



# ASSESSMENT OF SLOVAK STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES AND CAPABILITIES

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## INTRODUCTION

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Slovakia finds itself grappling with a number of consecutive crises that extend beyond the bounds of health system, geopolitics, and energy issues. The overarching political instability in the region, compounded by the enduring challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, and energy concerns, was exacerbated by an internal political crisis that led to the fall of the Slovak government in December 2022 and subsequent snap election that took place recently. The political instability, accompanied by decades-long corruption, created a corrosive effect of alarmingly low trust in government institutions, media, and even democracy. These issues have created a particularly challenging environment for strategic communication. As a consequence, the impact of governmental communication on its priority issue areas has, so far, been minimal, despite the development of strategic communication units and initiatives under a national conceptual framework.

Strategic communication in Slovakia is facing an information landscape in which hostile narratives and disinformation are not fringe phenomena, but have become part of mainstream politics, media, and public discourse. The recent snap election serves as a stark illustration, it saw the victory of parties that relied on increasingly hostile narratives in their campaigns. The outcome of this election reflects not only the depth of the challenges but also the need for a recalibration of strategic communication activities.

The present report aims to delve deeper into the landscape of strategic communication in Slovakia. It first lays out the legal and institutional framework and main actors involved in its development. Subsequently, it assesses the particular domestic challenges and opportunities for developing an efficient strategic communication system. Ultimately, the report aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on improving strategic communication within the country with recommendations for its optimization and alignment with national interests and goals.

## BACKGROUND: INFORMATION THREATS FROM DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN ACTORS

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Slovakia faces multifaceted information threats. One of the prominent challenges in Slovakia's information space arises from mainstream political figures, including the government, who leverage hostile narratives about democracy, the West, the European Union, NATO, and Ukraine. This is exemplified by the current, third-time Prime Minister Robert Fico. After he lost power following a murder of a Slovak investigative journalist in 2018 and widespread protests, his communication gradually turned from populist discourse to openly hostile narratives which eventually proved themselves successful in the snap election. These hostile political actors wield significant influence, and dominate Slovak information space, especially online, with platforms like Facebook serving as fertile ground for the dissemination of their narratives. As a result, the Slovak information space is dominated by strongly nationalist, anti-Western discourse, where even far-right movements like the Slovak National Party and the Republic party thrive (although with the latter, the popular communication did not translate into an electoral success).

A similar pattern applies to the media landscape, in which media known for spreading disinformation are not a fringe phenomenon with minimal readership anymore. One of the most prominent outlets, Hlavné správy, [recorded](#) 6.1 million visits in October, in a country with a population of 5.4 million. However, social media remains the main amplifier of hostile narratives and disinformation, especially Facebook. Moreover, the messaging application Telegram is on a rise, providing a platform for more radicalized actors due to its lack of regulation. It is especially popular among hostile actors who have been blocked on the more

“mainstream” platforms, like the far-left SMER member Ľuboš Blaha or conspiracy theorist Daniel Bombic who faces an EU-wide arrest warrant.

The domestic landscape of disinformation actors has a persistent undercurrent of inclination to Pan-Slavism and nostalgia for the communist era. These sentiments, intertwined with hostile political narratives, create vulnerabilities which lead to a pervasive inclination to believe in disinformation and conspiracy theories. According to the [Globsec Trends survey](#), this inclination concerns approximately half of the population, especially when it comes to claims about “secret elites running the world”. All these circumstances result in a highly polarized society that [feels threatened](#), especially by the West and migration, resulting in anti-americanism and conspiracy theories about EU and NATO. These public attitudes result in the popularity of nationalistic movements with extremist rhetoric, which are popular not only among those nostalgic for the previous regime, but also among young people.

The domestic hostile actors are also channels of pro-Kremlin narratives, whether intentionally or not. However, there are also more direct traces of Russian influence in the Slovak information space. The Russian Embassy in Bratislava is [the most active](#) in terms of number of posts of all Russian embassies in Europe, attempting to shape the discourse about the war in Ukraine among other topics. It is also a popular primary source for domestic disinformation outlets who reshare the content created by the Embassy. The Embassy was also [proven](#) to be involved in funding domestic disinformation, including a contributor to the aforementioned major disinformation outlet Hlavné správy. However, several people were [arrested](#) on accounts of Russian espionage, including a former employee of the Slovak Security Services, vice-rector at the Military Academy in Liptovský Mikuláš, or a former MP assistant. These cases illustrate the complex web of Russian influence in Slovakia.

The Russian Federation has repeatedly proven its influence over the public debate in Slovakia through Slovak public figures. It was exemplified by Slovak Prosecutor-General Maroš Žilinka’s [reliance](#) on the Russian ambassador’s claims about alleged defamation of graves of Russian WWI soldiers in a Slovak local cemetery. The Prosecutor-General wanted to investigate the alleged case despite warnings from the Slovak police that the Russian ambassador’s claims are a hoax. Russian influence also surfaces in Slovakia in other ways, including peace marches that claim to call for peace in Ukraine, but are [actually used](#) to promote anti-NATO, anti-EU and generally anti-Western stances, and even “Long live Putin”. Blurred lines of domestic and pro-Russian influence are also characteristic of the online information space where popular pages like [“Army of the Russian Federation”](#) promote Russia but a clear link to the authoritarian state has not been established yet.

In comparison, Chinese influence in Slovakia is much more subtle. In the information space, China attempts to target Slovak audiences via “alternative” outlets that cite views aligned with the Chinese Communist Party. Local press agencies occasionally adopt content from official Chinese sources, shaping narratives about issues like Hong Kong. Notably, Slovak disinformation actors [instrumentalize](#) China in their anti-U.S. narratives, for example by criticizing U.S. policies towards China. However, there is no coordinated pressure to develop relations with China from political, business, nor lobbyist actors. The absence of a unified stance on China reflects the country’s marginal [importance](#) to Beijing, which, in turn, limits the prevalence of Chinese sources, especially in comparison to Russian ones.

## LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

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### Role of Government (Political)

The legal and institutional framework for strategic communication in Slovakia is deeply entwined with the broader political dynamics that have characterized recent administrations. The former government of Igor Matovič, while inheriting an already diminishing trust in political institutions, faced additional hurdles in fostering effective communication. A marked decline in the culture of political communication compounded the challenges, with political discourse overshadowed by the protracted political crisis and coalition infighting, notably between ex Prime Minister Matovič and former Minister of Economy in his government, Richard Sulík. As the Matovič government struggled, the opposition filled the vacuum, albeit with a gradual shift towards more extreme rhetoric. Figures like current PM Robert Fico and parties like the far-right Republic gained substantial attention online, utilizing hostile communication to capture public sentiment. The online landscape, thus, became a political battleground, further complicating efforts to establish a coherent and constructive public discourse.

In contrast to the escalating hostile rhetoric, President Zuzana Čaputová emerged as one of the few sources with a non-hostile communication style. Her popularity was rooted in a more neutral approach based on promoting human rights, human dignity and solidarity, providing a stark contrast to the prevailing political climate. PM Eduard Heger who took Matovič's place, also maintained a more neutral tone in strategic communication. However, his stances often came across as vague and therefore he did not manage to assert himself as a major communication source.

The new government of Robert Fico assuming power in October 2023 means some of the most influential hostile sources are now leading the country. Their rhetoric is likely to become more consolidated after achieving their political goal, but at least ambiguous communication about the EU, NATO, support of Ukraine and foreign policy orientation of Slovakia is to be expected.

### Role of Government (Civil)

Slovak government institutions have put in concerted efforts to establish strategic communication infrastructure, particularly focused on countering disinformation. In June 2023, the government passed a national strategic document in the form of The Concept of Strategic Communication to underline the commitment to these efforts. The **primary goals** of this Concept are to enhance public awareness of key national issues, such as Slovakia's membership in the EU and NATO, and to foster trust in the state and its democratic institutions. Emphasizing a unified, clear, and apolitical approach, this framework sets the stage for strategic communication efforts.

Situated within the Office of the Government, the Security Council serves as a pivotal hub for strategic communication initiatives. Supported by a conceptual document, it plays a central role in coordinating efforts to enhance the country's resilience to hybrid threats. However, following the arrival of the new government, the strategic communication agenda is being transferred from the Office of the Security Council to the Office of the Head of the Office of the Government. Within the Office of the Government, there is also a Situation Centre which performs the role of the national contact point for hybrid threats. The future of these units remains unclear and possibly pessimistic considering the new government's stance to the agenda of hybrid threats.

The pilot national [project](#) “Increasing Slovakia’s Resilience to Hybrid Threats by Strengthening Public Administration Capacities”, funded by the European Social Fund, has been instrumental in increasing both personal and financial capacities, leading to the creation of dedicated departments. Its main recipient, Ministry of Interior, houses the Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats, and the project also allowed strategic communication efforts to extend the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Department for Hybrid Threats and Strengthening Resilience, along with the Department for Strategic Communications), and the Ministry of Defense with a dedicated department focusing on hybrid threats and strategic communication. Thanks to this project, strategic communication expanded from a small department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the governmental level. The project also supports events promoting the importance and work of the strategic communication framework, such as [a conference](#) that brought together the strategic communication departments with other ministries, public servants, civil society representatives and even their counterparts from abroad.

The Ministry of Interior’s Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats engages in activities ranging from [e-learning](#) programs about hybrid threats for public servants (including municipalities) to campaigns about hybrid topics, including a “Did You Know...” style campaign and a recent pre-election campaign titled “Hoaxes Do Not Stick To Me” in cooperation with the police that involved Slovak celebrities and thus enhancing the campaign’s visibility. Moreover, the Centre actively engages in in-depth analyses, assessing vulnerabilities and scrutinizing key topics such as migration and elections. Understanding the critical role of elections in shaping the democratic landscape, the Centre has implemented strategic communication initiatives explaining the electoral process and government formation. This led to the establishment of a dedicated website, [hybridnehrozby.sk](#), which serves as a central hub for information related to hybrid threats. This online platform consolidates resources, updates, and educational materials, providing the public with a reliable source to navigate the nuances of hybrid threats.

The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs was among the first with a formalized strategic communication team. The ministry runs the #WeAreNATO and #WeAreEU campaigns and also engages in other activities such as [visits to local schools](#) to talk about the roles of international organizations such as the UN.

## **Police and Military**

Slovak police forces have demonstrated prowess in strategic communication and addressing the issue of disinformation. Its success story includes a more informal style of communication and relying on human interest stories. The police also has a dedicated [Facebook page](#) focused on publicly highlighting viral hoaxes, scams or frauds. Among other topics, debunks and pre-bunks pro-Russian hoaxes and disinformation. The page has attracted a solid amount of followers considering the sensitivity of the topic (151,000). A [study](#) prepared for the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence confirms that the police is the most effective communicator in the field of security and defense in the Slovak information space.

The military also maintains online presence, although in a more formal and neutral tone. Despite trust in the military registering [under 50%](#), it still holds the position as one of the most trusted Slovak institutions. The military’s online activities contribute to its perceived neutrality, which plays a crucial role in shaping public perception. However, its strategic communication activities are still less impactful than those of the police.

## Civil Society

In Slovakia's strategic communication landscape, the civil society is a crucial actor, often shouldering roles traditionally associated with government institutions. Civil society plays a vital role in strategic communication about democratic values, national history, and attempts to construct a positive national narrative. Initiatives like *Sebavedomé Slovensko* (Self-Confident Slovakia) and *Mladí proti fašizmu* (Youth Against Fascism) exemplify the sector's commitment to shaping a collective identity rooted in democratic principles. Such initiatives also focus on fostering awareness about the EU and NATO and their importance for Slovakia and where it is now.

Besides these long-term communication campaigns, civil society organizations engage in fact-checking, media literacy activities and raising awareness about information threats via public events, conferences and workshops. Civil society also carries out research and [analysis](#) in the field of strategic communication in order to improve efforts in this field.

The active approach of Slovak civil society was exemplified in the run-up to the recent snap election. Besides media monitoring and communication campaigns, special attention was given to supporting participation in the election. The aforementioned *Youth Against Fascism* initiative, provided a special "election train" going from Prague to Bratislava a day before the election, offering free transportation to Slovak voters residing in the Czech Republic for the upcoming parliamentary elections.

## CURRENT EFFECTIVENESS AND CHALLENGES

Despite the many initiatives and capacity building launched by government institutions, their impact has been rather limited. The protracted political crisis, coupled with years of systemic corruption and state capture, has eroded public trust to alarming levels. Moreover, the current Slovak political landscape is an opposing force to the evolution of strategic communication. The current culture of political communication in Slovakia favors hostile narratives over official communication, which is an obstacle only President Čaputová has been able to overcome so far. Even prior to the change of government, strategic communication initiatives faced considerable challenges, grappling with a population inclined to believe in conspiracies, high levels of frustration, and low trust in institutions and the system.

With the advent of the new government, the future of Slovak strategic communication capacities is uncertain. With key figures departing, such as the head of the Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats at the Ministry of Interior, the situation poses a challenge for the continuity and efficacy of existing initiatives. Also, the political strategic communication landscape is expected to display a higher prevalence of hostile narratives, albeit probably less extreme than in the pre-election campaign. However, it is likely that Slovak foreign policy orientation will be challenged on a regular basis, with attempts to assume a more "neutral" position between the West and the East. The prevalence of conspiratorial thinking, radicalization on platforms like Telegram, and the vulnerability of young demographics underscore further multifaceted challenges faced by any future strategic communication efforts.

Especially the police, with a dedicated Facebook page debunking hoaxes, stands out as a success story. Accessible language and human interest stories have proven to be effective. However, worries about the continuity under the new government apply to this communication source as well. There are already personnel changes underway in the police forces, and although the new Minister of Interior Matúš Šutaj Eštok [claimed](#) he will not interfere with the operation of the police's Facebook page, he also claimed "it just won't deal with issues it maybe should not". In the past, the page accused him of spreading conspiracies and

Šutaj Eštok perceives the page as politically biased. Anyway, the police and armed forces hold potential for future strategic communication since they are institutions that retain the highest public trust in Slovakia.

Civil society remains important in filling the gaps in the activities of the government institutions, for example supporting positive national narratives and overall an informed public debate. However, their sector naturally faces very limited resources, posing a challenge to the continuity and effectiveness of their strategic communication efforts. In the uncertain political environment, civil society will likely carry the responsibility of maintaining strategic communication efforts emphasizing the importance of democracy and the importance of EU and NATO membership. The role of the civil society, although strained by limited resources, becomes increasingly critical in countering prevailing hostile narratives. More coordinated approach with official government communication sources is highly unlikely as the new government is not supportive of their efforts.

Further challenges can also arise from the potentially emerging crackdown on independent media. PM Fico declared four mainstream outlets as undesired visitors of the Office of the Government and that he will be reviewing their access permit. Such developments may strengthen the position of alternative, pro-Russian media, if they are granted exclusive access to government members.

### **Case Study: Strategic Communication About NATO**

According to the Globsec Trends, Slovakia witnessed a consistent increase in its support for NATO from 2018 (50%) to 2022 (72%), experiencing a more pronounced surge in the past year in response to Russia's aggression. Nevertheless, pervasive disinformation campaigns conducted by both domestic and foreign entities have played a role in diminishing backing for NATO membership. As a result, support has reverted to levels reminiscent of those observed around 2019. In 2023, only 58% of Slovaks supported NATO membership, which is the lowest level in the CEE region along with Bulgaria.

This short case study delves into strategic communication, actors and narratives surrounding NATO on Facebook as the most widely used platform in Slovakia. This exploration aims to analyze and compare how various entities, particularly government or official sources and questionable or unofficial sources, communicate and portray the activities, roles, and significance of NATO, using data from the last month provided by the CrowdTangle tool.

Strategic communication about NATO in the last month had minimal visibility, lacking discernible campaigns or a unified narrative. Hostile sources dominate the general communication about NATO, with NATO mentioned primarily in the context of criticism of the new political opposition seen as a tool of the West, particularly the Progressive Slovakia party. The absence of a cohesive narrative contributes to the challenges in effectively communicating NATO's role and importance.

Members of the new government generally adopt a neutral stance towards NATO on their official accounts. While acknowledging the importance of security and armed forces, the narrative emphasizes a peace-centric approach, prioritizing conflict avoidance. The Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces, particularly in the last month, have been active in posting about NATO, yet interactions highlight President Zuzana Čaputová as a more influential source. Government institutions have focused their communication on emphasizing the stability of Slovak membership in NATO, likely to prebunk and counter any stronger anti-NATO declarations from members of the new government.



Analysis of interactions achieved by communication sources in the last month reveals questionable and hostile sources attracting considerable attention. Half of the top 10 most active sources in general are questionable or hostile, indicating the pervasive influence of these sources. President Čaputová and the Police emerged as the most successful official sources in the monitored period.

The case study of strategic communication about NATO reflects broader outreach patterns in the Slovak information space, namely the disparity between the attention drawn by official and questionable sources in relation to any topic. In the past month, the government and civil society generated 408,032 interactions, led by President Čaputová, the Police, and the Ministry of Interior. Civil society sources managed to beat the communication of the Office of the Government or Armed Forces, in regard to interactions, which highlights the significance of civil society in strategic communication efforts.

In contrast, questionable sources, reached more than double the interactions of official sources in the last month (1,100,960 interactions), led by strongly pro-Russian outlets such as *Brat za Brata* (Brother for Brother), *Slobodný vysielateľ* (Free Broadcaster), and *Infovojna* (InfoWar), underscoring their considerable influence in the communication space.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The strategic communication landscape in Slovakia is marked by political interests, lack of public trust, and external malign influence. The recent political transition of power has introduced instability into the strategic communication environment. A significant lack of trust, higher susceptibility to consuming disinformation and influence of pro-Russian outlets threaten the effectiveness of communication initiatives. However, the biggest current challenge is a more existential question concerning the future of Slovak strategic communication as the new government will not likely support it. Indeed, it has already introduced personnel and other changes that suggest hard times for this government portfolio.

PSSI provides the following recommendations:

- 1. Prevent the Dismantling Of the Current Strategic Communication Capacities:** With Robert Fico's government assuming power, it is uncertain what will be left of the strategic communication structure. It will likely be marginalized, with significant personnel changes. At this point, the priority should be placed on preventing the dissolution of the existing strategic communication capacities and emphasizing their importance. It is key to preserve the tradition of professional government communication apart from the political communication of any current administration.
- 2. Support for Civil Society:** Under the current government, the civil society sector (especially NGOs and journalists) will likely have to shoulder a major part of strategic communication, especially when it comes to upholding democratic values and West-leaning Slovak foreign policy orientation. Financial support for the civil society, media literacy and civic journalism will be crucial to maintain communication about the importance of the EU, NATO, freedom of speech, as well as counter state capture and provide protection of the civil society from political turbulence. The civil society was a big target of hostile narratives in the pre-election campaign and it continues to be the case.

3. **Construct a Positive National Narrative:** The current discourse about Slovak identity is generally defined by opposition to some (external) entity without a positive narrative about the intrinsic attributes and unique qualities that define Slovakia and its people. So far, Slovak identity has been based on self-victimization of Slovaks throughout history. This state of affairs is a fertile ground for the spread of hostile narratives. Therefore, truly effective strategic communication needs a positive narrative, especially the vision for the country's future. In times when the Slovak population is highly frustrated and distrustful, granted often for understandable reasons, it will be essential to build confidence in Slovakia's capabilities and contributions on the global stage, showcasing achievements and strengths in various fields.
4. **Reform of The Education System:** A missing positive sense of national identity is also connected to how the current Slovak education system works. In particular the history curricula, based on outdated textbooks, reinforce the trend of Slovak historical self-victimization. These materials and curricula need to be revised in order to support the needed development of a positive national identity. Moreover, there is a significant disparity between how much time history curricula devote to, e.g., Antiquity and Middle Ages history, at the expense of modern history that truly shaped modern Slovakia.
5. **Protect the Sustainability of Governmental Strategic Communication:** The existent government strategic communication framework is the result of a European Social Fund project. Although the project was key at the beginning, it is now crucial to implement a more sustainable model of financial resources enabling a continuous functioning of strategic communication departments. Considering the current changes and instability introduced by the new government, the discussion should also include ways to make the strategic communication more independent from political transitions.
6. **Establishment of Strategic Communication Departments at All Ministries:** Strategic communication should be integrated into the core operation of government institutions. Rather than being a secondary component, it should be recognized as a vital and inseparable element that underpins and guides all activities undertaken by governmental institutions. The impact of any practical policy or initiative is determined by how well it is communicated to the target groups (or if at all). Following the idea of strategic communication underpinning all government activities, each ministry should have its own strategic communication department, on top of the more standard press departments. This integration will ensure a unified and consistent approach across ministries, promoting cohesive communication strategies. Besides the existing departments communicating about foreign policy, defense or internal affairs, more practical strategic communication is needed from the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Industry and Trade and all others.

7. **Replicate the Success Stories of a More Informal Outreach:** The success of the Police Forces strategic communication, embodied by their dedicated page to disinformation, should provide inspiration and a template for future strategic communication efforts. This lesson proves that relying on less formal language and human interest stories is an effective technique. Although many governmental institutions do not have the liberty of an informal style of communication and experimenting, the establishment of separate but affiliated social media accounts can be a way forward. Such accounts could also be more independent from fluctuating political influences. Other potential solutions include collaboration with content creators (like bloggers or Youtubers) on specific projects and campaigns to reach specific audiences with language adjusted to increase the reach.
  
8. **Define Specific Target Audiences:** Strategic communication needs thorough and regular sociological research to help define specific target audiences. Segmenting the population and devising targeted communication strategies for the identified segments is key for effective strategic communication. Such segmenting needs to go beyond the traditional focus on youth and seniors as vulnerable audiences. Vulnerability to hostile narratives is not clearly defined by age, level of education or residence, but represents an interplay of social and economic factors.