warning that it was in fact a disinformation, its author deleted the original post. By that time, the post had been shared by thousands. If the PF hadn't warned about said post, its author would've probably left it online to this day, since any reporting of similar content to Meta didn't yield any concrete results.

Similar disinformation also appeared in the CR, where, for example, a false report about the stabbing of a young boy by a group of Ukrainians was recorded. In Slovakia, the narrative about violence between refugees was often repeated.

The inability of social network operators to act against disinformation is illustrated by the following example. An anonymous Slovak Facebook account known for producing fake news ever since the pandemic had published a post describing his discussion with a Ukrainian masseuse in Slovakia. This woman supposedly told the author of the post "real information about what is happening in Ukraine". It was a construct of all basic Russian disinformation, including the one about how there's no war in Ukraine. The conversation was supposed to go as far as the "woman from Ukraine" labelling her own countrymen, refugees, as economic migrants who do not face any kind of danger.

How was this disinformation created? It was a communication method, when its author presents his own opinions and lies in form of a conversation, or attributes them to a fictional character, although sometimes it can be a real person as well (most often V. Putin and a speech he never had or a statement he never made). During the pandemic, the same Facebook account shared made up quotes from a Japanese professor

about the origin of the Covid-19 virus, which was denied by the professor himself. Despite all of this, Meta has not deleted any of the two posts, nor has it flagged them in any way to this day.

3.2 EXAMPLES OF ADDITIONAL RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

- secret laboratories in Ukraine with kidnapped children kept for scientific experiments
- "Nazi biolaboratories" in Ukraine
- video of child victims from laboratories (video from China)
- the German army attacked Russia
- house build like a swastika in Ukraine (photo from India)
- foreign politicians doing the Nazi salute during their visit in Ukraine (manipulated picture)
- upon his arrival in the US, President Zelenskyy was greeted by a billboard with "Glory to Urine" (manipulated picture)
- President Zelenskyy's wife purchased jewellery worth millions of dollars
- Czech President Pavel predicted Russia's victory (edited, manipulated video)
- President Zelenskyy admitted to being a fascist on the cover of a German magazine (manipulated picture)
- CNN deleted a news report about genocide in Donbas (nothing was deleted)
- President Zelenskyy kicked a monument in Prague
- an OSCE observer confirmed the killing of children in Ukraine
- President Zelenskyy is a drug addict
- President Zelenskyy's office blackmailed Elon Musk for deleting his account on X
- swastika on a Ukrainian tank (manipulated picture)
- the international arrest warrant for President Putin is invalid
- Turkey accused Ukraine of blowing up the Kakhovka Dam
- President Zelenskyy's wife has an Israeli passport, prepares to flee (manipulated picture)
- Ukrainians set fire to a church upon hearing Russian from it (it was a church fire in Russia in 2013)
- Uzhhorod is full of food, the war is a fabrication, Ukrainians don't need help (real photos from the visit of the author of the manipulation)
- mother with a stroller is a homeless woman from Ukraine (it was a Slovak homeless man without a child)
- Slovak soldiers will be sent on a mission for Ukraine ("for Ukraine" meant that

the mission will be conducted on the territory of a member state of the European Union (hereinafter referred to as "EU") for the benefit of Ukraine, yet disinformers deliberately talked about a mission "to Ukraine" as evidence of the deployment of Slovak troops to war)

Four different manipulative tactics can be identified on the example of four additional disinformation:

1. Nazism in Ukraine

A published, real photo depicted swastikas in Kyiv. It was supposed to be proof of support of Nazism in Ukraine, i.e. the support for justifying the need for Russian military intervention. In reality, it was a photo from a World War II-era movie shoot. The movie was indeed filmed in Kyiv, but in 2011. There's even a paradox, as the movie's director was Russian. Disinformers labelled the photo as being from the present day.

Method: retrospective misuse of a real event in order to support one of the main Russian disinformation narratives

2. Putin and 5G networks

Disinformation about the harmful effect of the 5G network has almost disappeared from the Slovak disinformation space. One of the few mentions was its connection to Russia and its president Putin respectively. According to disinformers, the Russian president supposedly banned it, which was meant to illustrate his wisdom and foresight. In reality, Putin is a supporter of the 5G network. In this case, disinformers even misused their role model to support their own disinformation narratives. It wasn't the first time this has happened. In the past, they spread fake speeches president Putin never held in the same way. These fabricated speeches contained their own thoughts, which they wanted to give seriousness and credibility in such a deceptive way.

Method: dissemination of own disinformation through the misuse of celebrities or other well-known people

3. The year 1968

Attempts to revise historical events that could strengthen the current position of the RF continued to take place in the information space. In the case of Slovakia, it was once again the arrival of Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. The responsibility for the invasion was blamed on Ukraine or the then First Secretary Brezhnev, who was born on Ukrainian territory. Intensive, long-term, massive and systematic distortion of historical facts can have fatal impact on the formation of societal opinions in relation to its own country in the future. In addition to proactive state campaigns, the education system plays a key role.

Method: systematic effort to manipulate historical facts in order to fulfil the current goals of the RF

4. Dominik Hašek

The former Czech ice hockey goalie is a critic of the sports side of Russian propaganda, as he regularly condemns Russian athletes, as well as foreign athletes playing in Russia. He became the target of a disinformation campaign, according to which he was a member of the Czechoslovak secret police (ŠtB). This was a standard communication attack against a person who had to be compromised from the point of view of the RF. Similar attacks continued against other entities on a global scale. In 2021, Hašek filmed a video series for the PF, in which he explained his position on the war in Ukraine and sport, which is misused for political propaganda by Russia.

Method: compromising a well-known personality acting against the interests of the RF.

3.3 INFORMATION OPERATION LADOMIROVÁ

The PF didn't record a similar information operation in 2023 as it revealed in 2022 in the case of the cemetery in the village of Ladomirová. The Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bratislava, as well as its ambassador, were no longer involved in such an unconcealed way, even though the embassy's activities towards the public continued to be intensive.

The main remnant of the information operation was the ongoing police investigation, the purpose of which was to determine whether the then mayor of the village committed a crime when he removed concrete kerbs from the historical cemetery without permission - which was the fundamental topic of the entire operation.

The investigator decided that it was not a criminal offense and wanted to move the case to a misdemeanour proceeding. At that moment, the prosecutor's office intervened, there was a change of prosecutors and the new one returned the case back to the investigator for additional investigation. Several months later, the investigator made the same decision, with the prosecutor ultimately agreeing with him as well.

No one was prosecuted for the death threats made against the mayor.

4 OTHER DISINFORMATION

When compared to the previous year, 2023 saw an increased amount of disinformation on various topics. Said increase simultaneously meant that information overload of the public intensified, which grew hand in hand with information chaos in general.

This served as evidence of the limited options of state authorities in terms of defence or repression against fake news, as well as the ineffectiveness of internal tools of specific social networks. Disinformation was on the rise more than ever before. At the same time, it's necessary to understand that this publication and the activities of the PF capture only a small fraction of fake news in the Slovak information space.

Each year, the standard package of disinformation and manipulations pertains to Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO. Its constant questioning, the spread of fake news about made up restrictions and regulations, affective highlighting of foreign state powers criticising both international organisations and other professional or "folk" information operations aim to reduce the population's trust in the membership in said organisations.

For example, one of the predominant topics of 2023 was the forced consumption of insects or its mixing into other food, which, according to a survey conducted by the daily newspaper Denník N, every third Slovak supposedly believed.

Another topic related to the EU were electric cars, which in many cases were presented as malfunctioning and life-threatening. For their arguments, disinformers used cases of car scrapyard fires (or other locations), which had nothing to do with electric cars. In these manipulations, the factor of novelty is misused - part of the population possesses a natural fear of new technology, which disrupts their usual way of life, and which is exploited by disinformers - and when the possibility arises to combine it with attacks on international institution, it's a welcome communication tool. Its main method is to sow fear and mistrust.

Incidents with bears in nature were a specific topic in the Slovak information space. A number of videos or photos capturing the movement or attacks of bears were shared on social media. These weren't captured or created in Slovakia, yet their authors claimed otherwise. This was exclusively a political topic of solving the possible overpopulation of this animal, which was significantly misused to manipulate public opinion.

The past year saw two new phenomena - a community supporting Czechoslovakia and the creation of pictures using artificial intelligence.

The first case was a group of people refusing to recognize the current establishment of the CR and Slovakia, who had their own IDs produced for a fee. While we could talk about the economic interests of the producer, the heads of said organisation, its

activities as a whole began to show signs of sectarianism. In the public space, individual expressions of individuals or small groups protesting the exercise and interventions of the police, for example when speeding, due to the non-recognition of the current state establishment of said countries, were recorded. No steps have been recorded from public sources that could resemble the activities of similar structures from abroad intervening in terms of terrorism, which does not, however, exclude its further development into this stage.

In the case of artificial intelligence misuses (mainly in case of photos or images), the PF recorded an increase, which was manifested in individual, as well as politically exposed disinformation campaigns.

On the first day of 2023, a woman was murdered in eastern Slovakia. During the search for the perpetrator of this act, a disinformation channel published his alleged identity - a name with a photo. This was a non-participating person who had nothing to do with said act. The police immediately responded to this fact, as an innocent person was in potential danger. The real perpetrator was tracked down within several days and in early 2024, he was finally convicted.

The publication of the identity of several persons who were identified as child kidnappers represented a certain degree of danger. This was a false information. The topic of child kidnappings in the SR has been widespread ever since the days of the communist regime. Nonetheless, ever since gaining independence, there hasn't been a case of a child kidnapping recorded in Slovakia and this continued to be the case - there was no instance of a child kidnapping, not even a recorded attempt and all published reports were false.

Fake news was spread among members of the PF as well. Their main source was a Facebook group with more than 20,000 members, made up of active/former police officers, as well as the general public. For example, in relation with the activities of the police, disinformation about the cancellation of social benefits and severance pay was spread in said group, causing general criticism and resentment among group members.

The police didn't record an increase in alarm audio messages in 2023..

4.1 ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES OF OTHER DISINFORMATION

- Hungary left the EU
- questioning the EU in relation to Croatia joining Schengen and eurozone
- disinformation campaigns how the SR/CR are oppressed because of the EU
- German Chancellor Olaf Scholz is a descendant of Nazis
- the drug Nurofen is lethal, because it contains Graphene
- the drug Paracetamol contains a lethal virus

- disclosure of the “chemtrails” plan
- popular chocolate candies are made from ground cockroaches
- the elites force people to eat insects to destroy humanity
- the EU ordered the demolition of houses build before 1990
- the EU banned the production of cheese
- the President of the PF had a heart attack
- a list of members of the future caretaker government
- there was no earthquake in Turkey and Syria
- the earthquake in Turkey and Syria was caused by the US
- the earthquake in eastern Slovakia was caused by the US
- the HAARP system can trigger disasters anywhere in the world
- standard disinformation about the 9/11 attacks
- shops sell human body parts
- there’s a market with human flesh in London
- the coloured stripe on toothpaste indicates its toxicity, it can damage teeth
- stickers on fruits indicate its possible genetic modification
- mountain ranges aren’t of natural origin, they are remnants of “cities of titans”
- the fire in Banská Štiavnica was caused intentionally to destroy the city’s history
- an unemployed person with 4 children receives a bigger social contribution than a working person
- the transport of nuclear weapons on the territory of the SR
- American soldiers are in Bratislava (they were Italians)
- a popular chain of stores banned the use of standard checkouts, forcing customers to use self-service checkouts
- a woman in Dubnica nad Váhom was murdered by an African (it was a Slovak)
- various manipulated photos directed against the Slovak president
- a Czech politician got a tattoo of George Soros (manipulated photo)
- vehicles fell out of multistorey garages during protests in France (shot from a movie)
- NASA admitted to the moon landing being fake
- Globsec instructs the PF when to carry out border controls
- the UN lies about the global population - there are 4 billion people instead of 8 billion
- catastrophic predictions about the future of the world in various areas
- the impending collapse of Slovak banks and urging people to withdraw cash
- activists were forbidden to take Slovak flags to Devín Castle (the ban only applied to poles)

- a German weather forecast used flames as “support of global warming” (manipulated photo)
- attributing disinformation statements to well-known personalities who never said anything similar
- toxic, unwashable coating on fruits in stores

4.2 CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The PF published a warning about the need to verify information from multiple sources shortly after the beginning of the most recent conflict in the Gaza Strip. The police continuously monitored social media and were ready to actively communicate this topic in the event that it began to significantly impact the Slovak information space.

There was a risk, in which the interests of the RF could be promoted while supporting one side of the conflict. Until the end of 2023, there were no significant information impacts, which could directly affect the security of Slovak citizens.

Examples of disinformation narratives:

- made up successes of one of the parties of the conflict,
- dissemination of photos from previous conflicts,
- celebration of successes in the Gaza Strips (it was a celebration of football fans in Algeria),
- Israeli soldiers wore a swastika (manipulated photo),
- US soldiers were deployed to fight in Israel (it was a mission in Romania),
- manipulated photos of civilian casualties, refugees, misuse of artificial intelligence to generate photos (man with five children),
- Egyptians help carry water to Palestinians across the borders (they were smugglers from before the conflict).

A video that supposedly captured an Israeli policeman strangling a minor boy, who later died as a result, was worth a special mention. In reality, it was a 2015 video from Sweden, featuring a member of a private security company, not a policeman, who arrested two minor thieves. There was no publicly available information about their fates.

The weaker information grasp of the topic of the conflict in the Middle East can be attributed not only to its geographical distance for the Slovak population, but also by the absence of effective hybrid tools for the Slovak market from one of the sides of the conflict - which may change in the meantime, for example by the support of a more experience player in this field.

4.3 COVID-19

For the second year in row, there was a significant decrease in disinformation related to Covid-19, vaccination or anti-pandemic measures. In 2022, it was caused by the increase of hybrid threats from the RF. In 2023, it was the increase of various other disinformation.

Fake news creators returned to the same topics: the side effects, even lethal effects of vaccines, plans for a “new” pandemic and the upcoming regulation from the WHO, which could “order” new pandemics.

The deaths of well and lesser-known people have been misused as evidence of the fatal effects of vaccination. These opinions persisted even after the announcement of autopsy results. There was an interesting disinformation paradox – in the case of deaths of figures adored by the disinformation scene (for various reasons), there were no immediate speculations as to whether the vaccine was to blame, even though these persons may have been vaccinated.

The presentation of an extreme increase of “sudden” death among athletes was another strong narrative. Ultimately, this turned out to be a hoax – it was a statistic of all sudden deaths from around the world, not just a narrow group of people and its value wasn’t statistically relevant.

As part of its activities, the police recalled medical disinformation from the past, including those, according to which additional waves of the pandemic and emergency measures were to take place during 2023.

Examples of disinformation narratives:

- vaccines cause AIDS,
- facemasks are burned en mass in Germany (they were burned because of their expiration, not because they were ineffective),
- new pandemic measures will be implemented under the supervision of Bill Gates,
- Switzerland suspended vaccination due to side effects,
- the US government allowed the use of Ivermectin (it was never banned),
- a pandemic treaty to eliminate laws to protect human rights,
- Bill Gates’ secret plan to vaccinate the unvaccinated was uncovered.

5 PREVENTIVE AND EDUCATIONAL CAMPAIGNS

Preventive and educational campaigns were an important part of police communication in 2023 as well. Through one- or multi-part series, more complex topics and the essence of their manipulations were explained to the public.

The campaigns had various forms – graphics, infographics, picture posts, shorter and longer analyses, video series of different lengths etc. The common denominator in all cases were statements from experts in the given field and/or information from verified sources, its preventive character against the possible influence of fake news and educational activity to develop general resistance to hybrid threats.

In terms of quantity, they were dominated by campaigns focused on the Russian war in Ukraine, although two other campaigns achieved higher views and audience figures. These were campaigns supported by well-known Slovak personalities. These personalities didn’t receive any remuneration or other forms of benefits for their participation in said campaigns.

5.1 IT’S ABOUT OUR SLOVAKIA

In June 2023, a 90-second spot was created, directed and technologically processed by the PF. Its aim was to encourage the public to talk about the impact and danger of disinformation with their loved ones.

The video featured actresses Božidara Turzonovová, Zuzana Fialová and Kristína Svarinská and actor Marián Mitaš. The actors played family members, who gave their elderly relative a cell phone as a birthday gift. The elderly relative immediately fell victim to the influence of social media algorithms, as she became the target of various fake news. It was only thanks to the intervention of her family that she realized that these were disinformation, and she urged the viewers to help their relatives in the same way.

As she stated at the end of the video, “it’s about our Slovakia”, which symbolizes the final stage of the effects of all disinformation – the downfall of society and democracy.

5.2 HOAXES DON’T STICK WITH ME

In September 2023, the largest preventive-educational campaign to combat disinformation named “Hoaxes don’t stick with me” was published. The campaign was creatively designed by the PF, which simultaneously produced and edited all campaign videos. The MoI SR and the Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats took part in its professional processing, dissemination, offline form and financial sponsorship on social media.

The campaign's goal was to draw attention to traditional disinformation, manipulation techniques and the influence of fake news via eight videos, most of which featured prominent Slovak personalities. None of the performers received any pay for taking part in the campaign.

The videos featured:

- rapper and comedian Bekim Aziri (the handicapped artist pointed out the topic of medical disinformation)
- the first Slovak cosmonaut Ivan Bella (scientific disinformation)
- archbishop emeritus Róbert Bezák (disinformation are as old as humanity itself)
- 96-year-old Karol Mika, the oldest doctor in Slovakia (medical disinformation)
- traveller Martin Navrátil (disinformation concern the entire world)
- a Ukrainian policeman (disinformation about the Russian war in Ukraine)
- a Ukrainian soldier (ditto)
- actress Emília Vášáryová (disinformation during communism and today)

Each of the performers pointed out fake news that were somehow related to her or his profession or life. At the end of each video, each respective performer stuck a sticker with the campaign slogan "Hoaxes don't stick with me" on a selected object. The second campaign slogan, which was featured on all visual materials, was the hashtag #LETSSTOPHOAXES (originally "#ZASTAVMEHOAXY").

Radio and Television of Slovakia, the country's nationwide public broadcasting service, together with private televisions Markíza and JOJ repeatedly aired all spots free of charge based on an agreement with the PF.

The campaign also had an offline form – in form of stickers and pin badges with the campaign's logo. Part of the materials was available in publicly accessible areas of buildings of the MoI SR or the police. The other part was distributed free of charge based on orders from the public submitted via the police's social media. In total, citizens received 10,000 stickers and 2,000 pin badges.

Last but not least, the campaign also included posters displayed in public and non-public parts of buildings belonging to the aforementioned institutions.

Statistical overview of the campaign on social media of the PF and MoI SR:

- number of published posts (video, photo, graphics): **70**
- reach of all posts: **9.8 million**
- number of interactions of all posts: **4.8 million**
- number of views of 8 spots on YouTube: **4 million**
- number of times spots were broadcasted/aired on TV/radio: **477/235**

Following the campaign's conclusion, the police published a series of videos from the interview with doctor Mika about the influence of disinformation on him both personally and professionally. Despite the absence of sponsorship, the videos reached high viewing figures, comparable to the figures of the campaign itself.

5.3 RUSSIAN WAR IN UKRAINE

- an overview of assets seized from Russian oligarchs,
- analysis of the Russian army brochure (justification of the war, "God stands on Russia's side", "dead Russians will reach paradise," "Ukrainians will become Russian" etc.),
- "Victims of Putin's war" (stories of civilian casualties, photos),
- "Refuting Russian lies" (sharing parts of an interview with a historian),
- deaths of Ukrainian athletes in the war,
- a year after the signature of the defence agreement with the US (comparison of the present with the real occupation from the past),
- "A love extinguished" (stories of couples whose relationship, lives and future were destroyed by war),
- "Yesterday's hoax, today's truth" (pointing out hoaxes from Russia, e.g. how they will never attack Ukraine),
- a minute book of the first day of the war on its first anniversary,
- "True desires of Russians for peace" (peaceful expressions of civilians who were detained for them),
- "Police state Russia" (examples of various civilian arrests in Russia),
- comparison of living standards in the EU and Russia,
- "The faces of Russian propaganda" (the profiles of key figures of Russian propaganda, alternatively pointing out their affection for the "West").

5.4 OTHER CAMPAIGNS

- support of Slovakia's membership in the EU in several forms (anniversary of accession, explaining the solution to the situation with rising energy prices, EU activities towards Russia/Ukraine, results and benefits of EU funds absorption in the SR),
- support of Slovakia's membership in NATO (examples of Russian hybrid attacks on NATO),
- comparison of the standard of living in the EU and in Czechoslovakia before 1989,
- Victory over Fascism Day (emphasis on the celebration of liberation, not occupation),

- “How to react when I’ve shared a hoax”,
- “How to talk to people who believe hoaxes”,
- retro hoaxes (pointing out hoaxes from the past),
- “What Brussels is (not) dictating to us” (explanation of new hoaxes, e.g. about forced insect consumption),
- occupation and the year 1968 (minute book),
- Slovak National Uprising anniversary (emphasis on the support of patriotism),
- migration and migrants (explanation of the current situation, the asylum process),
- “Soros everywhere” (an award-winning campaign pointing out the systematic misuses of George Soros in connection with various disinformation).



6 FRAUDS AND SCAMS

It’s possible to state that frauds and scams perpetrated via social media, the internet (i.e. online) or phone calls were on the rise in 2023, based on the increased number of tips and suggestions from citizens who either became victims of such crimes or detected them in time and informed the PF.

Thanks to personnel reinforcement, the Department increased its activities in terms of prevention towards the general public. In addition to warnings about specific fraudulent methods, it published several proactive prevention campaigns.

In terms of organic distribution and virality, the most successful posts were those detailing the experience of specific persons with completed or attempted scams, which were published with the consent of their senders. This form of relationship between an armed force and the public was further evidence of the successful trust-building process.

Representatives of the Departments took part in an international conference in Spain with the participation of almost 30 experts from five continents, where they exchanged information about current trends and proposals for solutions of online fraud. The Department became part of the international #InterCop network for strengthening prevention in this area of crime and communicated preventive topics at an increased rate within the framework of the “European Cybersecurity Month”.

The following are examples of online fraud methods with a common denominator – obtaining funds from a victim or obtaining sensitive information that could make victims susceptible to blackmail:

- sending a tempting message via Facebook Messenger with a www link, which looks like a message from a real friend (either a duplicate or stolen account/profile), gaining control of a social media account, blackmail
- threatening letter acting as police subpoenas signed by real officials (threats about offences for drug possession, watching illegal pornography)
- sending information about overpayment from the Financial Administration, luring out sensitive information
- eliciting of intimate photos, blackmail
- fake adverts for the provision of driver’s licenses
- fake SMS messages about the delivery of parcels (misuse of brands of the Slovak Post, parcel delivery services and others)
- fake adverts for renting out flats/rooms or the sale of hard-to-obtain dog breeds

- fake messages sent on behalf of Meta about alleged problems of Facebook pages, their subsequent theft
- fake advertisements of various kinds, fake reactions to real adverts
- fake online contests/competitions, newly created pages only for fraudulent purposes, addressing people based on their comments on posts (washing machines, houses, bicycles etc.)
- calls to pay fraudulent invoices (mobile operators)
- fraudulent notifications about alleged threats to a personal bank account
- misuse of well-known personalities for false references about products, services
- offers of suspiciously cheap products
- fraud and scams related to investing in crypto/virtual currencies
- cases of fake American soldiers
- modified www addresses of popular websites
- confirming payments for anything - by entering information from your payment card

In 2023, the preventive campaign “Don’t even try - Catch your scammer” continued for the second year. The campaign was based on sending an image to mock fraudsters, with the aim of demotivating them. Active citizens sent many screenshots of such communications. These communications were subsequently published as a warning for potential victims.

At one point of the campaign, scammers remade said image with their own text threatening their potential victims.

The PF opted for this form of prevention due to the fact that in many cases, fraudsters are based in third countries, with which cooperation on investigations can be difficult - therefore, it’s best to prevent online fraud in time and to demotivate scammers in an interactive and humorous way.

In addition to the campaign image, citizens also sent mocking text messages to fraudsters, which the police also published. This was also the case with authentic personal experiences of citizens, who fell victims to such actions and who were willing to proactively share their experience as a warning for others

7 ACCOMPLISHMENTS, AWARDS AND SECURITY CONFERENCE

In 2023, the Department achieved several accomplishments as part of its activities in countering disinformation and the range of its other activities was truly diverse.

The “Hoaxes and frauds - Slovak Police” Facebook page surpassed 150,000 followers, thus confirming its position as the most-followed source in this area in Slovakia and the surrounding region. The number of followers on its Instagram account surpassed 13,000.

The Department’s personnel capacities were strengthened, even if, in light of the circumstances previously mentioned, this didn’t last for long.

The police’s been named the most effective communicator in the field of security and defence. The Slovak think-tank Adapt Institute created a research study for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the aim of which was to identify the most successful communicators of defence-related topics in the Slovak and Czech information space.

In the institutional communicator category, the study stated: “The data show that the most effective security and defence communication is conducted by the Police of the Slovak Republic, including its second page Hoaxes and frauds - Slovak Police, which focuses on responding to and refuting disinformation.”

According to the study, the PF was among the three subjects in said area with the biggest number of interactions in Slovakia in all categories.

As part of its campaigns, the police were shortlisted in a Czecho-Slovak competition focused on the quality of created texts. The Golden Pen 2023 (Zlaté Pero 2023) award was organized by the Czech association Creative Copywriters Club, and for the first time, it also reviewed texts from Slovakia. The goal of the 12th edition of the competition was to select the best texts related to advertising or campaign operating within a brand or state institution.

The award jury, consisting of 12 jurors - 6 from Slovakia and 6 from the Czech Republic - evaluated 41 projects, which were either nominated by their authors or by anyone else. Even though the PF didn’t proactively sign up for the competition, the award jury became aware of its activity and included it in the so-called shortlist, i.e. among the 7 finalists.

“It’s true on both sides of the Morava River - a good text is the best answer to a bad mood or bad things. The winners truly deserve gold as bright as a bottom-fermented beer. And the rest of us, let’s write how wit is the most effective tool against trolls and that hoaxes are only good for puns,” said jury chairman Peter Rajčák in

regards to the nomination of the Slovak Police, which achieved this accomplishment thanks to its new preventive campaign “Soros everywhere”, through which it pointed out absurd disinformation and manipulations connected with this Hungarian-American financier. The essence of such manipulations is to blame any societal problem on a specific person or to create conspiracy theories about a top-secret conspiracy.

Among the Department's achievements, we can also include the participation in an international exercise against hybrid threats under the auspices of the Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats, which was held in Slovakia for the first time. The Department's representative took part in the exercise in the role of an “attacker”.

In cooperation with the International Police Cooperation Bureau, the Department organized an expert conference focused on hybrid threats, the first of its kind under the patronage of the police. The conference, titled “Strategic communication and the fight against disinformation”, took place at the end of the Slovak Presidency of the Salzburg Forum.

The two-day event was attended by police representatives from the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania. Experts from domestic security forces and other relevant institutions were in charge of the educational programme.

The conference's staffing provided the participants with the most complex picture of the state of hybrid threats in Slovakia. Mutual exchange of experience and examples of good practice was a significant benefit of the negotiations as part of the conference. An interesting aspect of the event was to observe the different procedures of combating hybrid threats in each respective country, depending on their cultural and societal situation.

The participating countries agreed that it would be advisable to organize a similar conference in the future, as well as to open cooperation in the field of an international preventive campaign to fight online fraud. Due to known circumstances, these proposals won't be implemented in the next few years.

In addition to domestic journalists, media from the Czech Republic, Netherlands and the US reported on the Department's activities against hybrid threats.

8 CONCLUSION

The year 2023 was marked by an increase in a wide spectrum of disinformation, manipulated reports and online fraud. Even though the creators of problematic content withdrew for a while or minimized their activities following the parliamentary elections in September, this didn't mean that they wouldn't continue in their activities. On the contrary, foreign and domestic interest groups will continue to “bend” information to achieve their own goals.

In the case of foreign actors, we'll see a continuity of hybrid threats towards the Slovak audience from the RF. Their activities won't be limited to superficial actions on pre-planned disinformation channels. Due to a certain degree of acceptance of local disinformation carriers and their forced popularization by politically exposed persons, they will become an essential part of state bodies and authorities, and the information space as such.

Following the parliamentary elections, domestic disinformation producers received a sign of acceptance from key persons and authorities. If they felt a form of inviolability up until then, the feeling will be multiplied for the next few years. They will produce disinformation not only when ordered to by their donor, but also on their own accord whenever they choose, based on their own discretion and opinions. At some point, there may even be an internal conflict between individualists, groups and the state, yet the desire to control the information space should calm mutual relations. The exception will be some individuals who become victims to information manipulations themselves.

Slovakia's membership in international organization will continue to be questioned. Disinformation will try to rewrite known historical events in favour of the RF and other entities. Migration will become a natural and popular target for fake news.

By disbanding departments, divisions or units specializing in strategic communication across various institutions, disinformation producers received more space. The state won't be able to explain disinformation, to highlight true patriotism or to produce preventive-educational campaigns. With this step, the population's information vulnerability has significantly increased. Its consequences can have a catastrophic impact on the education and resistance of young people against fake news and information operations.

Based on these contexts, it's possible to predict that criminal liability of the main creators of disinformation will continue to be absent. The position of social network operators regarding the fulfilment of obligation based on the Digital Service Act (DSA) and the willingness of Slovak authorities to supervise its compliance on the local market will both be questionable.

The security of citizens will be threatened by the influence of systematic hybrid threats. Extremism and violence are often linked to the spread of fake news. With the National Crime Agency specializing on this area of crime facing an uncertain future, it may lead to a further weakening of the state's defence capabilities and the level of protection of its inhabitants.

The country's information security will depend on the activities and actions of individuals or the third sector. The defence capability of the SR against information operations will exist at an intelligence, non-public level, but it won't be supported, let alone communicated.

An important aspect of countering hybrid threats in the form of institutional-wide public communication, public counteractions and public campaigns within the framework of an internationally recommended "whole-of-government approach" model has now disappeared for a certain period of time.

The success of the defence of their homeland in the near future is now in the hands of its own citizens.

Thank you for your cooperation (until December 2023):

Ministry of Interior of the Slovak Republic, Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats, Government Office of the Slovak Republic, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, Representation of the European Commission in Slovakia, Slovak Information Service – National Security Analytical Centre, National Security Authority, State Institute for Drug Control, Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family, State Veterinary and Food Administration of the Slovak Republic, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Nation's Memory Institute, Slovak Hydrometeorological Institute, Public Health Authority of the Slovak Republic, Nuclear Regulatory Authority of the Slovak Republic, Centre for Countering Disinformation (Ukraine), participating units of the Police Force, Globsec, MEMO 98, independent experts, embassies and permanent representations, foreign partner, the third sector and others.

THANK YOU!

HOAXES AND FRAUDS - SLOVAK POLICE 2018-2023

1,000+ warnings about online fraud and scams

1,500+ debunked hoaxes

4,000+ posts

13,000+ followers on Instagram

40,000+ private messages from citizens

150,000+ followers on Facebook

1,000,000+ readers per month on average (record: 3.000.000+)

OTHER MILESTONES

- the most-followed anti-hoax page not only in Slovakia
- awards and other achievements in expert and independent polls
- exposed information operation of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Slovakia
- representing Slovakia at prestigious national and international meetings and other events on three continents
- mentioned as an example of high-quality state strategic communication a number of expert publications at home and abroad
- free support from celebrities as part of preventive campaign against frauds and hoaxes
- "Hoaxes don't stick with me", the biggest anti-hoax campaign in Slovakia
- successful campaign against online frauds and scams "Don't even try - Catch your scammer"
- training of police officers and civil employees in the field of strategic communication in Sierra Leone and Montenegro
- victory at an international exercise against hybrid threats
- part of the national system of strategic communication
- exchange of information with domestic and foreign partners and other organizations
- publishing own expert material also intended for the public

„HOAXES AND FRAUDS” CONTINUE

In 2024, David Púchovský initiated the creation of the Facebook and Instagram page “Hoaxes and Frauds”. In the first phase, the civic and apolitical project will be financed via a crowdfunding campaign. The gradually built team has the ambition to continue the same work, which was known to the general public under the header of the police. Check out the new anti-hoax channels today. The admin team welcomes your tips on hoaxes or frauds, as well as potential help with creating content. More information is available at www.hoaxyapodvody.sk.



