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PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE MODEL IN THE POĽANA BIOSPHERE RESERVE

Katarína Vitálišová¹ and Mária Vavrušová²

Abstract

The systematic development of civic engagement and partnership with stakeholders within the biosphere reserve is a key to support the sustainability and resilience of the territory and development of its potential. The aim of the paper is to identify the authorities of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve and its relations with stakeholders, developed based on the concept of participatory governance and results of empirical research. The theoretical part of the paper explains the concepts of biosphere reserve and participatory governance. The practical part is focused on the analysis of the current state of the governance of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve and their legislative anchoring and functioning. The paper presents the results of surveys conducted with residents and selected stakeholders in the territory. The conclusion identifies opportunities to develop and strengthen community and stakeholder engagement within the Poľana Biosphere Reserve and propose a model of its governance. The paper presents partial results of the project APVV-20-0108 Implementation of Agenda 2030 through biosphere reserves.

Keywords: Participatory governance, Engagement, Poľana Biosphere Reserve

INTRODUCTION

A biosphere reserve is an area linking social and ecological systems, and its existence creates a space for understanding, managing change and interactions between these systems, which we should mutually reinforce (UNESCO, 2022; Lepeška, 2012). A biosphere reserve is also an internationally recognized site that is nominated by a national government but designated under the Man and Biosphere (MAB) intergovernmental programme by the Director-General of UNESCO, based on a decision of the MAB International Coordinating Council. Each biosphere reserve belongs to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves of the MAB Programme, which is a unique international tool for cooperation and exchange or sharing of

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good practices, knowledge, expertise, experience or effective promotion of biosphere reserves worldwide. In the context of the policy given by UNESCO, the biosphere reserve is a unique unit of cultural and natural landscape, in which man and his activities play an important role. The task is not only to preserve the natural heritage of the territory, but also cultural components in the form of traditions and a lifestyle of the people in the given territory, or their behaviour and socialization within the society belonging to this territory (UNESCO, 2023).

Biosphere reserves are known as a model territories or best practices examples where the coexistence of man and nature is developed with implementation of sustainability principles as well as reflecting the goals of Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2022; Bridgewater, 2002; Van Cuong, Dart, Hockings, 2017; Lepeska, 2012).

The value of a territory is created by its potential. In relation to economic theory, we can say that the definition and potential of biosphere reserves are based on the economic value theory of Randall and Stoll (1983) as a comprehensive analytical framework for the economic valuation of nature and landscapes (Mayer, Job, 2014). Biosphere reserves are goods with exceptional potential and positive externalities such as promoting sustainable development of the territory, strengthening the resilience, empowerment, and connectivity of the local community to the territory, strengthening biodiversity conservation and ecological and climate resilience, strengthening the resilience of the economy and others (Kettunen, ten Brink, 2013). If these goods, which are sensitive regarding the environment and the phenomenon of overcrowding, are to be wisely used, consumed and not devalued, it is necessary to strategically manage and plan wisely for the development of their potential. Development of biosphere reserve potential is important not only in preservation of its biodiversity. This development is also important for supporting the government, involvement of stakeholders and local community. The added value is also the appreciation of the importance of natural and cultural heritage for the development of the state, its policies, and its conservation, which contributes to ecological sustainability. Bridgewater (2002) states that ultimately, information gained from scientific research must be incorporated into meaningful management practices, and management must have a greater influence on research priorities. Both research and management need to be people-centred and directly linked to policy formulation. Ecological sustainability is a human-created ideal and will only be achieved through appropriate human behaviour. Biosphere reserves, as

special places for people and nature, are a key tool for developing a truly sustainable system.

Examples from around the world show that biosphere reserves have real potential for social, economic, and environmental development, but that this potential is not being sufficiently exploited (Makenzi, 2013; Nautiyal, et al., 2001; Carius, 2016). Grossmann (2006) also explains that biosphere reserves indicate positive outcomes for quality of life, economic development and environmental status and generally depend on a combination of economic, social and political requirements. It is associated with their development that should be achieved with requirements and emphasis on all areas - economic, social and environmental (Wheeler, 2009; Brandon, et al., 2005; Kearney, et al., 2007; Eizenberg, Jabareen, 2017; Schädler, et al., 2011; Lyon, Hunter-Jones, Warnaby, 2017; Hák, Janoušková, Moldan, 2016; Wager, 1995; Weaver, 2005; Riensche, et al., 2015; Deveci, et al., 2022; Donald, 2008; Reyer, et al., 2012; Wiber, et al., 2004; Orenstein, Shach-Pinsley, 2017). Their development is influenced precisely by the potential of biosphere reserves.

Essential for development of biosphere reserve's potential is a support of the government and the engagement of stakeholders falling directly within or outside the territory, or by other words participative governance of the territory. Stoll Kleemann, et al. (2010, in Walk, Luthardt, Nölting, 2019) state that, in biosphere reserves, participatory governance and shared decision-making are very important because local communities and producers are key actors in biosphere reserve management. By promoting the collection and integration of knowledge, expertise and experience from different stakeholders, the issues in the biosphere reserve community can be addressed and contribute to its solution based on the principles of participative governance and collaboration. Belcher et al. (2016, in Walk, Luthardt, Nölting, 2019) add that, biosphere reserves need to understand how these participatory processes can include collaboration between communities, partners, and universities. Universities can, due to their scientific credibility, play a catalytic role by initiating and reflecting on the processes. With such an approach, universities would offer a space for research, participation but also a place for sustainability learning (Walk, Luthardt, Nölting, 2019).

Currently, to the issue of participative governance in biosphere reserves is not paid adequate attention. That is why the aim of the paper is to identify the authorities of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve and its relations with stakeholders, developed based on the concept of participatory governance and results of empirical research. The paper contributes covering the

identified gap and explores the participative governance approach on the example of Biosphere Reserve Poľana as an example of good practice that can be a source of inspiration for other Slovak or foreign biosphere reserves.

1 STAKEHOLDERS AND PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE FOR DEVELOPING BIOSPHERE RESERVES

Active engagement of stakeholders is an important driver of biosphere reserve potential development.

Stakeholder is any group or individual who can influence or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives and are influenced by them. Stakeholder is also a participant in the human process of joint value creation that may influence or be affected by policy decisions or place a claim on an organizations or other entity's attention, resources, or outputs. Through public participation, which Quick and Bryson (2016) explain as participation in governance which involves the direct or indirect involvement of stakeholders in decision-making about policies, plans or programs in which they have an interest, stakeholders may interact with government agencies, political leaders, nonprofit organizations and business organizations that create or implement public policies and programs. While participation may be limited to discrete acts (e.g., a town hall meeting or citizen survey) or described by a set of practices (e.g., convening public hearings or other types of consultation processes), participation more generally is the process of engagement in governance (Pirozzi, 2019; Quick, Bryson, 2016; Freeman, 2010; Bryson, 2004).

In order to develop the potential of biosphere reserves, it is necessary to manage these territories through an inclusive and participatory approach and bring attention to the importance of involving local communities, stakeholders and civil society in the management. Stakeholder participation and involvement in the management of biosphere reserves has many positive effects on sustainable development, particularly in terms of strengthening and developing social capital, increasing efficiency in the promotion and implementation of decisions in which stakeholders have participated, increasing accuracy in the use of a diversified knowledge base, strengthening co-management, or strengthening stakeholder accountability to the territory in the process of its management and conservation (Mugisha, Jacobson, 2004; Berkes, 2009; Bouamrane, et al., 2016; Sandersen, Koester, 2000; Guillaume, Charrouf, 2016; Dressler, et al., 2010; Stringer, et al., 2006; Sudtongkong, Webb, 2008; Yaffee, et al., 1996; Ruiz-Mallén, et al., 2015;

Lebel, et al., 2006; Hahn, et al., 2006; Ansell, Gash, 2008; Pretty, Ward, 2001; Beierle, Konisky, 2001; Berghöfer, Berghöfer, 2006; Colfer, 2010; McCool, Guthrie, 2001; Stoll-Kleemann, O'Riordan, 2002). Wali, et al. (2017) claim that the global environmental conservation community recognizes that the participation of local communities is essential for the success of conservation initiatives. Berkes (2004) also focuses on the importance of local communities and civil society in conservation efforts and advocates for collaborative and community-based approaches and claims that community-based conservation is based on the idea that if conservation and development could be simultaneously achieved, then the interests of both could be served. Fritz-Vietta, Röttger and Stoll-Kleemann (2009) highlight the need to leverage local knowledge and to reconcile the different formal and informal rules for active and responsible involvement of concerned community members. The authors Sisto, et al. (2022) explain that the main strength of this approach lies in its intersectionality and its applicability to solve complex problems whenever different actors with different interests come into play. UNESCO in the Man and the Biosphere Programme also emphasizes the importance of involving local communities, indigenous peoples, civil society and stakeholders in the design and management of biosphere reserves. UNESCO's publications and guidelines often highlight the role of civil society in achieving the objectives of biosphere reserves (UNESCO, 2022). Van Cuong, Dart and Hockings (2017) claims that the stakeholder participation and collaboration, governance, management, and awareness and communication are one of the most influential factors in the success or failure of the biosphere reserves. It is necessary to build a stable and responsible management system with inclusive governance, strong participation and collaboration and human resource allocation. They also add that it is all rather obvious, but it is difficult to achieve without commitment to the biosphere reserve concept by the governance authorities.

Stakeholder participation and collaboration is also crucial for good governance, whether in formal or informal structures. This ensures coordination that facilitates dialogue, participation and collaboration in the planning and management of biosphere reserves. However, the establishment of informal governance by local communities or NGOs could be undermined in their functioning because they lack authority (Brunckhorst, 2001; Van Cuong, Dart, Hockings, 2017). Belcher et al. (2016, in Walk, Luthardt, Nölting, 2019) add that biosphere reserves need to understand how these participatory processes can include collaboration between communities, partners, and also universities which can, due to their scientific credibility,

play a catalytic role by initiating and reflecting on the processes. With such an approach, universities would offer a space for research, participation but also a place for sustainability learning (Walk, Luthardt, Nölting, 2019). Studies also point to the importance of involvement of scientists and volunteers in the development, management and planning of biosphere reserves because it also contributes to the success of biosphere reserves by providing new information and evidence for planning, decision-making and policy-making (Sabatier, Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Van Cuong, Dart, Hockings, 2017; Schultz, Duit, Folke, 2011; Schultz, Folke, Olsson, 2007). Other studies indicate that participation overall increases social acceptance and support, leading to improved management of biosphere reserves (Stoll-Kleemann, Welp, 2008; Stoll-Kleemann, De la Vega-Leinert, Schultz, 2010; Albert, et al., 2012), but government commitment, involvement, and understanding of the role of participation at the local level is also critical to the success of biosphere reserves (Van Cuong, Dart, Hockings, 2017). In practice, intended outcomes are only achieved as a result of participation and negotiation between stakeholders and institutions (Bouamrane, 2007). Many studies point to the need for government involvement in biosphere reserve planning, and highlight the positive impacts, particularly in the context of co-management, which requires the involvement of both communities and governments (Carlsson, Berkes, 2005; Cash, Moser, 2000; Berkes, 2007). The negative impact of government involvement in biosphere reserve planning has implications for the quality of the plan in terms of the ability of management to protect ecosystems (Brody, 2003). A top-down approach to biodiversity conservation makes the process of biosphere reserve management more difficult, as people-centred management and conservation is more likely to succeed than strict protection by an authoritarian government (Stoll-Kleemann, Welp, 2008; Schultz, Lundholm, 2013; Schultz, Duit, Folke, 2011; Wilshusen, et al., 2002). Despite the positive or negative impacts of government involvement, the need for government support for sustainable development of biosphere reserves is inevitable (Van Cuong, et al., 2018; Engelbauer, 2023; Wager, 1995).

Several articles and studies point to the need for participatory and adaptive governance of biosphere reserves to guide the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems with stakeholder participation. The exchange of information should lead to an understanding or agreement expressed by a shared vision. Shared management should be learning-oriented, using multiple sources of knowledge to solve problems. It should also include monitoring, interpreting and responding to feedbacks and take into account

scientific knowledge (Plummer, Armitage, 2007; Folke, Colding, Berkes, 2003; Reid, et al., 2006; Plummer, Fitzgibbon, 2007; Olsson, 2007). Studies have shown that lack of participation can lead to conflicts between local residents and governing bodies, but this can be mitigated by involving local residents (Rao, et al., 2003; Wissen, et al., 2008; Speelman, et al., 2014).

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

To the main sources of the secondary data used in literature review and mapping the situation in Slovak biosphere reserves belong monographs, studies, programmes, regulations, statutes, plans, strategies, projects, UNESCO methodological materials, or relevant laws on the issue of biosphere reserves processed by method of abstraction.

The primary research was realised from November 2022 till the end of 2023. The source of primary data were personal interviews with representatives of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve (manager and coordinator of biosphere reserve) and local stakeholders (3 local entrepreneurs, 1 representant of local action group, 5 members of civil association Coordination Council of the Biosphere Reserve Poľana). The collected data differentiated by the type of stakeholders. The semi-structured interviews with representatives of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve were oriented on the identification of the structure of stakeholders, the challenges and problems in cooperation with stakeholders, special attention was oriented on the work with local citizens. The semi-structured interviews with the local stakeholders evaluated the forms of cooperation with the representatives of biosphere reserves, the fields of cooperation, as wells as the challenges in the next development of cooperation.

The second part of primary data were collected by questionnaire survey among citizens of Poľana Biosphere Reserve, because they are the key stakeholders of biosphere reserve (Alford, 2002; Pestoff, 2009, Popoola, 2016). We aimed at researching citizen level of awareness about the biosphere reserves, which benefits or barriers it brings and how they perceive the cooperation with the representatives of biosphere reserves. Respondents were asked the following closed questions with yes or no options:

- Do you know that you live in the Poľana Biosphere Reserve?
- Do you know that the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is a UNESCO site?
- Have you heard about the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme?

- Do you know that the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is managed by the Poľana Biosphere Reserve Coordination Council, which is made up of important stakeholders from the region?
- Do you know the statutes and objectives of the Coordination Council of the BR Poľana?
- Would you like to become a member of the BR Poľana Coordination Council? (If yes, they could write the e-mail address to be invited for the meeting of the coordination council).

Respondents were also asked the closed or semi-closed question with multiple choice:

- How do you perceive the fact that you live in a Poľana Biosphere Reserve? (benefit x obstacle x no attitude).
- How do you perceive the existence of the Poľana Protected Landscape Area? (barrier for development of the territory x opportunity for development x no attitude). The respondent could also explain his/her answer.
- What do you perceive as priorities for development in the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve? (indicate the three most important from the list of 13 development areas identified by on the research of territorial potential)
- How do you assess 38 different areas of life in the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve on the 5-point scale from satisfied to unsatisfied? Respondent could also explain his/her evaluation. For the paper we selected just answers about the participation and governance of biosphere reserve.

Our research sample, which was deliberately selected, consisted of 101 respondents. The research sample was tested by Chi-square test as representative ones by gender (Chi-square test - Asymp. Sig. = 0,136) and age (Chi-square test - Asymp. Sig. = 0,051). The survey was conducted electronically via Qualtrics Survey, shared via email, social media and other channels. To process the collected data, we used basic mathematical and statistical methods. For testing and data analysis we used the SPSS program and MS Excel application.

The third part of the primary data were the information from the mayors of municipalities within the Poľana Biosphere Reserve collected by electronic survey. By quantitative questionnaire survey aimed at collecting direct data from mayors of municipalities within the territory of the Poľana

Biosphere Reserve and its surroundings, we analysed the evaluation of the quality of functioning and cooperation in this area. Our research sample consisted of 17 respondents. The questionnaire consisted of 16 questions and was conducted electronically, shared mainly via e-mail. Respondents were asked the following closed questions with yes or no options:

- Is the municipality you represent a member of the BR Poľana Coordination Council?
- Are you familiar with the statutes of the BR Poľana Coordination Council?
- and semi-closed questions with yes or no options:
- Do you cooperate on projects aimed at the development of the area with the Poľana Biosphere Reserve?
- Do you perceive this cooperation as working and beneficial?
- Do you have areas of cooperation with the Poľana Biosphere Reserve included in your strategic documents or projects?
- Are you interested in cooperating in the future on projects aimed at the development of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve?
- Do you perceive this cooperation as workable and beneficial?
- Has being a member of the Coordination Council of the Poľana BR helped you in your community?

Respondents were also asked the semi-closed questions with multiple choice:

- How do you consider the fact that your village/town is in the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve? (positive x negative x no attitude).
- How do you perceive the interest in the participation of local citizens? (positive x negative x no attitude).
- What forms of participation of local citizens in the development of the area have you used so far? (questionnaire, poll, public meetings and discussions, individual interviews with citizens, electronic voting or other).
-

Respondents were also asked the open questions:

- Do you perceive any specific problems that undermine this cooperation?
- Do you perceive any specific problems that hinder the development of the biosphere reserve area?
- With which entities do you cooperate the most that are part of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve (various entrepreneurs and non-profit

organizations in the area, other mayors and mayors of municipalities falling within the area, etc.)?

- How do you see the functioning of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve in the future?
- What could be improved in the functioning of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve from your point of view?

We analysed the data based on the methods of analysis, abstraction, comparison, and basic mathematical-statistical methods. We used MS Excel to test and analyse the data. These data were supplemented with data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, official information published on the website of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve, municipalities belonging to the Poľana Biosphere Reserve.

3 POLANA BIOSPHERE RESERVE AS A GOOD PRACTICE IN PARTICIPATIVE GOVERNANCE

The next part of the paper is focused on the analysis of the current state of the bodies of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve and their legislative anchoring and functioning and the current state of community and stakeholders' engagement in Poľana Biosphere Reserve. We present the results of surveys conducted with local residents and selected stakeholders in the territory.

3.1 Legislative anchoring and functioning of bodies in Poľana Biosphere Reserve

In Slovakia, there are 4 biosphere reserves, three of them are overlapped with the national parks and one is a Protected Landscape Area Poľana, an object of our research, so also their bodies correspond to these legal forms. Currently, there absents a legislative definition of biosphere reserves and its management bodies in the Slovak Republic.

The legislation of the Slovak Republic mentions the biosphere reserve only in one sentence within Act No. 543/2002 Coll. on Nature and Landscape Protection where is stated that „biosphere reserve is classified as an area of international importance.“

Only the term National Park is defined in terms of Article 19 (1) and (2) of the same Act, as: “a larger area, generally with an area of over 10,000 ha, predominantly with ecosystems substantially unchanged by human activity or in a unique and natural landscape structure, constituting the

most significant natural heritage, in which nature conservation is superior to other activities.” At the same time, in the case of the National Park, “the aim of its protection is the preservation or gradual restoration of natural ecosystems, including ensuring the undisturbed course of natural processes in at least three-quarters of the National Park area, and this aim is ensured by the zonation of the National Park.” However, a national park is not identical to a biosphere reserve or a protected area, the difference being primarily in the objectives of these recognised areas.

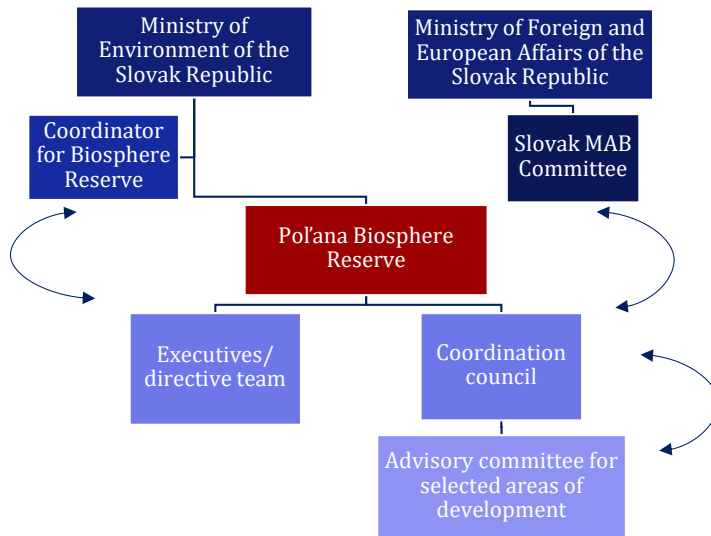
The same situation is with the definition of a protected landscape area. The same act, in article (18) defines it as a larger area, usually with an area of more than 1,000 ha, with scattered ecosystems, important for the preservation of biological diversity and ecological stability, with a characteristic appearance of the landscape or with specific forms of historical settlement.

Biosphere reserves have their objectives defined in a broader context than those of national parks or protected landscape area, which are bound directly by law to preserve or gradually restore natural ecosystems, including ensuring the undisturbed flow of natural processes (Act No. 543/2002 Coll. on Nature and Landscape Protection).

Except problems with missing legislative in conditions of the Slovak Republic there is also problematic issue an institutional system of biosphere reserves. The management of biosphere reserves reflects the recommendations of the UNESCO guidelines (2021). By them, the management staff of biosphere reserve structure should consist of a biosphere reserve manager/director and at least five executives in the context of the biosphere reserve functions managed by a supervisor within each biosphere reserve. This staff should balance all three functions of the biosphere reserve, i.e. logistics, conservation and development. A functional coordinating council consisting of key stakeholders from the private, non-profit and public sectors should be actively involved in decision-making and public policy formulation. There should be a coordinator above the level of biosphere reserves who will directly communicate with the responsible Ministry(ies).

In Slovakia, the role of coordinators to the tasks of biosphere reserves of the Slovak Republic are Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. However, their tasks to biosphere reserves are not clearly defined. In the next text, we focus on the analysis of the management bodies in Poľana Biosphere Reserve, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Model of Poľana Biosphere Reserve bodies



Source: own elaboration

As it was mentioned, the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is a protected landscape area. It has no legislative form and is under the umbrella of the State Nature Conservancy of the Slovak Republic. The biosphere reserve is headed by a manager/director who is responsible for the implementation of the strategic development documents and the fulfilment of the functions of the biosphere reserve. In case of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve, the manager is the same person as a direct of a Protected Landscape Area Poľana. General manager of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve, Vladimíra Fabriciusová, was awarded the Michel Batisse Award for the best management of the biosphere reserve in 2017 for her management and work based on an inclusive approach and cooperation with stakeholders. This prize represents an award of global significance.

The representatives and employees of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana are also very important drivers of development of biosphere reserve. The implementation of the agenda in the form of specific tasks is entrusted to them according to their professional orientation. At the same time, they are also coordinators of cooperation between local stakeholders in the biosphere reserve. They bring together experts, partners, but also elected representatives of the municipalities falling within the area through the Coordination Council of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve.

The Coordination Council is a basic prerequisite for a participatory approach to the management of the development of the area. The Coordination Council ensures the development and implementation of the management plan, business plan, marketing and communication strategy of the biosphere reserve. It discusses jointly solutions to the problem areas of the territory's development and actively involves the relevant stakeholders of the territory in the decision-making processes. To strength its position and to get the legal power, the Coordination Council of Poľana Biosphere Reserve fulfilled the requirements for the establishment of a civil association registered by the Ministry of the Interior. All members of coordination council became the members of civil association and can influence equally the activities of association. Members of coordination councils take part also in the advisory committees for selected areas of the development in the biosphere reserves (e.g. social services, education, etc.). They are advisory bodies for decision-making.

Currently, the Coordination Council of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve through regular meetings and projects associate 43 representatives of local governments, entrepreneurs, NGOs and citizens (ŠOPSR, 2022; Vitálišová, Vavrúšová, Piscová, 2023; Okániková, eds., 2014).

The created management structure of Poľana Biosphere Reserve covers the legislative gap of biosphere reserve definition and its management (Vitálišová, Miňová, Vaňová, 2021). The civil association „coordination council“ can enter into the legal relationships, be a recipient of funds or donations, can be an active partner in development activities or comment the development intents within the territory and thus to influence the economic, social and environmental development of the biosphere reserve.

The good practice from Poľana Biosphere Reserve presents also one of the possible solutions for absence of a long-term strategic approach to biosphere reserve economic and social development. The reason for this problem is the lack of knowledge of the governing bodies and their insufficient capacity, but also the desire to care for, plan and develop these areas. Biosphere reserves lack important strategic documents for development, management, marketing communication and methodological procedures, as well as procedures for assessing the quality of management and functioning of the biosphere reserve, which is carried out through a periodic evaluation every ten years. Another problem is the lack of understanding of biosphere reserve areas in relation to the socio-economic aspects of development, with an emphasis on biodiversity conservation in synergy with civil society and stakeholders (Vitálišová, Miňová, Vaňová, 2021).

3.2 Analysis of current state of stakeholders' and community engagement in Poľana Biosphere Reserve

Currently, the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is characterized by a relatively low population density and is one of the least urbanized areas in Slovakia (1,96 inhabitants/km²) (Fabriciusová, Slamová, Jančura, 2015). Most of the 400 permanent inhabitants are pensioners, the employed commute to industrial enterprises in larger cities (e.g. Hriňová, Detva, Zvolen, Banská Bystrica, Brezno), only a few inhabitants work in forestry or agriculture. Currently, 3 900 inhabitants live permanently in the transition zone. According to data from the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, the population of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is ageing, which may be a consequence of the departure of inhabitants and potential parents from the area. The reason for the phenomenon of recent years, which is the departure of young inhabitants from this area, is mainly due to the low number of job opportunities in this area and the supply, especially in the western part of Slovakia. Recently, we have also seen an increase in interest in the development of tourism, which could have an impact on the weak and unattractive supply of jobs, or on increasing the level of skills of local residents in the services offered and thus raising their overall level.

From the social and cultural point of view, the community of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve can be characterised by own production methods of tradition products, traditional crafts, the manually skilled people, traditional way of life in scattered settlement and specific cultural habits (costumes, songs, ceremonies, etc.). However, the ability to preserve and develop these potential fights with the challenges as the outflow of young people, the predominance of the older population, the growing proportion of the silver population, the loss of interest in traditional crafts and the lack of generational change (Vitálišová, Vavrúšová, 2023; Vitálišová, Vavrúšová, Piscová, 2023).

As a part of the analysis, we focused on exploring the awareness of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve and its existence by local people. We asked on it through 5 questions, whether the inhabitants know that they live in the Poľana Biosphere Reserve, whether they know that it is a UNESCO site, whether they have heard about the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, whether they know that the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is managed by the Coordination Council of Poľana Biosphere Reserve and whether they know its statutes.

Through the answers of 101 respondents of the questionnaire we came to the findings that 94,9% of the respondents know that they live in the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. 78,2% of respondents know that the Poľana Biosphere Reserve is a UNESCO site, but only 47,5% of respondents have heard of the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme. 61,4% of respondents do not know that it is managed by the Coordination Council of Poľana and 79,2% of respondents do not know its statutes. The last finding, we report in this area is that 13,9% out of 101 respondents would like to become a member of the Coordination Council of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve.

The issue of awareness of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve was explored also through questions how local people perceive the fact that they live in this reserve and how they perceive the existence of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana and their priorities for development in this area. The first question how local residents perceive the fact that they live in the biosphere reserve was responded as follow. 77,2% of respondents perceive this fact as a benefit or positive thing. Within this area, we also asked about the perception of the existence of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana by our respondents. 7% of respondents perceived its existence as a barrier to the development of the area and 77% as an opportunity for the development of the area.

Respondents perceive the existence of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana as an opportunity for development, mainly because of the development of tourism in a friendly way with an emphasis on traditional uses and ways of living in the territory, because without the preservation of natural and cultural values, they perceive the territory as uninteresting for tourism and housing. Furthermore, the respondents gave reasons such as the development of agro-tourism with nature trails, the possibility of sports activities, the development of the overall territory and its infrastructure, the creation of job opportunities, the increase of interest in an attractive territory which has a "quality mark" by its existence. Respondents perceive the opportunity in the existence of the Protected Landscape Area Poľana also in the increased emphasis on the care and protection of the unique territory, or in the way of education and the link between education and nature. We also asked about priorities for development in the biosphere reserve area, with 15% of respondents perceiving the biggest priority to be supporting employment in agriculture, 11% of respondents seeing the reconstruction of water and sewage systems as the biggest priority, and 10% of respondents perceiving environmental protection and reconstruction of roads and trails as the biggest priority.

Within this analysis, we came to findings that directly affect the behaviour of community in the territory. Based on the assessment of the different areas of quality of life by local citizens, we found that respondents consider the quality of involvement of residents in public life in Poľana Biosphere Reserve with a value of 26,8% out of 100%³, the quality of cooperation of actors in the territory with a value of 57,5% out of 100% and the quality of work of elected representatives of cities and municipalities with a value of 57,8% out of 100%.

The second part of the analysis is focused on the stakeholders' engagement in the Poľana Biosphere Reserve represented by the mayors of the villages and cities within Poľana Biosphere Reserve.

Stakeholders of the biosphere reserve that fall within its territory can be understood as various educational institutions, farmers, foresters, municipalities, representatives of civil society, or business entities. In the Poľana Biosphere Reserve there are various educational and cultural institutions covering different levels of education or cultural and social activities. These institutions are located in the villages where they offer their services to the local population. Within the territory of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve there are 9 kindergartens, 15 primary schools, 4 art schools and 3 secondary schools. In the vicinity of the area there are various universities and research and scientific workplaces, such as the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, the Technical University in Zvolen, the Academy of Arts in Banská Bystrica, the Faculty of Health Care, the Slovak Medical University, or the branch of the Slovak Academy of Sciences - Institute of Earth Sciences in Banská Bystrica (ŠOPSR, 2022).

Stakeholders of the biosphere reserve area represent the state administration, local action group or higher territorial unit. The state administration influences mainly the decision-making process of local policy. Local Action Group Podpoľanie is an important partner in financing of the regional activities. The important stakeholder is the higher territorial unit Banská Bystrica Region, which prepares various strategic documents of the region, but also decides about the financing of the key regional investments. In the context of stakeholder analysis, we focused on the analysis of the evaluation of the quality of functioning and cooperation in the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve by the mayors of the municipalities falling within its territory and its surroundings.

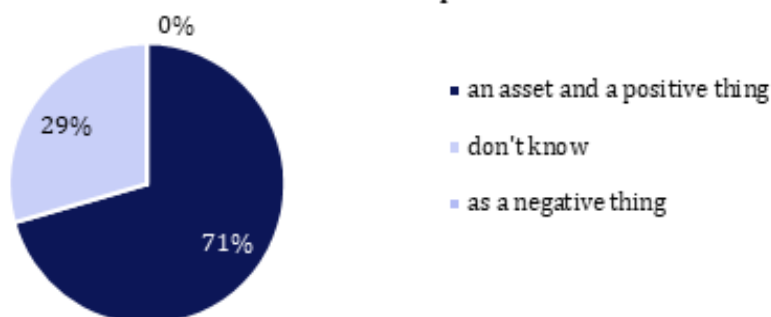
Within the first area, we investigated the functioning of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve on the basis of four questions. The first question asked

³ 100 % is the highest rate of involvement

how mayors perceive the fact that their municipality falls within the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. As you can see in graph 1, 29% of the respondents considered this fact as an asset and a positive thing, none of the respondents considered this fact as a negative thing and 71% chose the option don't know, of which 33% justified their answer by saying that they do not fall under the area.

Graph 1: Perceiving of the fact that municipality belong to the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve by the mayors

How do you perceive the fact that your municipality belong to the area of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve?



Source: own elaboration

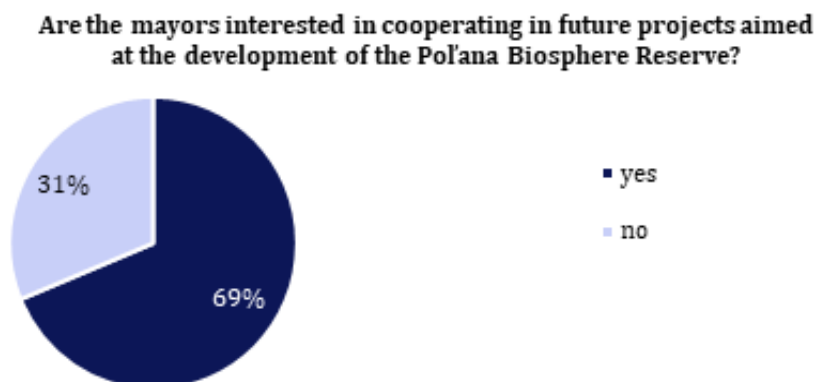
The second question asked whether mayors perceived any specific problems that hinder the development of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve area, where mayors mentioned the low support of local farmers and artisans by the state, or the use of examples of good practice from abroad. The penultimate question within this area was how mayors see functioning of Poľana Biosphere Reserve in the future. Among the answers we noted that they consider its functioning as a positive, benefit or a good thing that should work in the future, e.g. also in the field of tourism (difficult access for tourists to the area due to the presence of brown bears). The last question in this area was what could be improved in the functioning of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve from the point of view of the mayors. Among the answers to this question, we noted an increase in promotion, cooperation with citizens, information or involvement of state authorities.

In the second area we were interested in cooperation with the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. The first question in this area was whether the mayors cooperate with the Poľana Biosphere Reserve on projects aimed at the development of the area. 18% of respondents answered this question

positively and 82% negatively. Examples of areas or projects aimed at the development of the territory in which they cooperate with the Poľana Biosphere Reserve were given as: awareness raising, education, or work with youth. 40% of the respondents perceive this cooperation as working and beneficial thanks to the participatory management model and good communication, 60% of the respondents do not perceive this cooperation as working and beneficial, but they did not justify their answers. However, respondents gave reasons such as: lack of understanding on the part of the Ministry of the Environment of the Slovak Republic or pointing to good examples from abroad as specific problems that undermine this cooperation. Another question in this area asked whether the municipalities have included in their strategic documents or projects areas related to cooperation with the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. Exactly half of the respondents answered positively, citing documents such as the Economic and Social Development Programme and the Spatial Plan for the town and municipality. The next question explored whether the mayors are interested in cooperating in future projects aimed at the development of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve.

By the graph 2, 69% of the respondents answered positively, and in their opinions, these would be in areas such as support for traditional farming, tourism development, hiking, cycling and cycle paths, education and awareness, or again, dealing with the brown bear overpopulation situation. Within this area, we also asked questions of interest to the Coordination Council of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve.

Graph 2: Mayors' interest in cooperating in future projects aimed at the development of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve

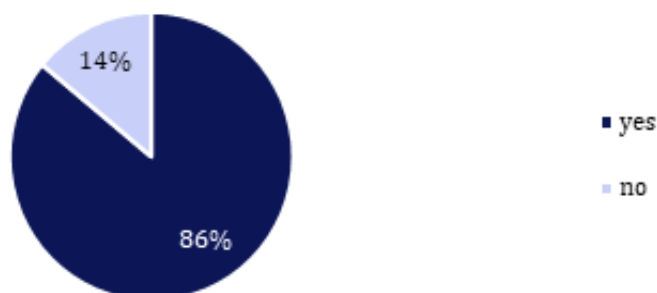


Source: own elaboration

Through the questions, we found that 41% of the respondents we surveyed are members of this council, as well as 41% of respondents are familiar with its statutes, and as you can see in graph 3, 86% of those who indicated that they are members of the council said that their community and municipality has been helped by being a member of the council. Reasons given were coordination procedures, finding common solutions and problems, and working together to regulate development.

Graph 3: Opinion of mayors' on being a member of the Coordination Council of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve

Has it helped you and the municipality to be a member of the Coordination Council of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve?



Source: own elaboration

The third area of research was exploring collaboration with other entities within the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. Within this area, we asked which entities the mayors cooperate with the most that are part of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve. The answers to this question were mainly: other mayors, other municipalities, or the civil association at Poľana Biosphere Reserve. 71% of respondents perceived this cooperation as working and beneficial. The fourth and final area was civic engagement in the community. In this area, we asked how mayors perceived the interest in local citizen participation. 56% of respondents perceived this interest as an asset and a positive thing, none of the respondents perceived this interest as a negative thing, and for 44% of the respondents we recorded the answer don't know. Within this area, we also asked about the forms of local citizen participation in the development of the area that respondents have used so far. Respondents mainly use public meetings and discussions, individual interviews with citizens, but also questionnaires. More detailed results you can see in table 3.

Table 3: The forms of local citizen participation, which mayors in the development of the area use

Forms of local citizen participation	Once a year	Two to three times a year	More than three times a year
Questionnaire	35%	-	23%
Poll	12%	-	23%
Public meetings and discussions	35%	67%	8%
Individual interviews with citizens	12%	33%	23%
Electronic voting	6%	-	23%

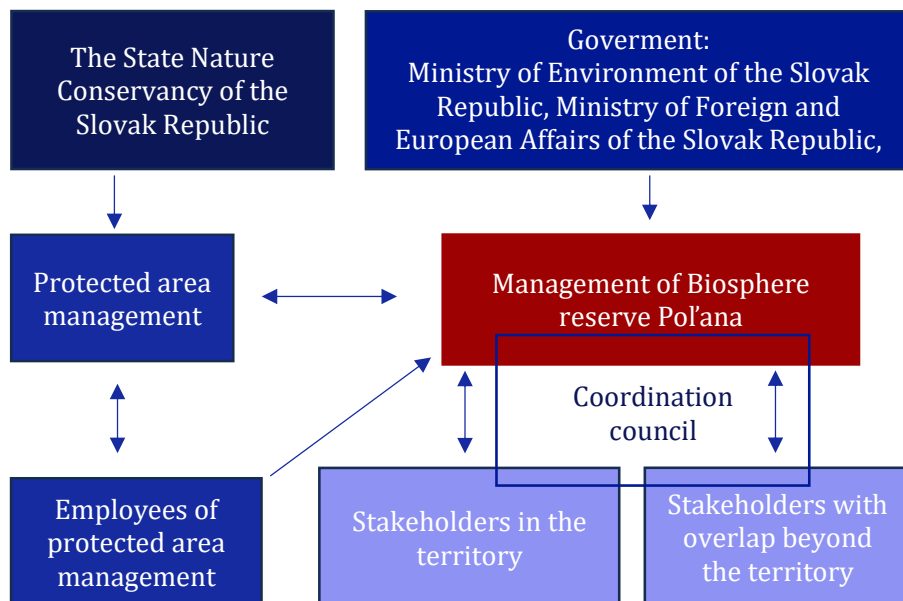
Source: own elaboration

CONCLUSIONS

The Poľana Biosphere Reserve faces several significant challenges, primarily related to inadequate legislation, weak institutional frameworks, lack of long-term strategic development. There is insufficient recognition of the reserve's importance, both locally and nationally and low local awareness which hinders biodiversity conservation efforts and community engagement. In the context of the analysis of the current state of local community and stakeholders in the territory and in terms of the position of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve as an actor in the development of the potential, we can confirm that it is inevitable for the biosphere reserve to be in direct interaction with actors and stakeholders from different levels.

Key recommendations include empowering local communities to acknowledge their heritage and responsibilities, enhancing education and awareness about the reserve, and improving communication strategies. Additionally, fostering partnerships among local stakeholders and developing an ecotourism concept could generate economic benefits and improve local conditions. Effective management and participatory approaches are essential to ensure the sustainability of the reserve while preserving its natural-geographic, socio-economic, socio-demographic and innovation potential.

Figure 2: Model of Poľana Biosphere Reserve stakeholders



Source: own elaboration

The important actors of biosphere reserves and thus also of the Poľana Biosphere Reserve are mainly the Ministry of the Environment of the Slovak Republic, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic. In the Slovak Republic, the first working model of the governance, on the examples of Poľana Biosphere Reserve present figure 2. It covers the managerial relationships as well as the relationships with the local stakeholders.

In the biosphere reserves, it is important to build a territory where people are aware of it and their value defined by their cultural and historical uniqueness, but also the common future and their interactions with this territory and act collectively and responsibly to form a prosperous community in harmony within the biosphere through participatory governance. In the paper, based on the analysis of the research results, we propose a set of recommendation how to foster the engagement of the stakeholders and thus to contribute to the potential development and raising awareness about the importance of biosphere reserves. Because the civil society is a bridge between different stakeholders, including local communities, businesses or researchers.

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BEYOND SERVICE PROVISION: THE ROLE OF NGOS IN YOUTH PARTICIPATION - CASES FROM TAMPERE AND LUBLIN¹

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Abstract

Over the years, NGOs have accumulated significant experience and developed expert knowledge in many fields, contributing to their growing prominence. On the one hand, the third sector has been perceived as market-based actors, delivering high-quality services. On the other hand, NGOs play a crucial role in decentralisation and democratisation processes. This change reflects a broader shift from government to governance. As a result, the third sector has moved from a traditional focus on project-based work centred on 'doing' to a more 'influencing' role. This paper aims to examine the role of the third sector in youth participation through two cases: Tampere (Finland) and Lublin (Poland). The issue of youth participation in decision-making is a cross-cutting topic, particularly in light of declining voter turnout and a systematic decrease of civic engagement among young people. This paper analyses both the theoretical framework and the practical outcomes of the empirical research conducted in the investigated cities. Data were gathered through desk research and semi-structured interviews with NGOs, decision-makers, public officials, teachers and young people. The research outcomes suggest that in both cities, the pivotal role of most NGOs is still in service provision and advocacy. In both Tampere and Lublin, NGOs also take on an additional roles as interpreters or mediators, though these remain narrow and limited. However, in Lublin, the third sector plays a more developed role that extends beyond mere facilitation.

Keywords: Participation, Young people, NGO, City, Local government, local governance

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of discourse on civil society in 1990s, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become key actors at various

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levels of governance – local, national and international (Kontinen, 2007; Lefi-Faur, 2012). Over the years, NGOs have gained significant experience and developed expert knowledge in many fields, contributing to their growing prominence. By the turn of the twenty-first century, they were responsible for carrying out most tasks associated with governing complex social issue. This indicates that their roles have expanded and evolved. Several factors have influenced on the emergence and proliferation of NGOs in the public space. Among the most significant is the ‘New Policy Agenda’, which arose from disappointment in the state’s capacity to implement improvements (Edwards, Hulme, 1995). Consequently, the diminishing role of the state and the promotion of the free market came to the forefront. This new approach simultaneously redefined the roles and relationships between the state, the market and the third sector (Ibidem; Saari 2023). On the one hand, third sector has been perceived as market-based actors, who deliver high quality services. On the other hand, NGOs have a crucial role in the processes of decentralisation and democratisation as a representatives of ‘civil society’. This undergone change reflects a broader shift from government to governance. According to many scholars, this shift involves a transformations from government being responsible for both the ‘steering’ and ‘rowing’ of the policy boat, to focusing primarily on ‘steering’, while the market and society take over the ‘rowing’ (Osborne, Gaebler 1995; Jordana, Levi-Faur 2004; Levi-Faur 2012). It signifies a transition from a centralised regime with direct service provision to multi-stakeholder governance model that is governed through networks and contracts (Levi-Faur, 2012). Furthermore, the past few years have been difficult due to new wicked problems and increasing complexity in both society and the governing process. As a result, in recent years, the third sector has moved from a traditional focus on project work centred on ‘doing’ and passive participation in the governing process to an ‘influencing’ role, where they are understood as a ‘bridge builders’ focused on enhancing their impact, meaning and practice (Clark, 1992; Pearce 1993; Muller-Hirth, 2012). The role of the non-governmental sector in the public space is still evolving, and thus remains somewhat vague.

The study aims to examine the specific role of the third sector in youth participation by analysing both the theoretical framework and the practical outcomes from two cities: Tampere, Finland and Lublin, Poland. The issue of youth participation in decision-making is a cross-cutting topic, particularly in light of falling voter turnout and the systematic decline in civic engagement among young people (European Commission, Council of Europe 2023). Both countries and cities have distinct democratic histories, models, and

approaches to youth participation. Nevertheless, both are influenced by democratic governance, market economics, and interest in citizen engagement in the public sphere, including young people. The article seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the specific roles of NGOs in youth participation in the selected case studies? 2) What are the relationships between NGOs and city authorities in supporting youth participation in Tampere and Lublin? 3) Can NGOs in Tampere and Lublin significantly boost youth participation, considering the differences in the local and organizational contexts? The paper is based on desk research and qualitative data gathered from interviews with different groups of stakeholders: NGOs, decision-makers, public officials, teachers and young people.

Current studies indicate different roles of NGOs in the public space, but it do not describe them in a comprehensive way, especially in relation to youth. Scholars have pointed out that NGOs often serve as intermediaries between young people and decision-makers, offering platforms for dialogue (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway et al. 2003). Additionally, research has indicated that NGOs can empower youth by equipping them with skills that enable them to become involved in governance (Bessant, 2004; Loncle et al. 2012). However, some studies argue that these efforts are often constrained by limited resources, hierarchical governance processes, and a lack of systematic support for youth engagement (Farthing, 2012). This article addresses this gap in comparative research on how NGOs operate in different local contexts to enhance youth participation.

The study is organised as follows. The first section introduces the theoretical framework and defines the key roles of NGOs in society, shaped by the transformation of governing processes. In the second section, the methodology and case study are described, then in the third part the results of the empirical research are presented. Finally, the article ends with a discussion and conclusion.

1 THE TRANSFORMING ROLES OF NGOS

The shift from government to governance reflects a fundamental change on how public affairs are governed, moving from a centralised model to a collaborative one. Traditional government was perceived as the sole authority responsible for the governing process, including the development of policy and the delivery of public services. However, under the influence of the governance paradigm, public administration has shifted from a centralised government model to one based on networks with various stakeholders,

including NGOs in policy-making and decision-making processes (Levi-Faur, 2012). Governance now encompasses decentralisation, participatory practices, and cross-sectoral collaboration to address complex societal challenges, including youth participation in public life. The role of NGOs has evolved significantly in this context, influenced by New Public Management (NPM), which has led governments to adopt market-based mechanisms. Consequently, NGOs have taken on a critical role as service providers, filling gaps in public service provision that were previously managed by the state. NGOs are valued for their flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and capacity to target vulnerable and marginalised groups, such as young people (Lundström, Svedberg, 2003). Scholars have noted that young people are often disempowered, underrepresented, and excluded from public decision-making (Loncle et al. 2012). Lightbody (2017) critiques the tendency to label youth as 'hard-to-reach' and argues that a more accurate term might be 'easy to ignore,' highlighting the systemic barriers that limit their inclusion. These barriers are rooted in perceptions that young people's opinions lack political relevance and that policies are predominantly designed with an adult-centric approach (Tisdall, Davis, 2004).

Under the governance paradigm, NGOs have expanded their role beyond service provision. They now act as partners, intermediaries, and advocates, bringing their expertise to policy-making processes. In this context, NGOs are crucial actors in creating platforms for dialogue between young people and decision-makers, facilitating engagement through initiatives such as youth councils, capacity-building workshops, and participatory budgeting processes (Checkoway et al. 2003; Camino, Zeldin, 2002).

While the broader roles of NGOs in governance and service delivery have been extensively studied (Lundström, Svedberg, 2003; Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2011), research on their contributions to youth participation is still limited. Some studies emphasize the potential of NGOs to foster youth engagement by creating participatory spaces, providing empowerment initiatives, and promoting advocacy efforts (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway et al. 2003). This shift underscores the growing importance of NGOs as facilitators of youth engagement, a topic that remains underexplored. According to academic literature and practical examples, NGOs play at least five distinct roles in the governance process: service providers, advocates, mediators, interpreters, and facilitators. This multifaceted involvement demonstrates their significant contributions to addressing societal challenges. In the context of youth participation, these roles provide the theoretical foundation for the analysis presented in this article.

Firstly, NGOs serve as service providers, delivering services to marginalised groups, including youth in areas where state mechanisms are either insufficient or absent. They are often perceived as gap-fillers, providing services at a lower cost while maintaining high quality (Lundström, Svedberg, 2003). The assignment of this role was made possible by the adaptation of NPM, which encouraged governments to downsize, sub-contract, and outsource public services (Pollitt, Bouckaert, 2011; Levi-Faur, 2012). Collaboration is typically structured through public-private partnerships or contracts with NGOs delivering services such as social welfare, human rights, education, healthcare, and youth-related issues. They provide targeted programs such as employment training, mental health resources, and educational opportunities, crucial for empowering youth and preparing them for active citizenship (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway et al. 2003; Loncle et al., 2012; Bessant, 2004). Youth-focused NGOs also address local challenges through community-based projects, such as leadership development workshops.

Secondly, a growing number of NGOs operate as advocates for the collective expression of goals and interests, or take action on causes, ideas, public policies, and decisions made by institutional elites (Casey, 2011). In addition to service provision, where they are merely *'doing'* the task assigned to them (Pearce, 1993), advocacy involves NGOs in *'influencing'* decisions-makers or shaping civic agendas to build political will for action (Schmid et. al. 2008; Gen, Wright, 2013). Existing literature confirms an increasing shift from *'doing to influencing'* (Clark, 1992; Pearce 1993; Gen, Wright, 2013). According to Hopkins (1992), NGO's advocacy approaches include: 1) programmatic or issue advocacy – where organizations present their position on public policy related to their work; 2) legislative advocacy, or lobbying of legislators – which relies on political campaign activities supporting or opposing legislation; 3) demonstrations – organising public support around an issue or policy; 4) boycotts – promoting or opposing business dealings with targeted entities; and 5) litigation - using legal action to advance a cause. Other scholars add grassroots advocacy and public opinion engagement to this list, as well as capacity building for policy advocacy (McCarthy, Castelli, 2002; Morariu et al. 2009). Furthermore, participatory advocacy has emerged, aiming to advocate for changes in policy and decision-making processes to make them more transparent and accessible to the public, and to raise awareness of public issues (Chapman, Wameyo, 2001; Gen, Wright, 2013). Regarding policy change, the goal refers also to adopt, modify, or reject specific policy options (Sewerin et.

al. 2020). The *raison d'être* of NGOs in advocacy is to contribute to policy development. Policy advocacy is widely seen as a prominent feature of non-profit organisations, allowing them to represent poor, marginalised, disadvantaged, excluded, and vulnerable populations. The outcomes of advocacy are related to various stages of policy cycles. First, it amplifies that previously excluded voices are heard. Second, it supports decision-makers in designing policy changes. Third, it ensures that policy changes are translated into new regulations. Fourth, the new policy is implemented as proposed by the advocacy organization. Fifth, the goal of the new policy is to create the desired changes. Finally, the new policy gains acceptance from various groups (Casey, 2011). As advocates, NGOs strengthen the voices of young people, lobbying for youth-friendly policies and regulations. Their advocacy initiatives aim to increase youth representation in local governance, including youth advisory bodies, and to ensure that education policies reflect the needs of disadvantaged youth (Checkoway et al. 2003).

Thirdly, NGOs act as a bridge between communities and public authorities, fulfilling two key communication roles: interpreters and mediators. Some scholars view these roles as distinct and separate, while others see them as interconnected, with a fluid and blurred boundary (Wang, 2017; Arumi Ribas, 2017; Almommani, 2024). As a result, while these roles are varied, they also complement each other (Martin, Phelan, 2010; Arumi Ribas, 2017). This distinction has appeared because interpreters are not trained in intercultural conflict resolution, while mediators are not proficient in linguistic translation services (Ibidem; Wang, 2017). Both professions require linguistic and cultural knowledge, but they served different purposes, and utilise distinct methods and tools (Phelan, Martin, 2010; Almommani, 2024).

Traditionally, interpreters focus on linguistic competence, bridging language gaps rather than fostering social interactions (Roy, 2000; Wadensjö, 2014). This approach suggest that interpreters act as the voices of both parties, faithfully conveying messages without personal opinions or advice (Almommani, 2024). Consequently, interpreters are expected to maintain neutrality, impartiality and ethical standards. However, recent discussions have contested this view, positioning interpreters as cultural brokers or even cultural mediators, who contribute to joint interactions (Arumi Ribas, 2017; Almommani 2024; Gustafsson et.al 2013). As Pöchhacker's notes, "*every interpreter is a mediator (between languages and cultures), but not every mediator is an interpreter*" (2008, p. 14). This statement emphasises the need for interpreters to consider social and cultural contexts to facilitate

communication, moving beyond language translation (Wadensjö, 2014). This understanding is linked to community-oriented approach, which is frequently associated with the needs of marginalised populations in public services, including the legal, social or educational sectors (Carr et. al. 1995), and therefore often associated with young people

In contrast, mediator serve as cultural bridges, facilitating communication and decision-making processes. They inform individuals, including young people, about their rights, help them understand cultural complexities, and empower them to express concerns (Martín, Phelan, 2010; Angelelli, 2006; Almommani 2024,). Mediators may also advocate on behalf of individuals, particularly in service provision, ensuring their needs and concerns are heard and adequately addressed (Martín, Phelan, 2009). In conflict situations, mediators work with both parties to resolve misunderstandings and reach agreements. Mediation therefore plays a crucial role in supporting social integration for marginalised groups, including minorities, vulnerable individuals, immigrants, and newly arrived populations. Pérez Crespo (2005, p. 256) identifies four areas where mediation is needed. First, when immigrants require access to resources and the adaptation of public services. Second, in the realm of foreign policy. Third, in actions promoting citizen participation. Fourth, in fostering intercultural harmony between diverse populations.

As a result, the key distinction between interpreters and mediators lies in their dynamics. Interpreters maintain a passive role, simply translating messages without responsibility for the content, while mediators actively shape dialogue to benefit all parties (Wang, 2017). Thus, interpreters focus on technical linguistic translation, whereas mediators navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication (Wang, 2017; Arumi Ribas, 2017; Almommani, 2024; Carr et. al. 1995). As mediators or interpreters, NGOs act as a bridges between young people and decision-makers. Within the role of mediators, they foster dialogue, ensuring that youth voices are effectively communicated and considered in public discourse. Additionally, as interpreters, they translate complex policy language into accessible terms that young people can understand, ensuring informed participation (Tisdal, Davis, 2004; Loncle et.al. 2012).

Last but not least, NGO play facilitative role in fostering dialogue between communities, governments, and other stakeholders to address social issues and promote collaboration. Facilitation generally aims to resolve community problems through a capacity building process, enabling citizens to identify, access, and structure their own problem while making informed decisions

(Vidal, 2009; Diaz Puente et.al 2013). This approach focuses on inclusiveness and community empowerment (Escobar 2019; Diaz Puente et.al 2013), employing various tools to create group dynamics (Vidal, 2009; Diaz Puente et.al 2013), cultivate trust, build a sense of identity among participants, and achieve specific goals. Therefore, facilitators take on multiple functions, including: 1) teachers or guides, imparting new skills; 2) consultants and advisors, supporting the implementation of ideas from group discussion; 3) trainers, providing instructions tailored to participant's needs; and 4) leaders, encouraging active participation and proposing alternative solutions; 5) intermediaries in participatory processes, implementing programs dedicated to specific groups and fostering meaningful participation (Diaz Puente, 2013; Molle, 2013; Escobar, 2019; Mueller-Hirth, 2012). Facilitators serve as neutral coordinators, guiding discussion without dominating them, and working in the following key policy areas: public service reform, social justice, and democratic innovation (Escobar 2019; Bynner et. al. 2023). NGOs play a crucial role in facilitation, as they are equipped with the resources and skills to support various forms of participation. Some NGOs are service-oriented, while others are project-led (Nelson-Nuñez 2019; Lanon et. al 2020). With extensive experience in mobilising community members and building their capacities, NGOs ensure diverse community voices are heard (Cameron et al. 2011). Facilitators simultaneously teach, ask questions, invite dialogue, guide discussions, and ensure active participation, empowering individuals with confidence and ownership of the issue being addressed (Douglas, 2023; Lehtonen, Radzik-Maruszak 2023). According to Escobar (2019) facilitators in the context of democracy fulfil several functions. One role refers to mini-publics, where they act as a process designers and are responsible for group facilitation using deliberative methods. The second is related to participatory budgeting processes, where facilitators mobilise various stakeholders, and the third focuses on creating space for public dialogue.

NGOs that advocate for youth in this role offer non-formal education tailored to the specific needs of young participants, such as mental health awareness, leadership skills, and public speaking (Camino, Zeldin, 2002; Checkoway, Gutierrez, 2006). Further research confirms that they also create inclusive programs or platforms where young people can engage in participatory processes, such as deliberative forums, participatory budgeting, and youth councils, participatory budgeting and other democratic innovation tools. NGOs support the implementation of ideas emerging from youth-led discussions and ensure that these ideas are integrated into decision-making processes (Tisdall, Davis, 2004; Loncle et al., 2012).

2 METHODS AND CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

This article is based on two case studies examining NGO activity in youth participation in Finland and Poland, two countries with distinct democratic histories and participatory traditions (Loughlin et. al. 2012). In Finland, NGOs have evolved within the Nordic welfare state model, known for high-quality service provision (Abrahamson, 1999). In contrast, the development of NGOs in Poland has been more complex, shaped by the post-communist regime, and administrative reforms (Ekiert et.al. 2014).

In Finland, the role of NGOs is primarily defined by the Finish Associations Act (Yhdistyslaki, 503/1989) and the Finish Foundations Act (Säätiölaki, 487/2015), which define key legal frameworks, including functions and cooperation with public authorities. These laws recognise NGOs as serving the public interest, complementing government in service provision. The Finnish Register of Associations reported over 108,475 active associations in 2024, alongside approximately 2,700 registered foundations in 2023 (Finish Patent and Registration Office: prh.fi).

In Poland, as in Finland, NGOs operate under two primary legal forms: associations, governed by the Act of 7 April 1989 – The Law on Associations (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 2261), and foundations, regulated by the Act of 6 April 1984 on Foundations (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 2167). However, the most significant legislation is the Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit and Volunteer Work (Journal of Laws of 2024, item 1491) which define the roles of NGOs and their interactions with public authorities, emphasizing public interest and partnership. In 2021, Poland had 138,000 NGOs, including associations and foundations (Chrzczonowicz, 2022).

The study focuses on Tampere in Finland and Lublin in Poland, cities chosen for their contrasting levels of civic engagement and social trust. Finland is often considered a model of active civic participation, while Poland, as a post-transition country, faces challenges with low social trust.

Tampere is the third's largest city in Finland, located in the southern part of the country with approximately 235,000 inhabitants. The city is governed by a 67-member council and city board, with the mayor as a head. In 2024, it was awarded as a UNICEF Child-Friendly City (City of Tampere, tampere.fi). Tampere is regarded as one of Finland's leading municipalities due to the quality and efficiency of its public services, and citizen involvement (Radzik-Maruszak, Bátorová, 2015). The city has deep-rooted traditions of participatory practices, and is known as a 'city of actions' (Digital and Population Data Services Agency: suomi.fi).

In contrast, Lublin with a population about 343,000, is a major city in eastern Poland. Power in the city is divided between a 31-member city council and directly elected mayor. Key reforms in Lublin begun in 2010, when the newly elected mayor emphasized participative governance, including close cooperation with civil society, and introducing innovative tools for citizen engagement. In 2023, Lublin became the European Youth Capital, reflecting its innovative approaches to fostering direct citizen involvement in local democracy (Szulc-Wałęcka, 2021; Lehtonen, Radzik-Maruszak, 2023).

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the roles of NGOs in youth participation in two cities. Data were gathered through desk research and semi-structured interviews. Desk research involved reviewing legal frameworks, policy documents, reports, and online resources from local governments and NGOs. Primary data consisted of 26 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024 with decision-makers, public officials, NGO representatives, teachers, and young people. A snowball sampling method was used to identify key interviewees. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed, and analysed. The data were processed using MAXQDA software, where key themes were identified through systematic coding. These themes were then grouped into broader categories aligned with the study's objective and research questions. The coding process was guided by both existing literature, and themes specific to the local contexts of Tampere and Lublin. MAXQDA facilitated a systematic and transparent approach to the analysis, enabling the connections between themes and insights from interviewees. Additionally, findings from desk research were triangulated with interview results to validate the study's conclusions (Gibbs, 2015).

3 RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL RESEARCH: CASE STUDIES OF TAMPERE AND LUBLIN

Using the theoretical framework described in this paper, the empirical research analyses the role of NGOs in both cities, categorizing the findings into four main areas: 1) the professionalisation of NGOs in service provision; 2) their role in advocacy and policy influence; 3) their function as interpreters and mediators; and 4) their role as facilitators.

3.1. Professionalisation of NGO in service provision

Scholars and practitioners emphasize that NGOs are seen as innovative responses to social challenges (Sama, Järvelä 2008), with increasing professionalization in service delivery (Sama, 2017). This trend emerges with the implementation of NPM norms, followed by governance practices, and is also evident in the cases examined in this paper. A representative from the non-governmental sector in Tampere commented on this as follow:

“NGOs are fulfilling the field of the public services, offering something that the state doesn’t offer. We are like filling the gaps, it’s like a puzzle where everyone is working in their own area. When some pieces are missing, then we are (NGOs) fill the gaps”, (NGO, Tampere)

A similar perspective was shared by the third sector in Lublin, indicating its active participation in the implementation of statutory task imposed on the city, including those related to youth services. Although both Tampere and Lublin rely on NGOs for public service provision, their approaches are slightly different. First, a crucial issue is the relationship between city authorities and youth organizations, which significantly influences the role of NGOs in service provision. Informants noted that youth work in Finland is ‘mainly handled by cities’, closely linked to the organisation of public services for young people, which are managed by the city. Therefore, youth policy is implemented through Youth Services, while some additional services outsourced to NGOs. Furthermore, non-governmental organisations heavily rely on public funding – both central and city sources (Sama, Järvelä, 2008; Trägärth 2010). Local organisations that cooperate with the city to deliver youth services benefit from operational stability and continuity. However, this dependence also poses challenges, as any disruption in city funding threaten their ability to operate.

In contrast, youth participation in Lublin is coordinated by the Social Participation Office (SPO) and Youth Policy Office (YPO). Notably, the SPO consists of individuals who previously worked in the non-governmental sector. As a result, they understand the needs of the community and are well-regarded by them. The YPO was established when the city gained the title of European Youth Capital 2023 (EYC), reflecting the needs and changes in the city’s policy. Many initiatives and projects also arise from cooperation with the third sector, with a broader financial support for youth participation than in Tampere. Beyond traditional statutory task assigned to NGO by the city,

funds are also dedicated directly for young people, such as the Youth Inspires the District program, coordinated by a local NGO. The EYC title provides NGO with new opportunities to access funding sources. One informant remarked that, while the title itself does not guarantee funding, it facilitates access to external resources. Nevertheless, some organisations in Lublin express concern that the city sometimes shifts responsibility for public task to NGO, providing inadequate funding. As they underlined, many city-assigned task, including those for youth, are underestimated. In consequence, NGOs often cannot sustain activities throughout the whole year, and they are forced to conduct shorter and non-sequential projects. Larger, well-established NGOs, driven by their mission, frequently cover funding shortfalls from their own resources. One youth organizations commented as follow:

"Commissioned tasks, which fall under the city's responsibility, are often very poorly financed, they are severely underfunded. Expectations are high, and since we are NGO, we are expected to do this work for free, without adequate compensation. We do it out of a sense of mission and duty, because someone must take care of this group (youth, ESW). That's why we continue to do it, regardless of how much we have to contribute ourselves"; (NGO, Lublin)

Aforementioned quotations indicate several issues. First, they refer to the unique nature of the social sector, which relies on philanthropy and has often been used as an argument for reducing the costs of certain public services. The second issue pertains to the higher capacity of youth-organization in leading youth activities. As scholars note, NGOs were created to fill gaps where neither governments nor the market were able to provide services for all and serve in the interest of the whole society (Ibidem; Schmitz 2015). In both, Tampere and Lublin, NGOs have recognized the need to support these group, particularly as city authorities face challenges in reaching hard-to-reach-groups, such as disadvantages, immigrants, minorities or other vulnerable populations (Sama, 2017). Scholars argue that this results from NGO's ability to mobilize community for participation, address unmet needs, and provide social services as trustworthy contractors (Ibidem; Sama, Järvelä, 2008).

3.2. Advocacy and policy influence

This role is primarily based on NGO participation in advisory bodies and councils, where they initiate and provide input on issue aimed at influencing

public decision-making. These bodies include youth representation, allowing organizations to present their position, opinion and proposals on youth public policy. In Lublin, advisory bodies are directly dedicated to young people, as reflected in their names and main focus, for example the Children and Youth Committee.

Nonetheless, differences are evident between the two cities. In Tampere, this distinction stems from the fact that Northern NGOs are known for their advocacy, particularly within development scheme, where they have been active for decades (Kontinen, 2007). Consequently, in addition to service provision, development cooperation has become a key objective for Finnish NGOs. Scholars have noted a shift from project development (service provision) to joint political advocacy (Ibidem; Smillie 1995). In the Finnish context, development cooperations entails close cooperation between NGOs and the government. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs plays a pivotal role, allocating funds to organisations involved in development projects and programs (Kontinen, 2007). As a result, Finnish NGOs work alongside state actors, adhering to national guidelines in development policy, which emphasises strong commitment to humanitarian aid, human rights, and sustainable development.

In this regard, the third sector in Tampere fulfil two main functions. First, as described by Hopkins, its programmatic and issue-based advocacy, with local public authorities participating in NGO meetings, and Steering Committee sessions with various stakeholders, including representatives from the third sector and the public one. As informants indicate, these meetings are held once or twice a year, and serve as a platform for exchanging information and experiences. Their aim is to foster collaboration in developing solutions for youth, particularly through project development, the creation of new services, and policy proposals submission to achieve policy change. Second, advocacy approaches in Tampere are strongly linked to Hopkin's theoretical framework, which also involves negotiation and discussion of key youth-related activities with decision-makers, persuading them to allocate funding for critical initiatives. One youth-organisation mentioned that they had demonstrated in front of City Hall due to difficulties in financial support from the city. They commented as follows:

"We had intense negotiations with the City of Tampere. I don't actually know what affects that the finance from the city was cut. It seems the system will become more centralised, than decentralised, but it's

easier to cooperate with the city, making the system more efficient (...)", (NGO, Tampere).

According to this statement, youth organisations recognize the importance of maintaining strong relationship with local authorities and building political support for their activities, particularly to secure funding for their daily operations.

In Lublin, the role of NGOs in advocacy is broader, as decision makers view NGOs as genuine partner in collaborative efforts to develop strategies, policy documents and reports, that define objectives for youth initiatives. Local NGOs have taken initial steps in identifying the needs and expectations of the city's youth in the document: We Need Information! Report, which examines the situations of young people in Lublin, and the Youth Guide, a comprehensive report on social involvement, youth information and structured dialogue in the city (EYC 2023 Application). Another important step was Let's Talk! the youth recommendations, an outcome of Erasmus+ KA3 Youth scheme, underling the beginning of structured youth policy implementation in Lublin. There are several examples of joint efforts between youth organisation and the city, such as City Development Strategy 2030, which includes separate youth policy component, the foundations for the Children and Youth Program, and the collaborative preparation of the European Youth Capital 2023. This process, fully coordinated by one of the youth organisation, strengthen collaboration between the administration, youth, and the nonprofit sector in Lublin. As local politician pointed out:

"A lot of activities are indeed implemented with the help of NGOs. We select them through a competitive process where we specify our priorities, for example, right now the competition is for youth policy. (...) It's best to entrust it to an organization that has experience, a nationwide perspective, and often a Europe-wide view, so that the document created will truly be something we are proud of, and here we have an excellent partner to whom we are not afraid to entrust this task", (decision-maker, Lublin).

Aforementioned quotations draw attention the crucial contributions of youth organisations to policy changes across several areas. First, the idea of Lublin's bid for EYC 2023, which became a milestone in developing youth policy in the city, was initiated by the non-governmental sector. Youth organizations advocate for changes in policy and decision-making processes,

resulting in the creation of new policy documents that directly addressed young people. Moreover, NGOs focus on raising awareness of youth issue, ensuring that marginalised and excluded voices are heard. Additionally, local organisation participates in preparation and implementation of the proposed policies, actively creating meaningful change. Finally, city authorities recognize the potential and competencies of NGOs, and assess them as valued partners with unique capabilities, especially in carrying out youth-focused activities. As one decision-makers emphasized:

"They are truly a great partner for us, primarily because NGOs typically focus their attention on specific issues, such as those affecting the younger generation. As a result, we often benefit from and enjoy listening to what they have to say", (decision-maker, Lublin).

This statement also emphasizes that NGOs are more adequate for youth initiatives due to their easier access to this target group, a better understanding of their needs and more informal, day-to-day contact. In addition, young people are more willing to cooperate with local organization, than with local authorities due to their bureaucracy and formal structure. According to one interviewee, decision-making processes related to youth participation are often designed by adults, with limited input from young people. In this context, local organizations from Tampere stressed that:

"Young people are not so willing to participate in city-organized activities like participatory budgeting or youth councils, because there are so formal (...). They feel if somebody is not really interested in their ideas, or if it's just a formality, and if the participation is real or it is just about what the city would say formally. It's created by adults, and the adults think what should be done, how the process should be organized", (NGO, Tampere)

In this regard, public authorities tend to work for youth, rather than with them, as opposed to NGOs (Quick, Bryson, 2016, p. 162).

3.3. The roles of interpreters and mediators

The role of interpreters, as originally defined in the theoretical framework of this paper, does not apply in a detail in either city. In Tampere, this role is only partially fulfilled by NGOs, mainly through the development of new public

services for young people from specific populations, such as immigrants. Most interviewees described Tampere as multicultural city. There are at least 160 languages spoken. In addition to Finnish, the most common languages include Arabic, English, Spanish, Farsi, Chinese, Kurdish, Somali, Russian and Estonian. As a result, the city tries to respond to the needs of these individuals, many of whom are young people (City of Tampere: tampere.fi). One local youth organization observed that city authorities value the expertise of NGOs, and through various consultations and recommendations from them, dedicated services are created for young migrants:

"Based on our information and knowledge, they (city authority, ESW), can also build different kind of services for the city of Tampere and for immigrant groups especially', (NGO, Tampere).

Therefore, in Tampere, the third sector plays a role in interpreting the needs of marginalised and multicultural groups across various public services. This role is rooted in a community-oriented approach that includes the cultural specifics of these young people and maintains fully independent and autonomous communication. Mediation also contributes to integrating immigrants with the local community to achieve balance within diverse and multicultural populations. Some NGOs undertake projects focused on debates and discussion, encouraging young immigrants to participate in community life, including local and national elections or Erasmus projects. Organisations in Tampere are not focused directly on promoting citizen participation, they emphasize their role in providing social services. They also partially fulfil their roles as advocates, mediators and interpreters, although the activities related to these roles still refer to public services for marginalised groups, such as young people.

In Lublin, the role of an interpreter is primarily reflected in a platform that seeks to define the needs of young people, representing their voice in dealing with the city administration. This process also includes input and advisory opinion from youth organizations. As a result, NGOs take a more active role, placing them between interpreters and mediators for this group. One NGO addressed the issue as follows:

"These young people are afraid to enter the City Hall, but thanks to the fact that we (NGO) know how to navigate the rigid dynamics of the institution (...), we can guide them safely through the process", (NGO, Lublin).

This quotation confirms that NGOs coordinate dialogue and mutual understanding between city authorities and young people, addressing the complexities of cross-cultural communication. The third sector also plays a role in informing youth about their rights, and empowering them to express their views, aiming to ensure their voice are heard by the authorities (Lundy, 2007). The importance of social organisations in youth empowerment within the city was stressed by one of the youth organisations, as follows:

"There is a lot of pressure from young people and from social organisations to take young people seriously (...) to become a subject in the discussion and I see they are starting to be seen as a priority", (NGO, Lublin).

The aforementioned quotations draw attention to a persistent issue in the literature: the portrayal of young people as objects rather than subjects of policymaking (Lehtonen, Radzik-Maruszak 2023). The statement also highlights the importance of NGOs in encouraging young people to participate in the urban sphere and speaking on their behalf. It also emphasizes the relevance of key areas defined by Lundy for meaningful youth participation, such as: space, voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007). Additionally, in Lublin as in Tampere, NGOs support social integration, but focus on youth as a whole, rather than only on immigrants.

3.4. NGOs as Youth Facilitators

In Finland, the role of facilitation is not as prominent as it is in Poland. This is noticeable because the role of NGOs is more limited, and schools play a more significant role in fostering youth participation. Decision-makers and teachers emphasise that schools ensure young people's voice are heard. Local youth organisations also strongly focus on schools and collaboration with them in youth activities and projects.

There is facilitation potential in Finland's Cultural Houses, developed in 2009 based on the Functional Peer Support (GFP) model and implemented by NGOs or supported by municipal institutions. Of the 20 Cultural Houses in Finland, a few are also located in Tampere. Although the Cultural Houses approach is based on planning, implementing and evaluating activities in cooperation between citizens and trained peer supporters, the focus remains on providing services rather than encouraging active participation (Cultural Houses: kukunori.fi; The Baring Foundation: baringfoundation.

org.uk). NGOs in Tampere have noted that these spaces provide valuable support for young people, especially for those with mental health problems. This model offers a limited form of participation, where young adults gain skills and lead volunteer activities through peer support. Tampere has two Cultural Houses: Laikku, managed directly by the City of Tampere as part of public cultural services, and Virta, which operates in partnership with NGOs, primarily under the Sosped Foundation (City of Tampere: tampere.fi).

NGOs in Lublin stand out significantly as facilitators of youth participation. Youth organisations initiate many activities for young people, which they implement independently or in cooperation with the city. They are also invited by the city to participate in various initiatives. Local NGOs often serve as a driving force, pushing youth participation and its framework. Consequently, these collaborative efforts have led to the development of tools aimed at youth inclusion, enhancing a positive 'bottom-up' approach to build participatory activities for young people. Furthermore, cooperation between the city and NGOs in creating and expanding offerings for young people has intensified in recent years. One youth organisation emphasises the need for collaboration between the public and nonprofit sectors in creating and developing participatory spaces in the city:

"I have the feeling that some of the impetus comes from NGOs, but without the involvement of each party (decision-makers, public officials, NGOs, ESW), nothing would happen", (NGO, Lublin)

The quotations above highlight the importance of the relationship between city authorities and NGOs in addressing social issues and promoting collaboration. In this relationship, the key to success lies in the cooperation of all actors. According to Escobar's theoretical framework described above, within the context of democracy, youth organisations in Lublin participate in the participatory budgeting process. The first Youth Participatory Budgeting (YPB) initiative, aimed at children, youth, and students was launched in 2019 by a local NGO (Youthpb.eu, 2022). Due to the pandemic, the initiative required adjustments and was transformed into School Participatory Budgeting (SPB) in 2020. In this process, the role of NGOs is crucial: the pilot action of YPB was coordinated by the third sector, while in SPB, the city took responsibility. Nonetheless, the revised edition still includes NGOs, which provide mentoring to working groups in schools implementing SPB. Another example involves Lublin obtaining the title of European Youth Capital, an achievement that

originated from a local NGO. As the NGO described the 'story' behind the application for the title:

"In the team, we thought, it would be great if Lublin became the European Youth Capital. After all, it's such a youth-oriented city, and we have so much energy in social organisations, and there are so many young people - why aren't we utilizing this? And what we thought, we decided to turn into action. The former president (of the NGO, ESW) went to a meeting with the vice mayor, and she said, 'Alright, if you write the application and carry out all the consultations, then let's do it', (NGO, Lublin)

Importantly, as the NGO noted, the city administration was 'supportive' of this idea, expressing interest in the initiative. Nevertheless, it was the nonprofit sector, with its substantial expertise and knowledge in this area, that persuaded decision-makers to apply for the title. Based on this collaboration with the city, NGOs took on the role of coordinators throughout the application process. As the nonprofit sector emphasised:

"It was a significant process, and we had to convince the city, which lacked the competencies to work with young people, as these are individuals who work in offices and don't have much interaction with youth. So, it was more about the city trusting us and believing that this potential truly existed", (NGO, Lublin)

The aforementioned quotations highlight two key points. First is the potential among youth themselves, and within the organisations who work with them. Second, youth organisations in Lublin have strong potential and competencies. As the lead organisation in EYC noted, it was essential to have a clear understanding of the objectives, key action directions, and an overview of youth policy to make the city more youth-friendly through fully participatory approaches.

A key issue is also the creation of Youth Spaces, places designed by young people for young people. There are eight Youth Spaces in Lublin in various districts of the city, coordinated by non-governmental organisations. This issue aligns with the concept of *invited spaces* created by city authorities and NGOs, where young people can initiate and actively develop their self-organizing capacity in society (Cornwall, 2004; Taylor, 2007). Similarly, since 2013, the Centre for Youth Information and Development has been run by

youth organisations in Lublin. This place is unique on a national scale. The centre focuses on youth information and encouraging them towards active civic engagement.

Additionally, officials and NGOs acknowledge their role as *intermediaries* and linkage between the city authorities and young people. Decision-makers define NGOs as the '*youngest voice*', recognising them as a key entity that can accurately diagnose the needs of this group. Local NGOs emphasises their role in empowering youth, using specific methods such as street work to be closer with young people and encouraging them to take on initiatives. In this facilitative role, youth organisations act as teachers, trainers and leaders. They are even perceived as the "*cool adults*", supporting young people, guiding them in civic participation and demonstrating the value of involvement. Furthermore, the institutional structure of NGOs is much more encouraging for young people to cooperate and engage in open dialogue than the city. Youth organisations offer non-formal education, training, workshops, and information on youth rights, as well as capacity building opportunities, allowing for learning through play. Even the City Youth Council (CYC) defines youth organisations as partners in their daily activities and tasks. The Chair of CYC described this relationship in the following way:

"I can't complete the project on my own. I need a good team and strong partners. For example, at the Congress (full name of event: Young People Have a Voice, ESW), we had around four or five partners. It was the NGOs that conducted workshops for us free of charge", (Youth, Lublin)

This quotation highlights the important role of youth organisations, which are prioritized as entities that young people want to collaborate with and trust.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the evolving role of NGOs in recent years and their impact on youth participation. In both, Tampere and Lublin, these organisations play a significant role shaped by different local governance models.

In Tampere, NGOs primarily fulfil service-oriented role, complemented by advocacy groups (Sama, Järvelä, 2008). Collaborations between NGOs and the city allows Finnish youth organisations to supplement public

resources effectively. However, this dynamic places them as gap-fillers in service provision, with limited influence on youth empowerment or policy change (Kontinen, 2007). Conversely, in Lublin, the role and scope of NGOs have expanded beyond service provision due to decentralisation and development of civil society. They frequently engage in policy advocacy, acting as key partners in the design and implementation of youth-centred initiatives (Szulc-Wałęcka 2022; EYC 2023 Application). This participatory framework, supported by the city's recent designation as the European Youth Capital, empowers NGOs in Lublin to advocate for young people's rights and needs, and to actively shape the city's youth policies. Furthermore, the result of the research provide evidence that NGOs in Lublin also frequently act as facilitators and mediators in youth participation, creating spaces, engaging youth directly, and enhancing their sense of agency and ownership in decision-making (Young et. al. 2024; Lehtonen, Radzik-Marszak, 2023).

One significant observation from the study is the varying levels of collaboration between NGOs and city authorities regarding youth participation. In Tampere, the relationship is service-oriented and formalized. NGOs work closely with local authorities but remain largely dependent on city funding, which restricts their capacity to adopt other roles. Local government relies on NGOs to support youth-focused services but maintains significant control over their management. Despite the potential of the Cultural Houses model, the focus remains more on service provision than promoting active participation. In contrast, in Lublin, there is a more collaborative and partnership-oriented relationship between NGOs and public authorities. As a result, NGOs not only provide some services, but also shape youth policies and other youth-oriented initiatives, such as Youth Participatory Budgeting and School Participatory Budgeting, the European Youth Capital application, and promoting youth rights and participation (EYC 2023 Application). This collaborative approach enables youth organisations to act as facilitators, allowing youth to participate more meaningfully (Lundy, 2007). Research further demonstrates that they play important roles, positioning them between interpreters and mediators.

As the research findings confirm, there are notable distinctions between the cases analysed in fostering youth participation. In Lublin, NGOs are crucial in empowering youth through advocacy, policy changes, new initiatives, and participatory spaces. These efforts increase the visibility of youth activities and voices in policy making, as well as ensuring greater opportunities for them to take action (Lightbody, 2017; EYC 2023 Application). Nonetheless, in Tampere, the NGOs' impact on

youth participation is more limited. They mostly deliver services rather than directly engaging young people.

The research results suggest that the functions and roles of NGOs also depend on local governance structures and cultural context. In Tampere, youth organisations operate within a relatively stable welfare state model that gives priority to service provision. Conversely, Lublin adopts a more integrated and participatory approach, reflecting a more flexible governance model that incorporates civil society into the governing process. Consequently, the potential of NGOs to boost youth participation varies significantly, depending on the structure and framework of local governance.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis presented in this paper, focusing on two cities, demonstrates that changes in public policy, social complexities and governance challenges influence not only the public sector but also the role of civil society organisations. Tampere and Lublin, with their distinct traditions and governance models, present contrasting roles of NGOs in youth participation. Although the role of NGOs in Tampere appears to be evolving, with advocacy emerging as a secondary function alongside service provision, attempts to adopt new roles focused directly on youth engagement remain limited. Meanwhile, Lublin exemplifies a more comprehensive approach that combine service provision with advocacy and facilitation in youth participation and engagement. Furthermore, NGOs in Lublin have emerged as influential actors in shaping youth-oriented policies and participatory tools. The research suggests that Lublin represents collaborative model, where NGOs work closely with city authorities, offering valuable contributions and driving dynamic change in youth participation. Consequently, more collaborative frameworks appear to be significantly conducive to boosting youth participation. Future research should explore how these roles continue to evolve in response to changes in local governance and context, including shifting policies and funding.

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THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION'S "FAKE NEWS" INTENTIONS IN THE WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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Abstract

The RF's conventional military operations against Ukraine are accompanied by a "fake news" powerful information influence on three objects, specifically "We" – Russia, "They" – Ukraine, and "The third party" – the West and other countries. In the RF's war in Ukraine, "fake news" reflects the strategic orientation of the Kremlin to manipulate the information space. The study aims to find out the dynamics and prevailing topics of the RF's "fake news" and to decode its intentions in the war time. The findings help conclude that 1) the dynamics of the number and topics of "fake news" in the Russian information campaign during military operations in Ukraine shows changes in Russia's priorities and tactics during the war; 2) topics of "fake news" that prevailed during the various stages of the war in Ukraine reflect the constant and changing aspects of the RF's information campaign; 3) the intentions coded in the "fake news" reveal the strategic and tactical objectives of the Russian information campaign and military operations in the context of the war in Ukraine. Analysis of the RF's "fake news" intentions discloses a general strategy aimed at delegitimising the Ukrainian government, justifying Russia's aggressive actions and splitting the anti-Russian coalition.

Keywords: *Disinformation, "Fake news", Intention, Russian-Ukrainian war, Information campaign, Manipulation of public opinion*

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INTRODUCTION

In today's world of information warfare and disinformation campaigns, the use of "fake news" as a strategic tool of military operations has become increasingly relevant. Russia's aggression against Ukraine reflects the destructive potential of fraudulent information. Consequently, it is important to understand how "fake news" is used to shape narratives, influence public opinion, and manipulate perceptions during military operations. The study of key topics and motivations behind the spread of "fake news" during military operations opens up opportunities to identify strategic goals and tactical flexibility of information campaigns in conflict situations. Understanding these aspects is critical to developing effective strategies to counter disinformation, ensure national security, and make informed decisions in conflict settings.

Studying "fake news" refers to understanding two distinctive phenomena: 1) an increase in disinformation in media in the period of war, and 2) malign intentions. In the article, we consider cases when disinformation is based on "fake news" and assume that intentions are the basis of any targeted communication, and "fake news", regardless of the target audience, always has some intention. Consequently, the purpose of the article is to determine the intentions of the RF's "fake news" directed against Ukraine and the West and in favour of the RF. Having defined five periods of the analysed time frame, the second aim is to research the intensity and topics of "fake news" prevailing in each period.

In this study, we set the following research questions:

RQ1: How did the "fake news" number and topics change depending on the development of military operations?

RQ2: What "fake news" topics dominated in each period we identified?

RQ3: How did the reconstituted "fake news" intentions reflect the tactical objectives of military operations, and how did those intentions influence Russia's information campaign?

This study concerns "fake news" of the first year of the Russian-Ukrainian war, and covers the period from February 17, 2022 to February 28, 2023. That is, a week before the beginning of the RF's full-scale invasion on the territory of Ukraine and a week after the end of the war first year. Ukrainian and Western experts (Pecherskyi, Buket, 2023; Walker, 2023; Westfall, 2023), taking into account the phases of military operations, divide the studied timeframe into five periods: 1) 17 – 23 February 2022 – the prelude of the RF to the invasion; 2) 24 February – 31 May 2022 – Russia's invasion of

Ukraine and international condemnation of its actions; 3) 01 June – 31 August 2022 – accumulation of forces by Ukraine to liberate territories occupied by Russia; 4) 01 September – 30 November 2022 – offensive operations of Ukraine and liberation of part of the territories; 5) 01 December 2022 – 28 February 2023 – defensive actions of Ukraine and exhaustion of the Russian armed forces. Selected periods are an important characteristic in the study of data, which allows systematisation and analysis of information according to the phases of war events.

The empirical data are taken from the relevant database of the Information Space Security Department at the Ivan Chernyakhovsky National Defense University of Ukraine. The database is published in two information and analytical collections (Mykus, Matsko, Voitko, 2022; Mykus, Matsko, Voitko, 2023). These primary data collection was composed based on official government sources, particularly, the official site of the Office of Strategic Communications (AFU StratCom, 2023), the official site of the Countering Disinformation Centre (2023), the fact-checking site Stopfake.org (2023) and the portal of the public organisation Detektor Media (2023).

The selection for the analysis consists of 1275 information units (texts only), which include “fake news” produced by the RF from February 17, 2022, to February 28, 2023. Each piece of “fake news” has undergone verification and includes a detailed description, primary message, and refutation. Cross-validation was applied to mitigate biases. Additionally, the aforementioned fact-checking resources have a clear methodology that is explained and publicly available on their websites.

The research data has certain limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results:

the analysis covers only one year of the war (2022-2023), which limits the possibility of studying long-term trends;

- the selection of “fake news” is limited to the Ukrainian information space;
- this study focuses exclusively on text-based “fake news”, excluding visual content such as photos, videos, or memes, which also play an important role in disinformation campaigns;
- only the war in Ukraine was considered, although the analysis of “fake news” spread by the RF in other conflicts (e.g., in Syria or Libya) could provide more knowledge about Russia’s general strategies in hybrid warfare.

Modern studies of the RF's disinformation destructive impact are conducted in several areas (Erlich, Garner, 2023; Bacio Terracino, Matasick, 2022; Propaganda Diary, 2023), namely: 1) impact of disinformation on national security: strategies to decrease disinformation, e.g., limiting access to specific channels and educating the public to distinguish facts from disinformation; 2) classification and detection of "fake news": characteristics of "fake news" and various techniques to identify and categorise them; 3) role of social media in spreading disinformation: the strategies used by social media companies to reduce the spread of "fake news" and the challenges posed by disinformation on these platforms; 4) combating disinformation: fact-checking, warning tags, and other methods to mitigate the impact of disinformation.

The first direction is the most studied, as it is the basis for comprehension of the phenomenon of Russian disinformation and "fake news". The least studied is the fourth direction since it requires a multidisciplinary approach and cooperation between various stakeholders, including governments, media organisations, and civil society. We focus on the last direction. Successful counteraction to disinformation influences is possible based on understanding the content of information flows. By analysing the messages and narratives shared in disinformation campaigns, researchers can identify the goals and tactics of the campaigns. This knowledge helps us figure out the best way to fight back with truthful information.

Our study refers to a relevant topic and potentially complements existing research, especially due to its longitudinal analysis. The results are not surprising, as there is a lot of literature on Russian information warfare (Pomerantsev, 2015; Horbulin, 2017; Elswah, Howard, 2020; Yuskiiv, Karpchuk, Khomych, 2021; Bacio Terrano, Matasick, 2022; Erlich, Garner, 2023; Aleksejeva, 2023) that points to the same themes and applications. The potential of this study lies in the research design that allows for the development of strategic topics and intentions regarding military actions.

The article is structured as follows. The first section provides an extended literature review. The second section is dedicated to the description of research methods and procedures. The third section presents the empirical results of the analysis. The final section outlines the conclusion, discussion and further research directions.

1 STATE-OF-THE-ART RESEARCH AND LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Systematic information manipulation and disinformation have been applied by the Russian government as an operational tool in its assault on

Ukraine (EU imposes sanctions, 2022). In the weeks and months leading up to Russia invading Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the Kremlin and pro-Kremlin media employed false and misleading narratives to justify military action against Ukraine, mask the Kremlin's operational planning, and deny any responsibility for the coming war (Yuskiv, Karpchuk, 2024). Collectively, these narratives served as V. Putin's *casus belli* to engage in a war of aggression against Ukraine (Aleksejeva, 2023).

Ukrainian fact-checkers emphasise that during the war, the RF's disinformation became repetitive, systematic and stable. It focuses on everyday problems as a result of massive attacks ("Life has become unbearable"), and also promotes the message "The West has given up on Ukraine and there will be no more help". Instead, before the war, the top topics included "Ukraine is a failed state", "Ukrainians are Nazis" and "Zelenskiy is a traitor and a thief of Western money." In the conditions of the war, the tactic of "massiveness" is even more used, i.e., much different disinformation, "fake news", manipulations under different guises and in different forms of content are thrown into the information space on all platforms. In addition, the war "fuels" the RF's disinformation like, for example, the topic of Ukrainian refugees (Kotubey-Herutska, 2023).

Russia's full-scale armed aggression significantly affected the volume of disinformation and "fake news" flows. Thus, in the first days of the full-scale invasion, the analysts of the Ukrainian public organisation Detector Media daily recorded more than 30 unique information leaks of Russia in the Ukrainian information space (DisinfoCronicle, 2022). The RF hoped to erode public trust, fuel discriminatory behaviours causing civil unrest, and undermine the quality of information making it difficult for the public to determine fact from fiction. It is the speed, scale and immediacy of its spread that makes misleading content dangerous (McNair, 2018; Farhall, et al., 2019). "Russia's disinformation campaigns purposefully confuse and undermine information environments. Their efforts seek to cause confusion, complicate efforts to reach consensus, and build support for Russia's goals, while undermining the legitimacy of Ukraine's response" (Disinformation and Russia's war, 2022). In addition, disinformation and "fake news" proper become the means of information warfare, which is directly or indirectly financed by the state or corporations, and involves the strategic use of information for political, economic or military purposes (Thornton, 2015). However, internet allows other players to challenge the Kremlin's narrative by providing counter-narratives and debunking distorted information and fake images (Khaldarova - Pantti, 2016).

The EU defines disinformation as “verifiably false or misleading information [...] created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to internationally deceive the public”, it “may cause public harm [...] [and] threats to democratic political and policymaking processes, as well as public goods” (European Commission, 2018). This means that: a) disinformation is a conscious attempt to encourage people to believe something that the producers and/or disseminators of the content know to be untrue; b) the producers and/or disseminators of disinformation act out of malicious intent (European Parliament, 2019, p. 19).

Disinformation has different ways of presentation, namely, fabricated content, misleading content, accurate content shared with false contextual information, satire and parody (House of Commons Select Committee, 2018) and in media, it is “fake news” (Egelhofer, Lecheler, 2019, p. 103). This term has been widely used since 2016 by American experts to explain the shocking results of the US elections (Wendling, 2018). The concept included both outright lies and ill-considered information traditionally used during election campaigns (bragging, bullying opponents, etc.). Since 2016, “fake news” has denoted a unique connection between algorithms of social networks, advertising systems, “creators” of false content and high-profile events (Fakes as a tool to influence, 2020).

Disinformation and “fake news” remain somewhat different, however, as the former generally refers to large-scale, orchestrated political and military actions to deceive people, while “fake news” might be sporadic and applied as part of a more general mosaic, often aimed at confusing population or arguing that there is no truth in the media, or elsewhere in the world (Kirby, 2016). “Fake news” has a centuries-long history around the world but the difference now is that the internet and social media distribute “fake news”, which is often hard to tell from real news, farther and faster than was possible only a few decades ago (Fargo, 2019, p. 59). Over the past years “fake news” concept evolved from journalists debating the notion (2017-2018), the concept being accepted as a term in public discourse (2020-2021) to turning into a newsworthy event, a particular expression of the more general phenomenon of disinformation (Boudana, Segev, 2024). Nevertheless, disinformation and “fake news” are interrelated and “fake news” becomes the basis/component of the disinformation campaign (Del Vicario, et al., 2016; Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Gibbons, Carson, 2022; Ferreira, 2022).

The threat of “fake news” is that “in a post-truth world in which ‘alternative facts’ have replaced the real in the collective imagination of

millions of people around the planet” a large segment of the population is unable to distinguish between reality and its ubiquitous misrepresentation and it may destabilise “democratic models of governance around the globe coinciding with the rise of autocratic forms of populism” (Moser, 2024, p. ix). “Fake news” may create “cultural chaos”, i.e., a new discursive order, where information flow is porous, hegemonic control over agendas is almost impossible, and traditional propaganda is not quite effective (Pantti, 2016).

Elections are not the only “breeding” ground for “fake news”. The RF’s war against Ukraine demonstrates the destructive potential of fraudulent information. During the period of preparation and implementation of aggression, the task of “fake news” may be to shock and intimidate the enemy (Clements, 2014; Yuskiv, Karpchuk, 2024). Such a strategy comprises several elements, the combined aim of which is to achieve “rapid dominance” over an enemy (Ullman, Wade 2003). The overall goal is to make the war quick and winnable.

News is often seen as an output of journalism, a field expected to provide “independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information” (Kovach, Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 11). “Fake news” refers to a range of discredited low-risk or high-risk news (A Multi-Dimensional Approach, 2018). The World Economic Forum has even listed “fake news” as one of the main threats to society (Del Vicario, et al., 2016). Like disinformation, “fake news” can take a variety of forms, including satirical news sites, fabricated news items, manipulated photography, propaganda, false press releases (Tandoc, Voc, 2016) and sensationalist tabloid content (Marwick, 2018).

The modern “flourishing” of “fake news” is associated with the development of virtual space technological and communication capabilities and numerous crises characterised, on the one hand, by a lack of information, and on the other, by its excessive volume. Troubled times provide fertile ground for the growth of “fake news”. “Social tumult and divisions facilitate our willingness to believe news that confirms our enmity toward another group” (Tandoc – Lim – Ling 2016: 13).

Oxford Dictionary defines “fake” as “not genuine; imitation or counterfeit”. “Fake news” mimics the form of mainstream news and is purposely crafted to mislead audiences (Bhatia, et al., 2023). It contains “false connection, false context, manipulated content, misleading content” (Wardle, 2017). Bakir and McStay describe “fake news” as “either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context” (Bakir, McStay, 2018, p. 157). This means that the presence of facts does not disqualify a message as “fake news” and that its content can be

completely fabricated, but also only be partly untrue and paired with correct information (Egelhofer, Lecheler, 2019).

Since “fake news” imitates objective news, it consists of similar structural components: a headline, a text body, and (however, not necessarily) a picture (Horne, Adali, 2017). The information is presented under the false pretense that it resulted from journalistic research (Egelhofer, Lecheler, 2019). As a result, recipients might misattribute “fake news” articles as genuine and credible news articles (Vargo, Guo, Amazeen, 2018).

The creation and use of “fake news” are determined by the following factors: 1) intention, 2) dissemination environment: “fake news” is primarily related to news that must come from legitimate sources, but a wider information ecosystem can also be used; 3) amplification: “fake news” exists “on its own”, but its consistent, coordinated amplification contributes to its use in information operations (Davlikanova, Kompantseva, 2022, p. 268).

In the conditions of war, “fake news” becomes weaponised aimed to bring about a change in beliefs and attitudes and, as a result, promote behaviour that serves the attacker’s purpose, in other words, “subdue the enemy without fighting” (Weaponization of Information, 2022). “Words also shoot”, so noted the Russian Minister of Defence Shoigu when opening the first military media festival in Russia in 2015 (Hansen, 2017).

As aforementioned, “fake news” is always intentional. Cambridge Dictionary treats “intention” as “something that you want and plan to do”. Particularly, intentions refer to the goals, objectives, or reasons behind someone’s actions. Intentions are combinations of ideas and desires rather than independent mental instructions, and they are distinguished from other instructions by “a special practical character” (Mele, 1997). Unlike desires, for instance, an intention has a decisive character, i.e., it sets the agent to a certain course of action (McCann, 1997, p. 206). Intentions are not always “visible” and clear, they can be implicit and need to be “reconstructed” to understand the agent’s aspirations, and this especially applies to the intentions embedded in “fake news”.

In times of war, “fake news”, having malicious intent, i.e., specific motives or reasons behind deceptive actions, could be disseminated to confuse and misdirect the rival, to demoralise enemy troops, to create fear, and erode trust in leadership, to camouflage military equipment and future actions, to disrupt enemy communications and intelligence-gathering efforts, to mislead enemy spies and intelligence agencies, to get a strategic advantage by making the enemy react to false information etc.

Russia has “acquired” the experience of using “fake news” since the time of the USSR. They were generally aimed at discrediting the West in the eyes of its citizens and the USSR’s satellite states and forming an exclusively positive attitude towards the Soviet state. During Putin’s time, the variety of forms of destructive information influence only expanded. While the methods used may differ across countries, the goals are the same: to sow distrust and confusion, to promote radical voices on divisive political issues, and to gain economic leverage, all while eroding support for the democratic process and rules-based institutions created in the aftermath of the WWII (Putin’s Asymmetric Assault, 2018).

“Fake news” enables the RF to construct a distorted pseudo-reality, in which military and other aggressive operations look forced, aimed at protecting the offended, overcoming “world evil”; fabricated “fake news” justifies the need for further tough action (Horbulin, et al., 2017, p. 58). In the war against Ukraine, the RF uses “fake news” that create a negative image of Ukraine and manipulate public opinion, which affects the course of a full-scale war, as well as the image of Ukraine in the eyes of citizens and the international community. Since agents of influence are well-versed in Ukrainian political, economic and social realities, they have the tools to manipulate public opinion.

The overall aim of this “fake news” activity is not necessarily to make one believe in lies but to persuade that everyone lies and there is no truth, or perhaps, there are “alternative truths” or “alternative facts.” Taken together, “fake news” establishes a fake cloud of vivid “pluralist truth,” which does not need proofs, knowledge, experts or even logic. Such “pluralist truth” is hard to counteract in a legal sense as it finds protection in the international and national standards on free speech (Fargo, 2019, p. 41)

2 RESEARCH METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This study involves three main stages: 1) analysis of the dynamics of “fake news” emergence in the context of military operations; 2) analysis of “fake news” topics within the defined periods; and 3) definition and analysis of objects and intentions of “fake news” according to their dynamics.

Analysis of “fake news” dynamics is the first step in the research aimed at understanding the general logic of information support of conventional operations. The main goal is to find the connection of “fake news” with the development of military events, including their distribution and response to changes. Such an analysis will enable, on the one hand, to specify the

key points of military operations, and on the other hand, how fraudulent information is used to influence the course of military operations, the population and public opinion, and international reaction.

At this stage, we use the method of forming a time series reflecting the number of “fake news” by weeks, months and military stages; then time series are analysed. This analysis includes trend detection, shift analysis, variance change analysis to identify extremes or special events in a time series and search for regularities (patterns). Data visualisation plays an important role in this process as it is a key research tool for visualising complex information patterns and trends, in particular for displaying the dynamics of the spread of “fake news”. This not only makes it easier to perceive the data, but also reveals hidden patterns that could be imperceptible in a purely textual analysis.

For a deeper understanding of the connection between military actions and “fake news”, we apply qualitative analysis, i.e., we compare the features of each period with the content of the publications. The most typical/characteristic and the most non-standard/notable publications are selected.

Identification and analysis of “fake news” topics for the periods was performed using the GPT-4 language model. Owing to advanced natural language processing capabilities, GPT-4 can understand and interpret complex narrative structures, providing deep analysis of “fake” discourses. A number of studies are devoted to the use of ChatGPT thematic analysis and analysis of intentions in the text. In particular, Fang et al. confirmed the effectiveness of using ChatGPT for thematic analysis and detection of intent in text (Fang, et al., 2023). Levkovich and Elyoseph apply ChatGPT to professional intent assessment and demonstrate the improved capabilities of the GPT-4 version in determining intentions compared to GPT-3.5 (Levkovich, Elyoseph, 2023). A study by Elyoseph et al. shows that ChatGPT can successfully identify and describe emotions (Elyoseph, et al., 2023). He and Garner conclude that large language models, in particular ChatGPT, can achieve intentions classification accuracy close to that of controlled models. Therefore, ChatGPT can be used to reliably identify intentions and emotions, at least compared to the capabilities of human experts (He, Garner, 2023). Similarly, Jeong confirms the superiority of ChatGPT in determining intentions compared to traditional chatbot systems (Jeong, 2023). The research by Zhang et al delves into the effectiveness of ChatGPT in refining the thematic analysis process (Zhang, et al., 2023). Hariri offers a comprehensive overview of ChatGPT, detailing its applications, advantages, and limitations (Hariri, 2023).

At this stage of the research, GPT-4 was applied to identify key topics for subsets of “fake news” for the corresponding period.

Analysis of the intentions embedded in “fake news” is a key stage of the research that provides an opportunity to consider the motivations of the enemy during a military conflict. Determining the intentions accompanying each “fake news” and further analysis of the general scheme of motivations to prepare and distribute “fake news” help not only reveal the tactical goals of the enemy’s information campaigns but also determine the tactical goals of the military operation as a whole. When we understand what objects “fake news” focuses on, we can reveal the real consequences of fraudulent information for these objects. Analysis of dynamics helps identify trends associated with changes in the political and social environment, as well as find key moments in “fake news” dissemination. On this basis, effective counter-disinformation strategies can be developed, aimed at the objects and motivations that gain importance in the analysis, but this may be a task for further research.

The intent analysis technique of political discourse is used to analyse intentions (Ushakova, et al., 2000; Zasiakina, Zasiakin, 2008). In the case of conflict discourse, this technique was applied by B. Yuskiv and colleagues (Yuskiv, Karpchuk, Khomych, 2021; Yuskiv, Karpchuk, 2024).

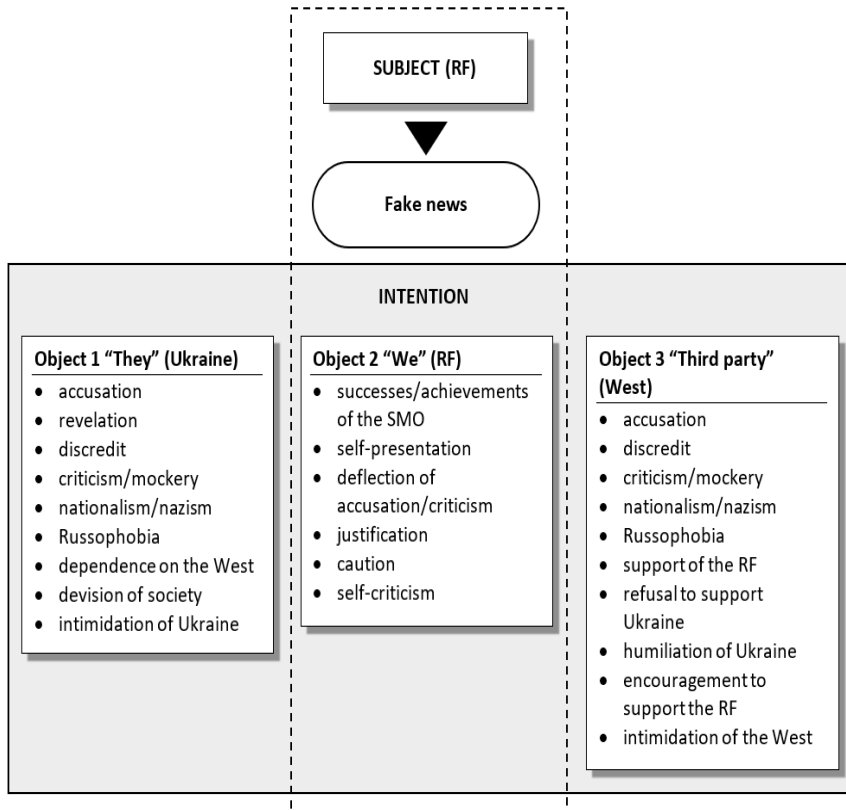
The methodology is based on the fact that intention is a property of the subject’s consciousness and is defined as the subject’s purposeful focus on some object. In the context of communication between the subject and the object, the message of the subject, being a product of his/her thought processes, contains one or more intentions of different courses. The structure of such a communication intention includes two aspects: indicating the object and expressing the subject’s attitude towards it. The individuality of intentions is revealed in the choice of objects to be designated and the expression of attitudes towards them. The same intention can be expressed in different forms: by one word or a whole sentence. And, conversely, one fragment of text can contain several intentions. The main goal of the technique is to try to reconstruct communication intentions based on the text of the message (See *Intentions in Communication*, 1990; Livet, Ridel, 1994).

Intentions are usually implicit and the determination of intentions is a complex and ambiguous procedure. However, in texts that express extreme conditions of conflict discourse, the hidden means tend to acquire a clear character and reveal the pragmatic or strategic orientation of the text. A conflict discourse creates a model of the enemy/adversary and a negative

assessment of everything related to it. Simultaneously, everything related to “us” is given a positive assessment. In the conflict discourse, “intrigue” unfolds in the so-called triangle: “We” – “They” (alien) – “Third party”. Each component of the triangle is assigned its characteristic. “We” block is usually attributed positively. Reproaches, condemnations, threats, etc. are addressed to the “They” block, as “They” represent the enemy/opponent. The “Third party” includes the people and decision-makers who are either encouraged to take the necessary actions or are reproached. Though, the triangle “We – They – Third party” is a characteristic feature of conflict discourse, it can be found in other types of discourse. However, it is in conflict situations that it gains the greatest potential.

In our case, we deal with texts that express the specified extreme conditions, i.e., a military conflict and the obvious confrontations. The subject of influence is the RF which uses “fake news” for purposeful, justified and organised influence on various target audiences to promote the ideas of the current Russian regime. The triangle of influence includes: 1) “We” – the RF’s decision-makers, its population and Russian supporters in the captured territories, as well as pro-Russian forces in other countries; 2) “They” – Ukraine’s decision-makers and its population; 3) “Third party” – the Western world. Taking into account the above considerations, appropriate profiles of intentions are defined for each object. The complete intentional model of “fake news” is presented in Fig. 1. The characteristics and interpretation of intentions are given directly in Annex. When counting the number of intentions in “fake news”, we consider that each news item may contain several intentions. In relation to one object, only one dominant intention is indicated.

Figure 1: *Intentional model of the Russian Federation’s “fake news”*



Source: Authors

The intention analysis procedure involves two stages: 1) selection and expert assessment of the range of intentions contained in the text, 2) their ranking and description of individual characteristics of the subject of influence based on intentions. The intentions of each message were evaluated regarding each object. The process of intentions assessment was initially conducted using the GPT-4 based on the identified intentions, and then each of the five experts expressed their version of the intentions. In the final version, an agreed assessment of the intentions of “fake news” was composed.

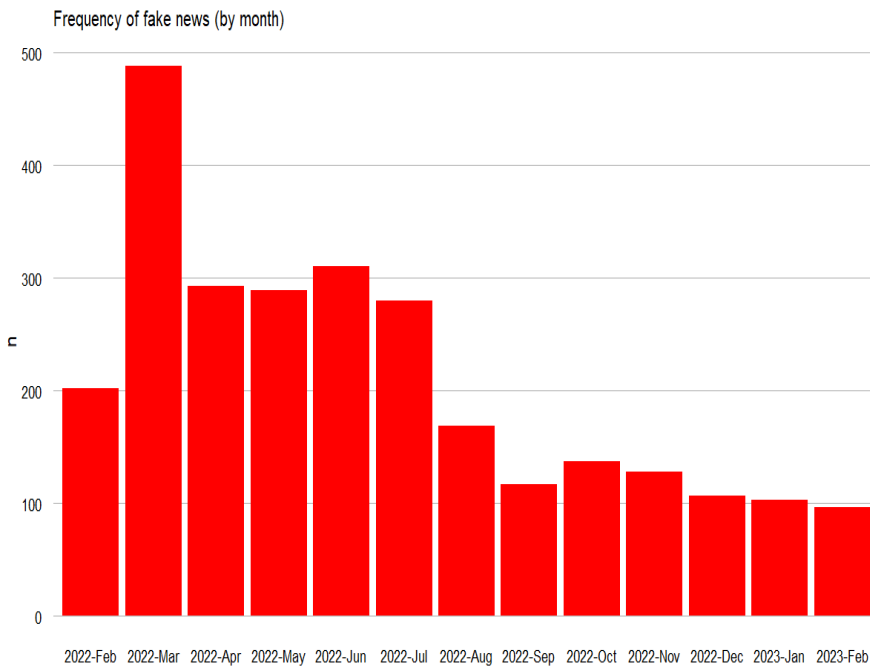
The described research stages are implemented in the R environment using: 1) data manipulation – functions of the dplyr and tidyr quanteda packages; 2) data visualisation – ggplot function from the ggplot2 package.

3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1. Research Question 1

The data in Fig. 2 and 3 show that “fake news” is an important component of the RF’s war:

Figure 2: *The number of the RF’s “fake news” by month from 17.02.2022 to 28.02.2023*

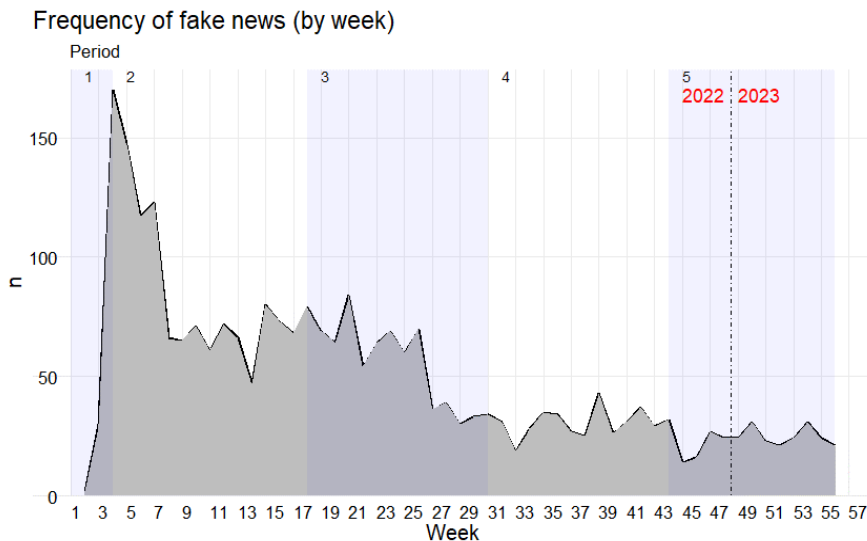


Source: Authors

Fig. 2 shows that the months can be divided into three groups according to the number of “fake news”. In March, the first period, the number of messages reached a maximum – 488 messages (more than 15 daily). The following months, from April to July, formed the second group, where the number of messages ranged from 280 to 310 (9-10 messages per day). The rest of the months belong to the third group. After August (169 messages – 6 messages per day), their number gradually stabilised within 100-140 monthly (3-5 messages per day).

We can explain it as follows: at the beginning of Russian aggression, the RF needed to justify its aggressive actions and at the same time intimidate Ukraine. Later, Russia tried to justify the consequences of its actions. The third period is a reaction to Russia's failures on the fronts. "Fake news" was seen as an attempt to save RF's face in the eyes of their supporters and at the same time to discredit the Ukrainian Armed Forces, accusing them of various crimes. So, the dynamics of "fake news" reflect a change in the priorities of the Russian information campaign during hostilities.

Figure 3: *The number of the RF's weekly "fake news" by stages of the war from 17.02.2022 to 28.02.2023*



Source: Authors

Fig. 3 shows changes in the number of "fake news" depending on the characteristics of each period of the war. The graph indicates the increase in the number of "fake news" during the first period of the war (17.02.2022 – 23.02.2022). The peak is reached at the very beginning of the second period – the invasion. During the next five weeks (until the beginning of April), there is a sharp decrease in the number of "fake news", but at the end of this period (the end of May), this trend changes to a slight increase in the number of fraudulent information. The third period is also characterised by an oscillating

decline in the number of “fake news” for nine weeks (until the end of August). Then, in the following periods, there are sinusoidal fluctuations in the amount of “fake news”; they are at approximately the same level.

3.2. Research Question 2

Let us consider how the features of each period of the war affected the topics of “fake news”.

The first period (17 – 23 February 2022) can be considered a kind of week-long “prelude” to the invasion though sufficient to understand Russia’s logic before the imminent invasion. Full preparation for the war lasted about a year (Banko, et al., 2023). Key events of this period include the gradual increase in tensions due to the build-up of Russia’s military presence along the borders of Ukraine and in the territory of Belarus, as well as demands to limit NATO; the growing threat of a full-scale invasion due to Russia’s provocative actions, such as the recognition of “people’s republics” in Donbas; increased support of Ukraine from the West in the form of intelligence, military assistance and preparation of sanctions; failed attempts at diplomatic settlement due to Russia’s position.

During this week, 38 RF’s “fake news” appeared in the information space. Key topics were the following:

- atrocities and war crimes of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (shelling of civilian objects, victims among the civilian population, violations of humanitarian law);
- panic and evacuation of the population of Donbas due to the actions of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (creating the impression of a mass departure of people to Russia);
- “staging” and provocations by Ukraine (fake chemical attacks, bombings, shelling of the territory of the RF);
- demoralisation and breakdown of the Ukrainian army (allegations of military desertion, dissatisfaction with the leadership);
- accusing Ukraine of escalating the conflict and aggression;
- creating the impression of the inevitability of a full-scale invasion by Russia.

This “fake news” content was aimed at the following goals:

- to portray Ukraine as an aggressor that prepares provocations;
- to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine, accusing them of crimes against civilians;

- to sow panic among the population of Donbas regarding the actions of Ukraine;
- to create the impression of the inevitability of Russia's invasion as a forced measure. In this way, Russia tried to justify its aggressive intentions, portraying Ukraine as the culprit of the escalation and a threat to the population of Donbas. Its purpose was to form an information background for the invasion under the pretext of "protecting" the population from the "aggression" of Ukraine.

The second period of the war (24 February – 31 May 2022) is associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and international condemnation. The period's main events are the following: the RF's large-scale and simultaneous invasion in many directions and fronts; formation of several operational zones and directions of hostilities; the strategic defeat of the Russians in the battles for Kyiv, Hostomel, Irpin and the RF's retreat from the northwestern regions; disruption of plans for a naval landing in Odesa due to the destruction of the fleet and the Moskva missile cruiser; the long defense of Mariupol and the distraction of Russian forces. The period is characterised by the scale and multi-vector nature of Russia's offensive actions which ended in a turning point in favour of Ukraine.

During this period, 1284 RF's "fake news" was found. The key topics included:

- discrediting the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Ukrainian authorities (accusations of crimes against civilians, unprofessionalism, Nazism, looting, corruption, etc.);
- humanitarian disaster and difficult situation in Ukraine (lack of food, medicine, communal services, mass flight of people);
- provocations and "staging" by Ukraine (shelling of residential areas, bombings, killings of civilians);
- successes of the Russian army and liberation of cities ((alleged) capture of Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol);
- support for Russia and pro-Russian sentiments in Ukraine (referendums, switching to the side of the RF);
- fatigue and disappointment of the West, termination of aid to Ukraine;
- internal conflicts and crises in Western countries;
- aggressive intentions of NATO and some other states towards Russia.

To sum up, in the 2nd period there was a large-scale RF's invasion, but it was defeated near Kyiv, Chernihiv and in the south. However, Russian

“fake news” focused attention on the topics of the alleged successes of the Russian army, the capture of cities, and Russia’s support in Ukraine. In this way, Russia was trying to hide its failures and the real situation, to create the image of the invasion success contrary to the facts, to demoralise Ukrainian society with “fake news” about a humanitarian catastrophe, to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine with accusations of crimes, and to present Ukraine as a country without the support of the West. In other words, “fake news” was designed to create an alternative to the reality picture of the war, in which Russia “dominates and wins”.

The third period of the war (01 June – 31 August 2022) can be characterised as the accumulation of forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to liberate the occupied territories. Main events include Russia’s focus on seizing the Luhansk region and massive shelling of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk; the retreat of Ukrainian troops from these cities caused significant losses to the Russians; failure of Russia’s attempts to force Siverskyi Donets and to surround Ukrainian troops; maintaining positions on the Avdiyivka and Novopavlivka directions; restoration of control over Zmiinyi (Snake) Island, which made landing in Odesa impossible; the depletion of Russian troops and Ukraine’s accumulation of potential for a counteroffensive. As a result, this is the period of deterring Russia’s offensive, Ukraine’s successes in the south, and its preparation for a counteroffensive.

The analysis of the RF’s “fake news” during this period (759 messages) made it possible to identify the following key topics:

- Ukraine’s military failures, heavy losses, low morale (alleged defeats of the Ukrainian army, its demoralisation and lack of fighting spirit);
- atrocities and crimes of Ukrainian troops (allegations of shelling civilians, killing civilians and prisoners);
- Ukraine’s inability to resist Russia (Ukraine is doomed, has no strength to resist and no chance of victory);
- betrayal and inaction of the West (the countries of the West do not really support Ukraine, want quick peace with Russia, etc.);
- provocations and “staging” by Ukraine (accusing Ukraine of forgeries and staging to escalate the conflict);
- threats to the civilian population (spread of panic regarding humanitarian disasters, evacuations, lack of food, etc.);
- the successes and humanity of the Russian troops (alleged successful advance of the Russian troops and their concern for civilians).

Hence, the RF's "fake news" focused on the topics of Ukraine's defeats, Ukrainian atrocities, Western inaction and Russia's successes. Obviously, Russia was trying to hide its failures and the real state of affairs, to demoralise Ukrainian society with reports about the defeats and brutality of Ukrainians, to discredit the support of the West and to create the impression of Russia's inevitable victory. That is, the "fake news" was designed to sow panic, disappointment and hopelessness among Ukrainians.

The fourth period (01 September – 30 November 2022) is a series of Ukraine's offensive operations and the liberation of part of the territories. The main events are the following: Ukraine's transition to a strategic offensive after the accumulation of forces and means; the successful Kharkiv offensive operation and liberation of the Kharkiv region significant territory; a diversionary offensive in the Kherson region and the liberation of the right bank of the Dnieper; the liberation of Kherson as an important strategic victory of Ukraine; forcing Russia to mobilise, attract mercenaries and increase pressure on the Eastern Front; the transition of Ukraine to strategic defense after successful offensive operations. This period's key features involve Ukraine's transition to the offensive, successful operations and the liberation of territories, opposition to Russia and a new stage of defense.

We distinguish the following key topics in this period RF's "fake news" (382 messages):

- discrediting the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the Ukrainian authorities (accusations of crimes, unprofessionalism, Nazism, the escape of President Zelenskyi, etc.);
- pro-Russian sentiments in Ukraine (referendums, refugees to Russia, pro-Russian schools);
- successes of the Russian army (capture of territories, destruction of Ukrainian troops);
- the West's fatigue from supporting Ukraine (ceasing aid, criticism of allies);
- humanitarian disaster in Ukraine (lack of food and light, cold);
- nuclear threats from Ukraine and NATO;
- provocations by Ukraine (shelling on the RF's territory, sabotage);
- crimes of Ukrainians in Europe (thefts, Nazism);
- internal conflicts in Western countries;
- discrediting the West and international organisations.

In this "fake news", Russia again offered the same information "menu": to hide its failures and loss of territories, to create a false impression of the

successes of the Russian army, to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine and to portray them as incapable of offensive actions, to sow panic and demoralisation in Ukraine with the help of false information about the humanitarian catastrophe, as well as to undermine the West's support for Ukraine, accusing Ukrainians of crimes.

The fifth period (01 December 2022 – 28 February 2023) can be called the defensive actions of Ukraine and the exhaustion of the Russian armed forces. Determining events are the following: Ukraine's transition to strategic defense after successful offensive operations; maintaining positions and restraining the Russian offensive in the main directions; exhaustion of Russian troops in defensive battles, particularly for Bakhmut; Russia's failure of initial plans to capture Kyiv, Odesa and exit to Transnistria; focusing Russia's efforts on Donbas and keeping part of the occupied territories; undermining the Russian offensive potential and breaking the backbone of aggression due to Ukraine's resistance.

The "fake news" of this period (307 messages) contains the following key topics:

- losses and failures of the Ukrainian army (attention to the heavy losses of Ukrainian troops, especially near Bakhmut, their exhaustion and unpreparedness for offensive operations);
- the incompetence of the Ukrainian command (claims about the chaotic actions and mistakes of the Ukrainian command leading to losses);
- the successes of the Russian army (the RF's advance in the Donetsk region and the offensive in the Bakhmut direction);
- the West's fatigue from supporting Ukraine (Western countries will soon stop helping Ukraine);
- Zelensky's escape and surrender;
- atrocities of Ukrainian troops (shootings of civilians and other crimes by Ukrainian troops);
- the threat of a nuclear attack from Ukraine.

3.3. Research Question 3

Table 1 summarises the results of the analysis of intentions in "fake news"

Table 1: Share of intentions in the RF's "fake news"

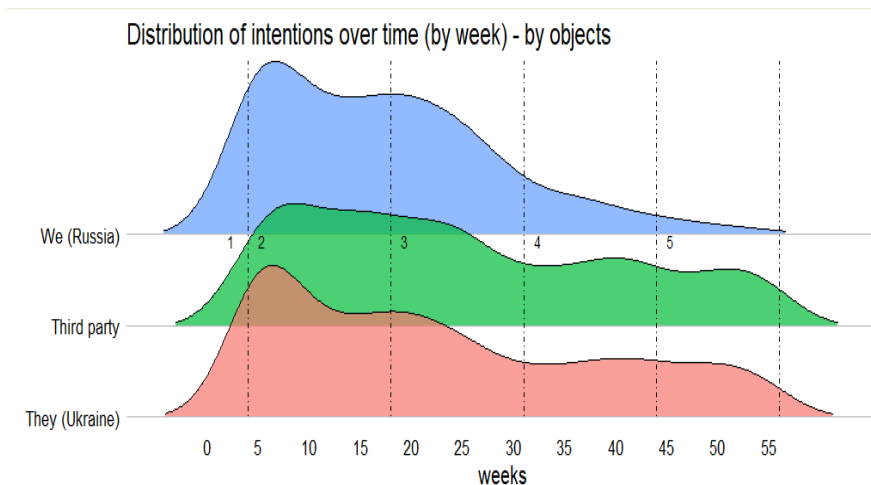
Object / Intention	Total		Period 1		Period 2		Period 3		Period 4		Period 5	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
We (Russia)	855	31,4	17	44,7	451	36,5	287	37,8	74	19,4	26	8,5
deflection of accusation/criticism	244	9,0	5	13,2	133	10,8	73	9,6	25	6,5	8	2,6
justification successes/ achievements of the SMO	238	8,8	8	21,1	116	9,4	101	13,3	11	2,9	2	0,7
caution	131	4,8	3	7,9	66	5,3	54	7,1	8	2,1		0,0
self-presentation	66	2,4	1	2,6	35	2,8	11	1,4	14	3,7	5	1,6
They (Ukraine)	1168	42,9	16	42,1	511	41,4	289	38,1	182	47,6	170	55,4
discredit	360	13,2	3	7,9	195	15,8	67	8,8	45	11,8	50	16,3
intimidation of Ukraine	178	6,5	0	0,0	38	3,1	52	6,9	48	12,6	40	13,0
accusation	152	5,6	10	26,3	74	6,0	35	4,6	18	4,7	15	4,9
revelation	148	5,4	2	5,3	76	6,2	43	5,7	13	3,4	14	4,6
dependence on the West	90	3,3	0	0,0	28	2,3	33	4,3	9	2,4	20	6,5
criticism/mockery	89	3,3	1	2,6	41	3,3	22	2,9	16	4,2	9	2,9
nationalism/nazism	76	2,8	0	0,0	30	2,4	22	2,9	15	3,9	9	2,9
division of society	48	1,8	0	0,0	23	1,9	9	1,2	13	3,4	3	1,0
Russophobia	27	1,0	0	0,0	6	0,5	6	0,8	5	1,3	10	3,3
Third party	697	25,6	5	13,2	272	22,0	183	24,1	126	33,0	111	36,2
humiliation of Ukraine	196	7,2	3	7,9	116	9,4	40	5,3	16	4,2	21	6,8
refusal to support Ukraine	113	4,2	0	0,0	48	3,9	45	5,9	9	2,4	11	3,6
accusation	89	3,3	0	0,0	34	2,8	21	2,8	12	3,1	22	7,2
intimidation of the West	79	2,9	0	0,0	25	2,0	21	2,8	17	4,5	16	5,2
discredit	78	2,9	0	0,0	8	0,6	19	2,5	28	7,3	23	7,5
criticism/mockery	54	2,0	0	0,0	11	0,9	11	1,4	21	5,5	11	3,6
encouragement to support the RF	36	1,3	2	5,3	15	1,2	13	1,7	6	1,6		0,0
support of the RF	23	0,8	0	0,0	2	0,2	7	0,9	8	2,1	6	2,0
nationalism/nazism	15	0,6	0	0,0	7	0,6	3	0,4	4	1,0	1	0,3
Russophobia	14	0,5	0	0,0	6	0,5	3	0,4	5	1,3	0	0,0
Total	2720	100	38	100	1234	100	759	100	382	100	307	100

Source: Authors

At the level of objects of intentional influence, the largest share of intentions for the entire studied period is directed against Ukraine (42.9%), followed by Russia (31.4%) and the West (25.6%). If we consider the periods of the war, the share of intentions towards Ukraine and the West gradually increases to 55.4% and 36.2%, respectively, while the share of Russia drops to an extremely low value of 8.5%.

If we look at the distribution of intentions over time, the peak intentional influences on all three objects fall at the beginning of the 2nd period of the war (24 February – 31 May 2022) and then the activity of the influences gradually decreases. It is interesting that in relation to Russia (“We”) already in the 5th period (01 December 2022 – 24 February 2023) the intentions are reduced to practically 0.

Figure 4: *Distribution of intentions during all periods of the war by objects – Russia, the West and Ukraine*



Source: Authors

A detailed analysis at the level of intentions regarding objects reveals the following results.

Ukraine (“They”). The largest percentage of “fake news” intentions falls on discrediting Ukraine (14.5%), i.e., unreliable information is disseminated to undermine the trust and authority of Ukraine. Considerable attention is paid to intimidation of Ukraine and the spread of panic (7.2%), accusing Ukraine of invasion, provocations and crimes (6.1%), as well as an attempt to

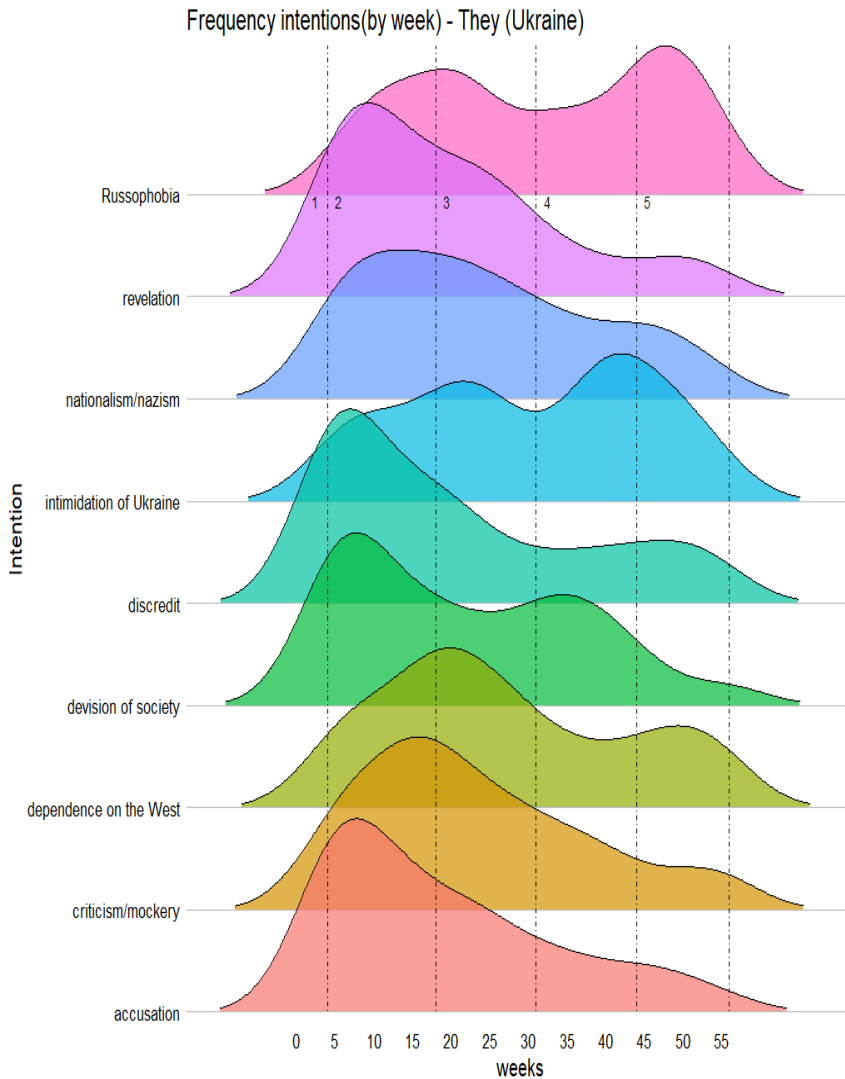
“uncover” allegedly secret intentions or actions of Ukraine (6%). The topics of Ukraine’s dependence on the West (3.6%) and humiliating criticism and mockery of Ukraine (3.6%) are present as well.

Features of the intentions dynamics can be seen by considering the density curves⁶ in Fig. 5. Most of the intentions were actively used from the first period of the war. Intentions of accusations and discrediting were the most prominent in the first two periods. From the first to the fourth periods, the Russian side very actively used such intentions as division of society, exposure, nationalism/Nazism and criticism/ridicule. Intentions of dependence on the West were accentuated in the second period and intensified again in the fifth period. Intentions of intimidation and Russophobia occurred at the very beginning, but they were most often emphasised in the last researched period.

So, we can see the “fake news” intentions regarding Ukraine uniformly cover the entire period of the war. However, we cannot claim that judging by the graph, a decrease in some intentions is compensated by an increase in the number of other intentions. It is partly true but it should be taken into account that the share of intentions is different.

⁶ The density curve of the distribution shows how the variable is distributed over the set of definitions of X. Before preparing this graph, the variable is normalised and therefore the area under the curve is equal to 1. Hence, the value of any segment below the curve shows what fraction (from 1) falls on this segment. In our case, it is about how intentions are distributed throughout the entire period under study.

Figure 5: Dynamics (density curves) of intentions regarding Ukraine



Source: Authors

The consequences that Russia counts on can be formulated as follows. The predominance of discrediting intention over other intentions indicates that the RF's main task is to undermine the trust and legitimacy of the Ukrainian authorities. Intimidation is also aimed at spreading panic and

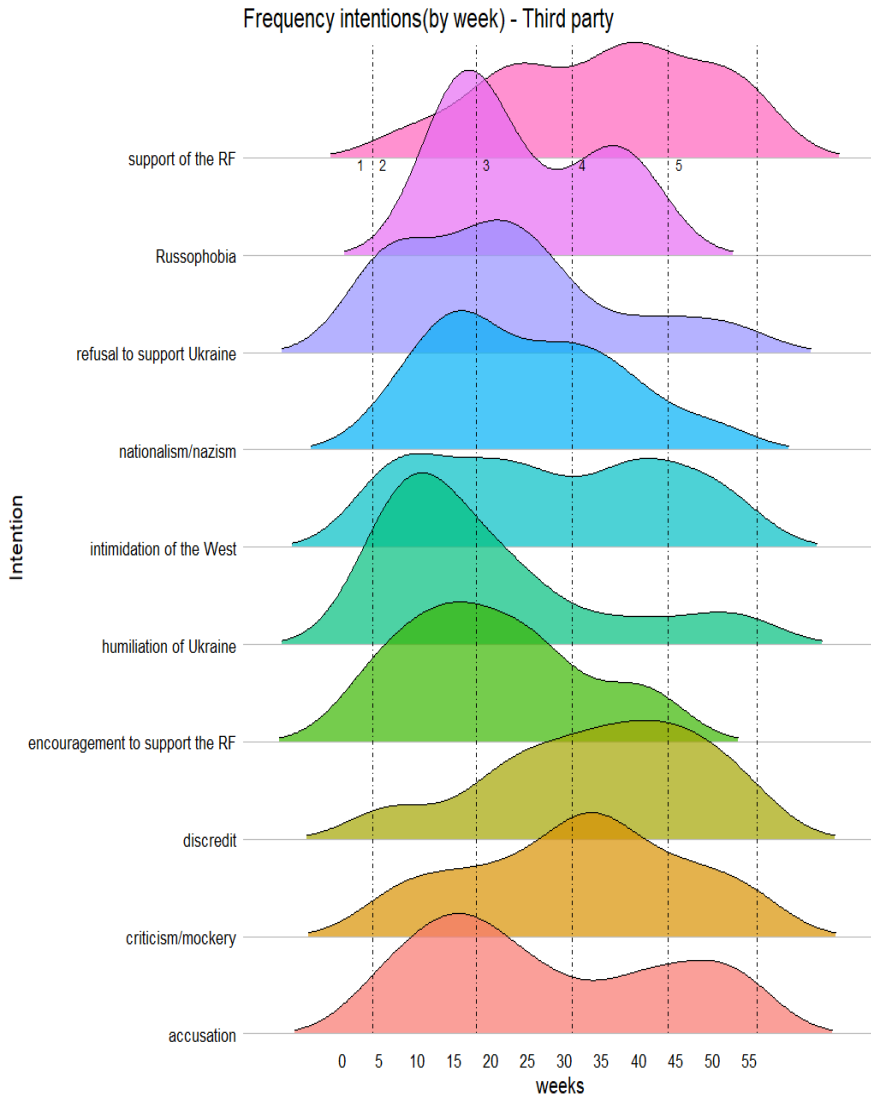
demoralising Ukrainian society. Almost equal shares of accusations and revelations intentions serve to justify Russia's aggression and create a negative stereotype about Ukraine. Small amounts of criticism and ridicule add emotions to discredit in the form of humiliation, and the focus on "dependence on the West" is intended to emphasise the weakness of Ukraine.

Therefore, this distribution of intentions reflects a strategy of deliberate undermining of trust (delegitimation) in Ukraine in the eyes of its citizens and the world.

West ("Third party"). The analysis of intentions towards the West gives the following results. The largest percentage (7.9%) is devoted to the humiliation of Ukraine by Western countries to discredit Western support for Ukraine. Considerable attention (4.6%) is given to calls to deny the support of Ukraine from the West to cast doubt on the trust in allies. Accusations of Western countries for aggression against Russia are present (3.6%). The intention of intimidation of the West and discrediting of Western countries equals 3.2% and criticism and ridicule of the West is 2.2%. A small share of other intentions completes the overall picture.

Fig. 6 shows the dynamics of intentions. Such intentions as humiliating Ukraine and encouraging the West to support the RF were most actively used in periods 1 – 3. Nationalism/Nazism and Russophobia were most actively used in periods 2 – 4. The peak of such intentions as criticism/ridicule and refusal to support Ukraine fell on period 3. Discredit intentions were actively used in the last two periods – 4 and 5. Intentions to support the RF and blame and intimidate the West were typical for almost all periods.

Figure 6: Dynamics (density curves) of intentions regarding the West



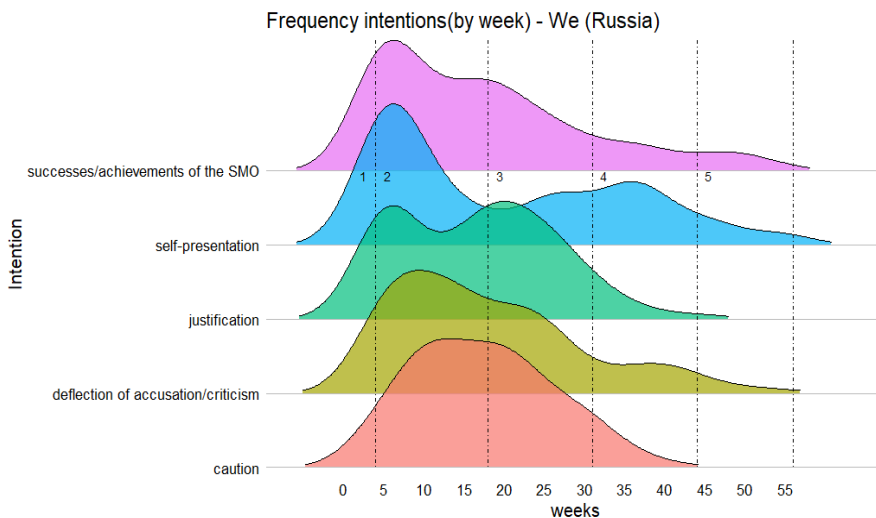
Source: Authors

Thus, the main goal was to discredit the West's support for Ukraine, sow doubts in the trust in allies and portray the West as an aggressor. In this way, Russia tried to undermine the unity of the West and its resistance to Russian aggression.

Russia (“We”). Table 1 above shows that the following intentions predominated in Russian “fake news” about the RF: denial/refutation of accusations and criticism of Russia (9.9%), justifying Russia’s actions (9.6%), demonstration of the successes and achievements of the Russian army (7.1%), caution, restraint in statements (5.3%) and self-presentation, creating a positive image (2.7%).

Fig. 7 shows that the dynamics curves of almost all intentions are identical. They reach a peak in period 2. The exceptions are two intentions – justification, which peaks in period 3, and self-presentation, which has a second (albeit smaller than the first) peak in period 5.

Figure 7: Dynamics (density curves) of intentions regarding Russia



Source: Authors

This dynamic of intentions indicates that the main goal of the RF’s “fake news” intentions towards Russia was to justify and legitimise its actions in the eyes of its citizens. The predominance of topics of denial of criticism and demonstration of successes indicates an attempt to compensate for real failures and international condemnation. A moderate share of cautious and positive statements contributes to the creation of the image of a strong but restrained state.

Thus, such dynamics of “fake news” enable Russia to control the information space inside the country and maintain loyalty and approval of its aggressive policies.

Comparing the intentions regarding Russia, Ukraine and the West, we can claim the following. Intentions towards Russia were aimed at justifying its actions and creating a positive image. Therefore, there was a predominance of denying criticism, demonstrations of the army's successes, and careful positive statements. Intentions regarding Ukraine were aimed at delegitimisation, so the discrediting of the authorities, intimidation of the population, accusations of aggression and crimes dominate here. Intentions towards the West were aimed at dividing Ukraine's allies. That was done by discrediting support to Ukraine, portraying the West as an aggressor, and spreading doubts about the reliability of partners.

By twisting the facts, lying and hiding the truth, the RF accused, criticised, and mocked the opponent. Regardless of the object of influence, the general strategy was to discredit and manipulate.

In general, behind the use of reconstructed intentions in Russian "fake news", the following real motives and goals may be hidden regarding:

- the RF's citizens – to hide the truth about the army's failures and justify aggression to maintain support for the war;
- Ukraine – to break the people's resistance, sow panic and distrust in the authorities, undermine the fighting spirit;
- West – to quarrel allies, split unity in support of Ukraine, weaken sanctions;
- the world – to present Russia as a victim of Western aggression, and Ukraine as an illegitimate state, to justify the invasion;
- in general – to cover the imperial ambitions of the Kremlin and the desire to restore control over Ukraine.

CONCLUSION

Considering the stated research questions, the present study enables us to conclude the following:

- the dissemination of disinformation during the Russian-Ukrainian war was not uniform, but rather fluctuated in intensity. The most concentrated period of disinformation dissemination occurred at the onset of the invasion;
- while the specific content of disinformation varied in response to evolving battlefield developments, certain overarching themes remained consistent. These topics primarily centered on discrediting Ukraine, its Armed Forces, and Western support, while concurrently constructing a positive narrative of Russian actions. The underlying

purpose of this disinformation campaign was to obscure Russian failures, demoralise the Ukrainian population, undermine Western unity, and project an image of Russian success. Despite tactical adaptations, the strategic objective of the Russian information campaign remained unchanged: to legitimise its aggression and maintain domestic support for the war;

- beneath the surface of reconstructed intentions in Russian disinformation, several real motives and objectives can be discerned: concealing the Russian army's failures and justifying aggression to sustain domestic support for the war; weakening Ukrainian resistance through sowing panic and distrust; alienating Ukraine's allies and fracturing Western unity; portraying Russia as a victim of Western aggression and Ukraine as an illegitimate state; and advancing the Kremlin's imperial ambitions and desire to reassert control over Ukraine.

This research has made a significant contribution to the academic discourse by elucidating the strategic and tactical aspects of disinformation in military conflicts, particularly within the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The study underscores the enduring strategic objectives of the Russian information campaign and its tactical adaptability in response to frontline developments. This research enhances our understanding of contemporary challenges and threats to information security, contributing to the development of scientific approaches to countering disinformation and psychological operations in wartime, which is essential for safeguarding national and international security.

We posit that this study may serve as a foundation for further research exploring the impact of Russian disinformation at various geographical levels, e.g., in European countries. Additionally, future investigations could focus on the analysis of visual content within the realm of Russian disinformation.

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ANNEX

Table: *Characteristics of intentions by groups of reference objects*

Intentions (mode⁷)	Reconstruction of intentions
Object 1: "They" (Ukraine)	
accusation (-)	attributing any guilt to Ukraine
revelation (-)	detection of improper actions, intentions, negative qualities of Ukraine
discredit (-)	presenting facts and arguments that undermine trust in Ukraine and diminish its authority
criticism / mockery (-)	a negative judgment or ridicule of Ukraine and its actions
nationalism / nazism (-)	the priority of national interests and cultural purity of Ukrainians accompanied by extremism/discrimination based on racial, ethnic or ideological characteristics
Russophobia (-)	a negative/hostile attitude to everything associated with Russia and the Russians
dependence on the West (-)	Ukraine relies heavily on the West's economic, political or cultural support, or has significant Western influence on its decisions and actions
division of society (-)	conflict or lack of unity of Ukrainian society, in particular concerning values, views, ideologies or interests
intimidation of Ukraine (-)	the RF's acts/verbal statements to create fear, a sense of danger or the promise of trouble in Ukraine to control, punish or achieve certain goals of the Russian Federation.
Object 2: "We" (Russia)	
successes / achievements of the SMO (special military operation) (+)	impressive results and efficiency of the SMO that demonstrate the high level of professionalism and military achievements of the Russian Federation
self-presentation (+)	presenting the Russian Federation in an attractive, favourable light;
deflection of accusation / criticism (+)	denial of guilt attributed to the Russian Federation, negative judgments about the RF or its actions

⁶ Note: Mode of intentions is defined as: "-" – negative, "0" – neutral, "+" – positive/

justification (+)	providing arguments and/or facts to prove the rightness of the Russian Federation and to show the absurdity of its condemnation by the international community
caution (+)	refraining from situations or actions to prevent possible negative consequences or problems
self-criticism (-)	the Russian Federation criticises itself
Object 3: "Third party" (West - other countries)	
accusation (-)	attributing some guilt to the West
discredit (-)	presenting facts and arguments that undermine trust in the West, diminish its authority
criticism/mockery (-)	negative judgment or ridicule of the West and its actions
nationalism / nazism (-)	the priority of national interests and Western culture accompanied by extremism/discrimination based on racial, ethnic or ideological characteristics
Russophobia (-)	a negative/hostile attitude to everything associated with Russia and the Russians
support of the RF (+)	the West's support of the RF's certain actions or the RF as a whole
refusal to support Ukraine (0)	refusal/encouragement of refusal of the West to provide support to Ukraine
humiliation of Ukraine (-)	negative statements or actions of Western politicians or famous people aimed at accusing, insulting or humiliating Ukraine and the Ukrainians
encouragement to support the RF (0)	encouragement to take the side of the Russian Federation through the declaration of the RF's "great mission" to fight any evil associated with Ukraine
intimidation of the West (-)	the RF's acts/verbal statements to create fear, a sense of danger or the promise of trouble in Western states to control, punish or achieve certain goals of the Russian Federation

DEBT TRAP AND CHINA'S ECONOMIC FOOTPRINT IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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Abstract

This paper investigates whether the Chinese economic footprint, proxied by bilateral trade and foreign direct investment (FDI), is associated with the gradual emergence of a debt trap in Western Balkans countries during the period from 2011 to 2022. By employing the dynamic panel data estimation, the research reveals that increasing Sino-Western Balkans trade and FDI intensity seems to contribute to rising debt levels in the Western Balkans. Despite the benefits of trade and investment agreements with China for infrastructure development in these countries, they also seem to heighten financial dependence, potentially jeopardizing the region's economic stability through unconditional low-interest loans. Given the Western Balkan countries' candidate status for EU membership, understanding of such Chinese involvement and its implications is crucial for their progress toward further integration.

Keywords: China, Western Balkans, Initiative 14+1, Debt trap, Trade openness, Foreign direct investment, Public debt

INTRODUCTION

China, as the world's leading export country, launched in 2013 its ambitious plan, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aimed to reduce transportation barriers and promote its regional economic cooperation by creating international economic corridors from Asia through Africa to the Middle East with a final destination, Europe (Tang et al., 2023; Wen et al., 2019). The effort for an economic presence in Europe has been further supported by additional cooperation with the Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in the form of the 14+1 Initiative⁴.

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⁴ A number of changes have taken place since the inception of this initiative. Originally, the

The activities within the 14+1 Initiative, including infrastructure improvements and the promotion of trade and FDI, were primarily intended to give Beijing access to Western European markets (European Parliament, 2022). The Balkan Silk Road, i.e., the transport and logistics corridor in the Western Balkans region—comprising Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—played a crucial role in this matter. China has been drawn to these countries mostly due to their strategic position but also because of their catch-up potential, affordable acquisition prices, and labour costs (Bastian, 2017; Boruta, 2021).

Simultaneously, the Western Balkans countries experienced benefits from this cooperation. Given their lack of well-developed infrastructure and heavy reliance on external investments and trade, it was the opportunity to receive financial assistance from China to meet their capital needs for road and highway construction (Ivanić, Savović, 2020). In this regard, the existing empirical evidence points to the fact that Chinese investment has driven infrastructure innovation in the Western Balkans on an unprecedented scale (Bastian, 2017; Vulović, 2023; Zweers et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, the majority of these investments have so far been financed through low-interest loans (Zweers et al., 2020). This led not only to the greater dependency of the Western Balkans countries on China, but also to the possibility of creating a debt trap, i.e., a situation when the borrowing country becomes caught in an escalating cycle of debt, making it difficult to escape. Debt trap may be especially challenging given that these countries are aspiring European Union (EU) candidate countries, and addressing public debt sustainability is crucial for their economic stability and future prospects within further European integration (Dvorský, 2022).

Given that, this article aims to explore whether China's trade- and FDI-related activities are associated with the gradual emergence of a debt trap in Western Balkans countries. Additionally, it discusses China's strategic influence in the region concerning the potential integration of these countries into the EU. In line with this, our research question is defined as follows: *How does China's economic presence relate to the debt levels of Western Balkans countries?* Furthermore, we discuss the potential positive or negative implications of China's economic influence in this region, considering not only fiscal policies but also their future engagement with the EU.

16+1 Initiative was established in 2012, covering China's cooperation with 16 CEE countries. Greece joined in 2019, creating the 17+1 format. However, in 2022, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania withdrew, resulting in the current 14+1 Initiative.

To address this research question, we analyse the connection between China's trade and FDI linkages with public debt in a sample of 33 European countries, with an emphasis on the Western Balkans, using panel models from 2011 to 2022. This methodology allows for an in-depth examination of China's economic effect in this region, as well as the public debt dynamics within the specified regional context and timeframe.

While geo-political discussions exist regarding this potential negative effect on the Western Balkans region, no quantitative analyses have been conducted with such specific research question for this region to our knowledge. Existing research focuses on other economic indicators, such as GDP while examining the potential benefits of BRI membership (see, e.g., Ashraf, Luo, Anser, 2021). However, it lacks an in-depth quantitative analysis of China's effect on BRI countries' debt sustainability—a critical aspect central to our study. It should also be noted that the Western Balkans countries have not been the main subject of interest of the existing empirical research regarding the BRI implications. Our research focuses on China's economic footprint via trade and FDI intensity in the Western Balkans countries. Unlike Popović, Erić (2018), who also study the Western Balkans, we specifically investigate China's effect on these countries' public debt, considering the potential debt trap. Our contribution lies in narrowing our scope to provide a detailed perspective, using our own proxy variables to enhance understanding of these dynamics within the regional context.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: In the first section, we provide a literature review related to the BRI Initiative, with the emphasis placed on the Western Balkans countries. The second section focuses on methodology, describing the model specification, data used for this analysis, and potential limitations of our approach. In the third section, we present our main findings and provide a related discussion on this topic. Finally, we discuss the potential implications of China's effect on the Western Balkans countries in the conclusions.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Western Balkans countries have long faced several economic challenges. These include high unemployment rates, reliance on tourism without sufficient transport infrastructure, and a low level of national savings that necessitates supplementation through FDI, among others (see, e.g., Popović, Erić, 2018; Selimi, Sadiku, Sadiku, 2017; Ziberi, Alili, 2021).

Existing empirical studies validate this assertion and demonstrate that FDI plays a pivotal role in driving growth within this region. For instance, Ziberi and Alili (2021) focus on the drivers of economic growth in the Western Balkans (including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia), and confirm that FDI contributes to the region's economic growth, as do remittances and population growth. The study also emphasizes the limited control over corruption and its detrimental effect on long-term economic growth, disturbing areas such as taxes, investments, and public expenditures.

As for FDI, the EU has been the dominant economic partner for this region. Popović and Erić (2018) show that the EU investment is in a positive relationship with the GDP per capita of the Western Balkans countries. Hence, the authors recommend implementing reforms to attract FDI and stabilize public debt.

However, more recently, a shift in the economic and political orientation of several Western Balkans countries towards China has been observed as a result of the BRI and 14+1 Initiative, which promised investments and stronger trade linkages (see, e.g., Bastian, 2017; Hurley, Morris, Portelance, 2018; Tang et al., 2023). In this regard, some studies highlight the positive effects of BRI. Here we can refer to, for instance Ashraf, Luo, Anser (2021) who find that the BRI initiative has contributed to increased GDP in countries associated with the BRI. Additionally, energy consumption, trade openness, and institutional quality also play crucial roles in supporting economic growth. To simultaneously promote economic development and reduce environmental pollution, the authors recommend enhancing institutional efficiency in these BRI-associated countries.

Moreover, the economic openness and institutions within one BRI country seem to positively affect neighbouring countries and contribute to economic development as well. Based on these findings, Ashraf, Luo, Khan (2022) suggest that the policymakers in BRI countries should focus on long-term macroeconomic policies to enhance the legal framework, establish the rule of law, and create an efficient judicial system. These changes aim to improve competitiveness and economic openness.

Given that the BRI seeks to encourage Chinese investment, it is pertinent to mention that the positive effect of Chinese FDI on the growth of developing countries has been confirmed by, for instance, Fu, Buckley, Fu (2020). The authors also provide a comparison between Chinese outward FDI with US outward FDI. Their results suggest that while Chinese FDI appears to boost employment and productivity growth more intensively than US FDI,

particularly in resource-rich low-income countries, US FDI demonstrates significant effects in generating new jobs mainly in middle-income countries.

On the other hand, the Chinese presence in the Western Balkans primarily relies on loans, rather than non-refundable financial assistance which can bring several negative effects of this Sino-Western Balkans cooperation (see, e.g., Brinza et al., 2024; Gafuri, 2020; Hurley, Morris, Portelance, 2018). If that is the case, why do the governments of Western Balkans countries favour this type of financing?

As Conley et al. (2020) state, the orientation of the Western Balkans toward Chinese loans often comes from the opaque conditions of these non-competitive contracts. While the EU funding provided by the European Investment Bank (EIB) is contingent upon certain conditions, such as financial and environmental sustainability, transparency in public procurement, and compliance with terms of employment, the loans provided by Chinese banks, including the Export-Import (EXIM) Bank of China and China Development Bank (CDB), do not adhere to standard disclosure requirements. The Chinese lack of transparency promotes bad governance structures and intensifies corruption, underscoring why Western investment initially remained absent in this region (Conley et al., 2020).

In this respect, Soyaltin-Colella (2023) points to the increasing corruption in Serbia and Montenegro. Although these countries show greater state capacity compared to other Western Balkans countries, the author explains that the emergence of the corruption problem arises mainly due to the non-advancing process of EU integration and Chinese unconditional low-interest loans that are heavily accepted by the governments of these countries. The no-strings-attached loans and non-transparent government-to-government agreements are then transformed into opportunities for Balkan stabilocrats and their networks, ultimately contributing to increased corruption.

At the same time, evidence has demonstrated that a significant level of corruption impedes growth in Western Balkans countries (Shahini, Muço, 2022). For this reason, improving good governance and curbing corruption can enhance the efficiency of reallocating public expenditures.

Shahini and Muço (2022) claim that over time, better governance can contribute to decreasing the indebtedness of the Western Balkans countries, but so far, indebtedness remains a concerning aspect of Chinese lending activities in the Western Balkans (Bastian, 2017; Brinza et al., 2024; Hurley, Morris, Portelance, 2018).⁵ It follows from the fact that the combination of

⁵ It is worth mentioning that another negative effect of Sino-Western Balkans cooperation includes a surge in Chinese imports unaccompanied by corresponding export growth from

low return on investment and substantial loan amounts makes it challenging for Western Balkans countries to repay Chinese loans. Some authors have labelled this situation as an example of Chinese debt-trap diplomacy, wherein small economies become dependent on China when they are unable to repay their loans (see, e.g., Doehler, 2019; European Parliament, 2022; Gafuri, 2020; South Asia Monitor, 2020).

The debt implications of China's presence in the region may be even worse due to the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; these countries are already asking for debt forgiveness as they cannot repay it (Gafuri, 2020). Debt sustainability concerns among Western Balkans countries have primarily been expressed in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania. Additionally, Serbia has been identified as a risk due to its substantial share of Chinese capital since the inception of the BRI (Conley et al., 2020).

According to Sandhu (2021), Montenegro stands out as a nation facing serious risks due to predatory loans from Beijing, and its lending program is considered one of the most alarming in Europe.⁶ The country's public debt-to-GDP ratio has reached a staggering 83%, while the primary driver of this debt is the ambitious Bar-Boljare Highway project. This highway aims to connect the port of Bar in Montenegro with other Eastern European countries (Bar-Boljare), whilst the first phase of the Bar-Boljare Highway project has been estimated to cost approximately \$1 billion (Jaćimović, Deichmann, Tianping, 2023).

Moreover, the Montenegrin government is expected to owe approximately 85% of the investment to the EXIM Bank of China. Recent official reports indicate that the estimated cost has now risen to \$1.1 billion, which represents more than 25% of Montenegro's GDP. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has expressed concern about the unfavourable repayment conditions associated with the first phase of construction. To prevent an economic crisis, the IMF recommends subsidizing the loans provided for the second and third phases of the project (Sandhu, 2021; Jaćimović, Deichmann, Tianping, 2023).

Beyond debt issues in major recipients of Chinese funding (primarily Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro), this cooperation also amplifies China's political influence (Brinza et al., 2024) as part of its soft

the Western Balkans, which leads to an expanding bilateral trade deficit (for more, see, e.g., Bastian, 2017; Boruta, 2021).

⁴Predatory loans are financial credits offered under unfair conditions designed to harm the borrower. They involve aggressive sales tactics, unclear terms, and high fees or interest rates, often leading to a cycle of debt. The goal may be profit or gaining control over the borrower or their assets (Agarwal et al., 2014).

power strategy. While this article primarily focuses on the hard power strategy, which relies on coercive methods such as economic pressure, military actions, and political coercion, it is important to note that China's approach in the Western Balkans also involves soft power elements, such as fostering positive relationships (Nye, 1990; 2008), building trust through cultural centers, facilitating university exchanges, and creating Confucius Institutes (European Parliament, 2022).

Previous studies confirm that the presence of Confucius Institutes has a positive effect on Chinese cross-border mergers and acquisitions (M&A), while the benefits seem to be larger in BRI countries compared to the non-BRI countries (see, e.g., Wang et al., 2021). Additionally, Confucius Classroom programs, which not only facilitate language learning but also enable travel to China, positively affect Chinese M&A, although their effect is somewhat weaker compared to Confucius Institutes.

Chinese political impact is particularly pronounced in Serbia, which, thanks to the tight political liaisons of President Aleksandar Vučić, can be identified as the centre of Chinese activities in the Western Balkans (Conley et al., 2020). These are then reflected in the growing debt; Serbia borrowed €195 million from the EXIM Bank of China for the Pupin bridge and €1.08 billion for two sections of the Belgrade–Budapest railway. In addition, it borrowed €538 million for the construction of the Kostolac B3 coal-fired power plant. In a similar way, we can also mention North Macedonia which borrowed €714 million from the EXIM Bank of China for the construction of two highways: Miladinovtsi–Štip and Kičevo–Ohrid. This represents approximately 14% of the current level of government debt for 2020, which reaches €5.2 billion (see, e.g., Zweers et al., 2020).

While there is a plethora of policy commentaries and discussions regarding the harmful effects of the BRI membership on the indebtedness of participating countries (see, e.g., Brinza et al., 2024; European Parliament, 2022; Gafuri, 2020), the empirical literature lacks quantitative studies on this matter. In this regard, we can only refer to Sun et al. (2022), who, using a propensity score matching (PSM)-difference in difference (DID) approach, find that the BRI contributes to increasing overall external indebtedness (both short-term and long-term) in selected, mostly Asian BRI-participating countries. Therefore, our paper intends to fill the research gap by examining the indebtedness concerning the BRI in Western Balkans countries, contributing to the empirical literature focused on the region. In the following section, we explain our estimation strategy.

2 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To answer our research question, we conduct the analysis for a total of 33 European countries, with an emphasis on five Western Balkans countries, namely, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, during the period 2011-2022.⁷ Kosovo, although part of the Western Balkans, is not included in this research because China has not officially recognized its sovereignty.

The model is estimated for 33 European countries to ensure a sufficient number of observations. By incorporating an interaction term between a dummy variable representing Western Balkans countries and Chinese presence, proxied by bilateral trade and FDI linkages, the study specifically focuses on assessing the China's economic footprint in the indebtedness of these countries. This approach allows us to maintain the primary scope of the paper, which is to evaluate the effect of Chinese economic activities on the debt levels in the Western Balkans. For this purpose, we use bilateral trade data (including both exports and imports) sourced from the World Integrated Trade Solution (WITS) database, and bilateral FDI stocks (both inward and outward) obtained from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). Additionally, data on public debt are retrieved from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) database. All sets of data are expressed as a share of GDP.

The research focuses on China's hard power. It examines economic activities, such as trade and FDI relations between China and the Western Balkans countries, which lead to growing financial dependence of these nations on Chinese loans and potentially to the emergence of a debt trap. These loans serve as a coercive tool of hard power, as they create financial pressure and influence political decision-making in the region. The analysis of China's hard power is essential, as its economic tools can significantly impact their sovereignty, macroeconomic stability, and EU integration processes.

To explore the relationship between Chinese trade and FDI activity in this region and public debt, we provide results based on the dynamic panel data econometric analysis using the following model specification:

⁷The analysis includes five Western Balkans countries, alongside EU countries and the United Kingdom.

$$\begin{aligned}
 PD_{it} = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 PD_{it-1} + \beta_2 ChEF_{it} + \beta_3 Balkan_{it} + \\
 & \beta_4 ChEF_{it} \times Balkan_{it} + \sum_{c=1}^c \delta_c CV_{cit} + \\
 & \gamma_2 Period_{2015-18} + \gamma_3 Period_{2019-22} + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{it}
 \end{aligned}$$

where PD_{it} represents public debt for the i -th country in the period t , $ChEF_{it}$ stands for the economic footprint of China for the i -th country in the period t (considering two proxies: bilateral trade (TO_{it}) and FDI intensities (FDI_{it})), and $Balkan_{it}$ is a dummy variable denoting Western Balkans countries. The variable takes the value of 1 if the observation is from one of the studied Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Serbia), and 0 otherwise. The effect of the Chinese economic footprint in these countries is captured through the interaction term $ChEF_{it} \times Balkan_{it}$.

We follow the existing literature on public debt suggesting its persistent behaviour through time (see, e.g., Shah et al. 2024). For this reason, we also include the lagged dependent variable (PD_{it-1}) on the right side of the equation.

In addition to our main variables of interest, we include control variables in the model, following the studies by Agiropoulos, Galanos and Poufinas (2021), Del Monte and Pennacchio (2020), Filip (2019), and Gargouri, Keantini (2016), to reduce the risk of omitted variables bias. The correlation matrix of explanatory variables is provided in the Appendix (see Table A1).

The selected determinants of public debt are military expenditure ($Milit_{it}$) and the share of non-performing bank loans in total gross loans (Bnl_{it}). In a broader model specification, we supplement these with additional important public debt drivers: inflation index average consumer prices ($Infl_{it}$), index of control of corruption ($Corrupt_{it}$), real GDP growth ($GDPg_{it}$), and primary fiscal balance, as a share of GDP ($FiscBal_{it}$).

Given that military expenditures are often financed through debt we anticipate a positive effect on public debt as confirmed by Gargouri and Keantini (2016). Furthermore, the allocation of resources towards military development may hinder economic growth if the government prioritizes this sector over others. A high share of non-performing bank loans threatens the stability of the banking sector and can also hamper economic growth (Agiropoulos, Galanos, and Poufinas, 2021). This situation often necessitates government intervention, leading to increased budget deficits and public debt.

In line with the findings of Aizenman and Marion (2009), we expect that inflation reduces the real value of public debt. A similar effect is anticipated in the case of real GDP growth, as evidence suggests that economic growth is crucial for reducing public debt (see, e.g., Filip, 2019). Additionally, a primary fiscal balance surplus is key for debt sustainability and can be used to reduce public debt (Escolano, 2010). Conversely, a higher level of corruption may indicate inefficient allocation of government expenditure and an unfavourable business environment, which can hinder government revenues and economic growth, potentially resulting in higher levels of public debt (Del Monte and Pennacchio, 2020). If possible, the variables enter the model in logarithmic form to reduce variability.⁸

Finally, μ_i denotes individual effects, *Period*_{2015–18} and *Period*_{2019–22} capture 4-year period-specific effects, which help reduce the number of instruments that would otherwise be high if year-specific effects were used, and ε_{it} represents the error term. The descriptive statistics are available in Table 1 below, which highlight the differing trends of the main variables under study, as well as the control variables, when considering the full sample and separately the Western Balkan countries.

Table 1: *Descriptive statistics*

<i>Full sample:</i>	N	Min	Mean	StDev	Max
PD	396	6.1370	67.7872	36.3932	213.1520
TO	396	0.8034	3.9095	2.2479	15.5982
FDI	396	-0.1615	1.5655	4.3655	34.8637
Milit	396	0.2187	1.3791	0.5546	4.0242
Bnl	375	0.1456	7.6728	8.0433	47.7478
Infl	396	92.4320	116.6043	38.9851	355.5380
Corrupt	396	3.4425	6.5450	1.7396	9.8053
GDPg	396	-15.3070	2.3040	3.7985	24.6160
FiscBal	396	-12.0130	-1.0512	2.7305	4.8160
<i>Western Balkans:</i>					
PD	60	27.7280	55.4979	16.0133	107.3480
TO	60	1.8608	4.5178	1.3642	9.6737

⁸ We do not include the unit root testing as we are dealing with short panels. In this regard, Baltagi (2008) points out that with a small time dimension (T) in panel data, panel unit root tests often lack sufficient diagnostic precision and may lead to incorrect conclusions about non-stationarity in the entire panel, even if it contains a significant proportion of stationary series.

FDI	60	-0.0420	0.3624	0.4687	1.4123
Milit	60	0.6791	1.3901	0.4427	2.7113
Bnl	60	2.7900	10.9393	5.9494	22.2439
Infl	60	92.8920	161.4058	78.6235	355.5380
Corrupt	60	3.4425	4.2701	0.4154	4.9705
GDPg	60	-15.3070	2.4296	3.6868	13.0430
FiscBal	60	-8.1830	-1.4804	2.5604	3.9160

Source: Own calculations based on data from World Integrated Trade Solution, UNCTAD, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

As the lagged dependent variable at the right side of the equation (Eq. 1) is correlated with unobserved individual panel effects, this can lead to inconsistency in standard estimates. Therefore, we estimate the model using a *dynamic* system-GMM estimator developed by Blundell and Bond (1998), which addresses this issue. Here, lagged levels of the variables are used as instruments in the regression on differenced data, and lagged differenced values are used as instruments in the regression on original data.

Despite the robustness of our methodology, there are several limitations to consider. The analysis is constrained by the availability of data, which may affect the accuracy of our findings and limit the number of regressors we can include, impacting the comprehensiveness of our model. It is also important to note that our analysis does not establish true causal relationships, but rather identifies associations between China's economic presence in the Western Balkans countries and their level of public debt. However, to comprehensively capture multiple dimensions of China's influence in the region, we use two proxies for Chinese economic presence: bilateral trade and FDI linkages. This approach, despite its limitations, allows us to provide a more nuanced understanding of the effect of Chinese activities on the indebtedness of Western Balkans countries. By employing these proxies, we aim to offer a detailed analysis that can inform future research and policy decisions, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of China's role in the region.

3 RESULTS

The 14+1 Initiative aimed to intensify international trade and investment between Central and Eastern Europe and China since its establishment in 2012. Therefore, in the first place, we can evaluate its success based on the

volume of Sino-Western Balkans trade and investment linkages. We then focus on analysing the relationship between trade intensity and levels of public debt in the Western Balkans.

3.1 Sino-Western Balkans cooperation through the lenses of trade, FDI, and public debt

In Figures 1 and 2, we illustrate the imports and exports of goods and services (G&S) as a share of GDP between Western Balkan countries and China during the period from 2007 to 2022. As we can see, the Sino-Western Balkans trade intensity has changed since the introduction of the 14+1 and BRI initiatives.⁹ Overall, we can observe an increasing trend in time (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1: *Western Balkans imports from China in the period 2007-2022*



Source: Own elaboration based on data from World Integrated Trade Solution (2023), and the World Bank (2023).

Additionally, country-specific evidence reveals some differences. While Chinese imports gradually increased in Albania, we observed significant variation in Montenegro during the observed period. Notably, there was a year-on-year increase in Chinese imports from 2014 to 2015. This surge coincided with the signing of an agreement for the construction of the Bar-

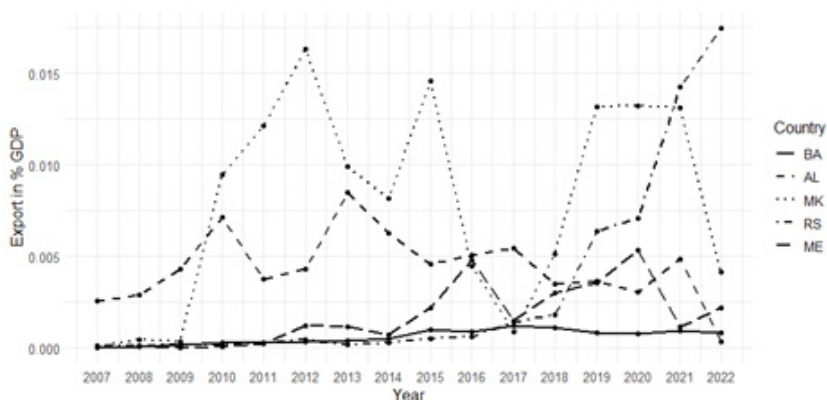
⁹Trade data (both imports and exports) and FDI data (both inward and outward) have been available since 2007. However, public debt data is only available from 2011 onwards. We include all available observations in our figures; however, it must be noted that the model is estimated for the period from 2011 to 2022.

Boljare highway section, which was carried out by a Chinese construction company.

In North Macedonia, Chinese imports have seen a slight increase, with broadcasting equipment representing the largest share of imported goods and services, as reported by OEC (2023). The major share of Chinese imports to Bosnia and Herzegovina can be attributed to steam turbines needed for China's biggest project in this Western Balkans country—the establishment of the seventh block of the Tuzla thermal power plant, as mentioned by Ivanić, Savović (2020).

During the last two years of the observed period, Serbia notably increased its imports of goods and services from China compared to other Western Balkans countries. This trend suggests a strengthening of trade relations between Serbia and China.

Figure 2: *Western Balkans exports to China in the period 2007–2022*



Source: Own elaboration based on data from World Integrated Trade Solution (2023), and the World Bank (2023).

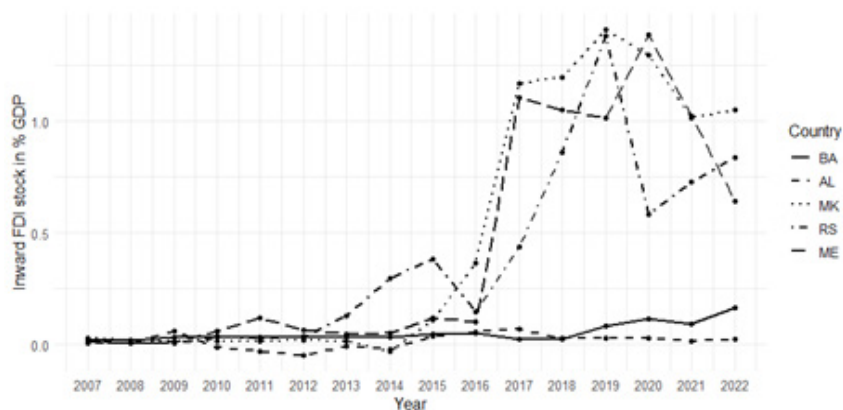
Figure 2 illustrates the Western Balkans exports of G&S to China. Compared to Chinese imports, exports from the Western Balkans are considerably lower, and for some Western Balkan countries, they are nearly zero. Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently the smallest exporter of goods and services to China among the countries under review, and its low level of exports remains relatively stable. Similarly, Montenegro also contributes minimally by their exports to China.

Until 2016, Serbian exports to China remained nearly consistent year-on-year. However, starting from that year, a more pronounced surge in exports to China became evident. By 2019, the country achieved an export level of \$329.17 million, with copper ranking as the most exported item during that period.

North Macedonia stands out as the biggest exporter from the Western Balkans to China. Its export trajectory has undergone significant changes over time, with the most substantial growth occurring between 2018 and 2019—a remarkable increase of \$100.78 million year-on-year. Similarly, Albanian exports to China have shown an unstable trajectory over time, with significant fluctuations during the observed period, now being the second biggest exporter to China in the Western Balkans.

In Figures 3 and 4, we present the inward and outward FDI stock between Western Balkan countries and China in the period 2007–2022. As shown in Figure 3, inward FDI stock has generally increased over time, particularly for Serbia and North Macedonia, indicating China’s growing investment presence in the region.

Figure 3: *Inward FDI stock from China in the Western Balkans during the period 2007–2022*



Source: Own elaboration based on data from UNCTAD (2023), the World Bank (2023).

Figure 3 illustrates the inward FDI stock from China in the Western Balkans between 2007 and 2022, expressed as a percentage of GDP.

Prior to the launch of the 17+1 initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative, the level of inward foreign direct investment from China to the Western

Balkan countries remained relatively low and nearly uniform across the region. A significant shift occurred in the years following the introduction of these initiatives, as cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe deepened considerably.

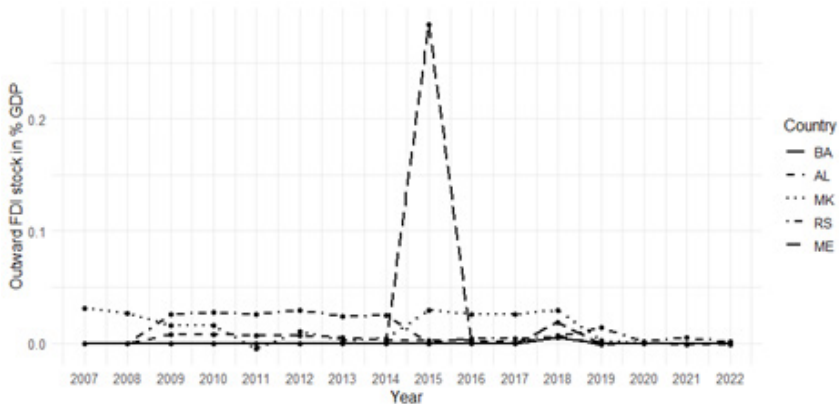
Serbia stands out with a sharp and continuous increase from 2016 to 2019, peaking in 2019, followed by a temporary decline and renewed growth in 2021 and 2022. This reflects China's intensified investment presence in Serbia, likely linked to large infrastructure and industrial projects. In 2019, Chinese capital was directed toward the construction of a tire manufacturing plant in the city of Zrenjanin. The project was valued at USD 900 million and is expected to employ around 1 500 people, with plans to further increase the number of jobs. This investment also included road infrastructure development towards the west to enable faster delivery of tires to Western customers (Ladevac, 2020).

Foreign direct investment in North Macedonia are somewhat lower; however, the graph clearly shows that their levels remained stable until 2015. A more pronounced increase can be observed in recent years, which may be linked to the rising total costs of the Kičevo–Ohrid motorway construction project, as also noted by Vangeli (2022).

In countries such as Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, China directs the lowest the level of FDI compared to the rest of the Western Balkans. One possible explanation is that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not located directly along the main route of the Belt and Road Initiative.

China has significantly directed its foreign direct investment towards Montenegro, although a notable increase is only observable from 2016 onwards. The peak of Chinese FDI in the country was recorded in 2020, reaching a value of USD 153.08 million.

Figure 4: *Outward FDI stock from Western Balkans in China during the period 2007–2022*



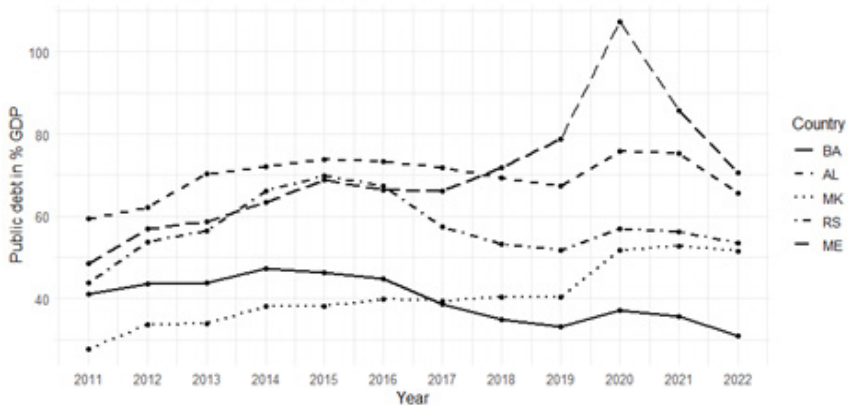
Source: Own elaboration based on data from UNCTAD (2023), the World Bank (2023).

Figure 4 illustrates the outward foreign direct investment stock from Western Balkan countries to China between 2007 and 2022, expressed as a percentage of GDP. In most countries across the region, the share of outward FDI directed towards China remains very low and shows little variation over time.

A notable exception is Montenegro, which recorded a sharp spike in 2015, when the outward FDI stock briefly exceeded 0.25% of GDP. However, this sudden increase appears to be a one-off event, as the level returned to previous values the following year.

Other countries, including Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, consistently exhibit only marginal and stable levels of outward FDI to China throughout the observed period, suggesting limited engagement with the Chinese market.

Figure 5: Public debt in Western Balkans in the period 2011–2022



Source: Own elaboration based on data from International Monetary Fund (2023).

Finally, we illustrate the public debt in Western Balkans countries from 2011 to 2022 (see Figure 5). As the Western Balkans are candidate countries for the EU and potentially the Eurozone, it is reasonable to assess their public debt levels based on the nominal Maastricht criterion, which stipulates that public debt should not exceed 60% of GDP.

Figure 5 reveals that North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina consistently maintained public debt levels below 60% of GDP throughout the observed period. This suggests their potential eligibility for Eurozone membership in the future. In contrast, Serbia, Montenegro, and Albania exceeded the 60% threshold set by the Maastricht Treaty. Notably, in 2015, Serbian public debt reached 75% of GDP, possibly due to the Chinese project involving the Hungary-Serbia railway. Since then, Serbia has gradually reduced its public debt.

Meanwhile, North Macedonia's debt has increased, diverging from Serbia's trend. Albanian public debt has also shown a slight upward trajectory since the inception of the 14+1 and BRI Initiatives.

3.2 Revealing the relationship between Western Balkans' public debts and Sino-Western-Balkans trade activities

To address our research question, we estimate a linear regression model. The estimation results are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Estimation results

	Dependent variable: PD _t			
	ChEF: Trade intensity		ChEF: FDI intensity	
	(I)	(II)	(III)	(IV)
PD_{t-1}	0.8116*** (0.1020)	0.8259*** (0.0468)	0.7473*** (0.1144)	0.8246*** (0.0442)
ChEF	-0.0018 (0.0066)	0.0024 (0.0061)	0.0027 (0.0049)	0.0001 (0.0020)
Balkan	-0.2717** (0.0866)	-0.2613 (0.1983)	-0.1935** (0.0669)	-0.0766 (0.1138)
ChEF X Balkan	0.2403** (0.1182)	0.3516* (0.2009)	0.1191** (0.0499)	0.1185* (0.0680)
Milit	0.0311 (0.0598)	-0.0246 (0.0646)	-0.0020 (0.0686)	-0.0342 (0.0682)
Bnl	0.1332*** (0.0274)	0.0883** (0.0328)	0.1676*** (0.0524)	0.0869** (0.0309)
Infl		-0.1866 (0.1423)		-0.1607 (0.1056)
Corrupt		-0.0067 (0.2163)		0.0122 (0.1056)
GDPg		-0.0098*** (0.0010)		-0.0092*** (0.0010)
FiscBal		-0.0157*** (0.0032)		-0.0171*** (0.0026)
Constant	0.5740 (0.3769)	1.4646* (0.8797)	0.7722* (0.4642)	1.3267* (0.7577)
AR(1) (p-value)	0.0001	0.0290	0.0001	0.0240
AR(2) (p-value)	0.0040	0.1530	0.0004	0.1240
Hansen test (p-value)	0.1760	0.1540	0.1130	0.1380
No. of observations	345			

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own calculations based on data from World Integrated Trade Solution, UNCTAD, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

The columns present the results for the proxy of the Chinese economic footprint in terms of trade intensity (columns (I)-(II)) and FDI intensity (columns (III)-(IV)), while alternating the set of control variables. We present the baseline model ((I),(III)) and subsequently the model with the full set of controls ((II),(IV)).

Firstly, the results confirm a statistically significant relation between current and lagged public debt levels (columns (I)-(IV)), indicating debt persistence, consistent with previous empirical studies (see, e.g., Shah et al., 2024). It is therefore reasonable to pay increased attention to strategies for long-term debt sustainability.

Regarding the Chinese economic footprint (ChEF), whether measured by trade or FDI intensity, the results do not confirm that increased Chinese activity contributes to the growth of public debt across the entire sample of studied countries. This suggests that the Chinese economic footprint may not have a direct effect on public debt levels in all examined countries. Additionally, in some model specifications, it seems that Western Balkan countries exhibit statistically significant lower levels of public debt on average compared to other studied countries (see negative coefficients related to the variable *Balkan*). These findings confirm that many EU countries, such as Greece, have higher levels of debt compared to the Western Balkans, as seen in the descriptive statistics provided in Table 1. However, their high debt levels are not primarily determined by increasing trade or investment cooperation with China, but rather due to various structural reasons, including economic structure, fiscal policy, and previous events such as economic crises (see, e.g., Armendariz et al., 2024; Cahen, 2023).

On the other hand, regarding the trade and FDI linkages between China and the Western Balkans, we observe a positive relation with public debt levels. The statistically significant coefficients associated with the interaction variable *ChEF X Balkan* in columns (I)-(IV) indicate that Western Balkan countries with higher trade or FDI intensity with China tend to have higher public debt levels. This finding remains quantitatively consistent and robust even with the incremental addition of control variables (refer to Table A2 in the Appendix). While this finding does not establish a causal relationship, it raises important questions regarding the economic and political strategies for countries in this region.

While trade openness and FDI theoretically supports economic growth, it is essential to closely monitor how they might be related to public debt and debt trap risks. Frequently, trade and investment agreements with China include substantial infrastructure projects funded partially or entirely through loans from Chinese banks or financial institutions. As we previously mentioned, these projects may contribute to the rise in public debt. Moreover, when imports from China surpass exports from Western Balkans countries, it can also result in trade deficits. To finance these deficits, increased borrowing becomes necessary, leading to higher overall public debt, which validates these results and previous geo-political discussions (see, e.g., Brinza et al., 2024; Hurley, Morris, Portelance, 2018).

Given these findings, Western Balkans nations should be cautious when enhancing trade and FDI with China. It is crucial to weigh the potential long-term consequences of such economic relationships. Expanding trade and

investment ties with China presents a significant challenge that demands vigilant monitoring and strategic planning by governments to avoid potential debt traps and secure a sustainable economic future.

Finally, regarding our control variables, we observe a statistically significant, positive effect of the share of non-performing bank loans in total gross loans (columns (I)-(IV)), and negative effects of real GDP growth and primary fiscal balance (columns (II), (IV)). The first relationship is consistent with the findings of Gargouri and Keantini (2016) and can be explained by the fact that a higher share of non-performing loans within banks may lead to financial instability and an increased need for government interventions, which frequently results in higher public debt. On the other hand, real GDP growth and primary fiscal balance help mitigate public debt as expected (see, e.g., Filip, 2019). Economic growth leads to an increase in government revenues from taxes, fostering a sustainable fiscal policy, which reduces the need for borrowing and, consequently, the rise in public debt. Similarly, an improvement in the primary fiscal balance indicates that the government has sufficient revenue to cover its expenditures, thereby helping to reduce the overall debt burden.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the economic footprint of China on the public debt of the Western Balkans countries during the period from 2011 to 2022. The system GMM estimation, which also considers other factors, reveals that increasing trade and FDI cooperation with China appears to contribute to rising debt levels in the Western Balkans. The evidence obtained thus points to the debt trap phenomenon, which emerges mainly due to large infrastructure projects in the Western Balkans financed via Chinese loans.

It is important to note that our analysis has certain limitations, such as data availability and the inability to establish true causal relationships. Despite these limitations, our findings highlight the need for careful consideration of economic and political strategies in the region to mitigate potential risks associated with increased Chinese economic presence.

As China's trade and FDI cooperation appear to have implications for public debt in the Western Balkans, countries should navigate these dynamics carefully to prevent falling into a debt trap while promoting economic growth.

Moreover, the Western Balkan countries are currently candidate states for the EU, for which it is essential to discuss Chinese involvement in the region. Such activity could significantly affect their potential progress toward joining this integration grouping.

The Western Balkan countries are integrating EU legislation into their national law and already meet several convergence criteria. For instance, inflation rates in all Western Balkan countries do not exceed the average of three EU countries with the highest inflation (Austria, Slovakia, and Romania) by more than 1.5% (Eurostat, 2023). However, they do experience higher long-term interest rates (primarily in Albania and Montenegro) and public debts. In Figure 5, we graphically illustrate the public debt levels in the Western Balkan countries, highlighting non-compliance with the convergence criterion for sound and sustainable public finances in some countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Serbia are just below the 60% threshold required for entering the Eurozone.

It is also worth mentioning that not all citizens of the Western Balkans countries want to be part of the EU, even though they have already become candidate countries for joining this integration group. In this regard, a survey conducted by Ipsos (Jasnić, 2022) found that the majority of Serbian citizens are against their country's inclusion in the EU. This negative attitude could be related to China's soft power, which is trying to influence public opinion through various means, and because of the strict norms set by the EU, Serbian leaders tend to prefer Chinese investments in infrastructure.

Beyond our findings related to the potential negative effect on public debt, we recognize that Chinese involvement in the Western Balkans region may also pose challenges concerning the EU's future enlargement. Consequently, representatives of this group should proactively address these issues to ensure the region's stability.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Correlation matrix of input variables for the period 2011-2022

	TO	FDI	Milit	Bnl	Infl	Corrupt	GDPg
FDI	-0.2144						
Milit	0.0529	-0.2692					
Bnl	-0.2785	-0.1070	0.1586				
Infl	0.1970	-0.0762	0.2449	0.0430			
Corrupt	-0.0906	0.3312	-0.2160	-0.4267	-0.2863		
GDPg	0.0578	0.0131	-0.1793	-0.1023	0.0470	-0.0267	
FiscBal	-0.0761	0.1356	-0.1936	0.1481	-0.1248	0.0538	0.3593

Source: Own calculations based on data from *World Integrated Trade Solution, UNCTAD, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.*

Table A2: Complete estimation results

	Dependent variable: Public debt									
	ChEF: Trade intensity					ChEF: FDI intensity				
	(I)	(II)	(III)	(IV)	(V)	(VI)	(VII)	(VIII)	(IX)	(X)
PD _{t-1}	0.8116*** (0.1020)	0.7829*** (0.0787)	0.7433*** (0.0663)	0.8175*** (0.0508)	0.8259*** (0.0468)	0.7473*** (0.1144)	0.7790*** (0.0768)	0.7826*** (0.0589)	0.8150*** (0.0422)	0.8246*** (0.0442)
ChEF	-0.0018 (0.0066)	0.0090 (0.0102)	0.0082 (0.0104)	0.0040 (0.0067)	0.0024 (0.0061)	0.0027 (0.0049)	0.0032 (0.0041)	-0.0029 (0.0036)	-0.0008 (0.0021)	0.0001 (0.0020)
Balkan	-0.2717** (0.0866)	-0.4371* (0.2250)	-0.2172 (0.2407)	-0.2611 (0.2249)	-0.2613 (0.1983)	-0.1935** (0.0669)	-0.1143 (0.0849)	0.1813* (0.1031)	-0.0137 (0.1201)	-0.0766 (0.1138)

ChEF X Balkan	0.2403** (0.1182)	0.6315* (0.3807)	0.5609* (0.3111)	0.4466* (0.2441)	0.3516* (0.2009)	0.1191** (0.0499)	0.2021* (0.1059)	0.2127** (0.0959)	0.1441* (0.0745)	0.1185* (0.0680)
Milit	0.0311 (0.0598)	0.0361 (0.0841)	0.0894 (0.0809)	0.0305 (0.0646)	-0.0246 (0.0646)	-0.0020 (0.0686)	0.0080 (0.0834)	0.0927 (0.0896)	0.0215 (0.0676)	-0.0342 (0.0682)
Bnl	0.1332*** (0.0274)	0.1514*** (0.0400)	0.1497*** (0.0425)	0.1042** (0.0347)	0.0883** (0.0328)	0.1676*** (0.0524)	0.1381*** (0.0402)	0.1235** (0.0412)	0.1011** (0.0329)	0.0869** (0.0309)
Infl		-0.3766* (0.2248)	-0.4084** (0.1484)	-0.2624 (0.1645)	-0.1866 (0.1423)		-0.2790 (0.1744)	-0.4429** (0.1401)	-0.2271* (0.1267)	-0.1607 (0.1056)
Corrupt			0.3764 (0.2805)	0.0994 (0.2403)	-0.0067 (0.2163)			0.5552** (0.2417)	0.1453 (0.2204)	0.0122 (0.1056)
GDPg				-0.0118*** (0.0013)	-0.0098*** (0.0010)				-0.0114*** (0.0012)	-0.0092*** (0.0010)
FiscBal					-0.0157*** (0.0032)					-0.0171*** (0.0026)
Constant	0.5740 (0.3769)	2.3727** (1.0905)	1.9660** (0.7686)	1.6297* (0.9391)	1.4646* (0.8797)	0.7722* (0.4642)	1.9971** (0.9006)	1.7148* (0.9740)	1.4134* (0.8556)	1.3267* (0.7577)
AR(1) (p-value)	0.0001	0.0010	0.0010	0.0100	0.0290	0.0001	0.0001	0.0010	0.0060	0.0240
AR(2) (p-value)	0.0040	0.0030	0.0030	0.1950	0.1530	0.0004	0.0001	0.0010	0.1620	0.1240
Hansen test (p-value)	0.1760	0.4180	0.4310	0.1150	0.1540	0.1130	0.1060	0.7760	0.1010	0.1380
N. of observations	345									

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Own calculations based on data from World Integrated Trade Solution, UNCTAD, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION OF PARLIAMENTARY PARTY LEADERS ON FACEBOOK AFTER THE 2023 ELECTIONS UNTIL THE ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION OF THE PRIME MINISTER

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Abstract

Political communication in the Slovak political space has its own specifics, but it follows the trend of many democracies towards coarser vocabulary, vulgarisation, and escalation of political conflict. The aim of this study is to identify the messages that the leaders of the elected parliamentary parties addressed to the public via Facebook in the period after the parliamentary elections. The period is bounded by the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister Róbert Fico in May 2024. Qualitative research using grounded theory is the collection of data to reach a theoretical concept. We used NVivo qualitative software to code the data, in our case messages public on FB profiles of individual party leaders. Grounded theory is often used in political communication and helps us to create a theoretical concept. There are 6 main Themes that emerged as a result of political communication after parliamentary elections: Domestic Policies, Foreign Policies, Criticism of the Government/Opposition, Criticism of Others, Presidential Election and Positive Messages. Negative campaigning significantly influences affective polarization. Based on an analysis of 632 Facebook posts by leaders of Slovak parliamentary parties, we conclude that negative campaigning constitutes the largest share of all analyzed posts. Combined with a strong presence of anger, aggression, insults, and vulgarity, political campaigning via Facebook contributed to an increasingly polarized atmosphere, which culminated in the 2024 assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico.

Keywords: Political Communication, Parliamentary parties, Status, Facebook, Assassination Attempt, Affective Polarization

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of political communication through internet platforms instead of using traditional media has been strongly present in the academic debate in recent years. The paper focuses on political communication of parliamentary party leaders after the elections in September 2023 until the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic Robert Fico in May 2024.

Political communication in the political arena is carried out through a multitude of channels and the current paper does not have the ability to record and evaluate the essence and style of political communication of the most prominent political leaders in its complete scope. Thus, the paper focuses on the messages posted on Facebook in the above-mentioned period after the parliamentary elections until the assassination attempt.

Political communication takes place on other platforms as well, but Facebook is still the most widely used in the Slovak political scene in terms of sending out messages to its electorate. We see a significant increase in the importance of Instagram and Tik Tok as well, but we chose this platform for the possibility of comparing the political rhetoric, content and form of political messages of parliamentary parties.

The main objective of this paper is to identify the content and form of political communication of parliamentary party leaders in the specified period on the social network Facebook. The partial objectives include the comparison of messages between the different representatives, their scope, content as well as form. The research questions are also linked to these objectives of the thesis. The formulation of the first research question is as follows: What topics were communicated by individual representatives of parliamentary political parties in the period we have defined? The first research question is followed by the second research question. Were the communications of the opposition party leaders more negative in the number critical or even hate messages? Both research questions are intended to approximate the political atmosphere in the period prior to the assassination and thus potentially answer the question of contribution to the assassination attempt.

The methodological setting of the paper is adapted to the issue under investigation. In this case, it is a qualitative research design in the setting of political communication. "The qualitative mode of research is increasingly used in the social sciences and humanities as a complementary and main method of investigating selected phenomena of social reality" (Lukáčová,

2017). In doing so, we use the so-called grounded theory. Research through grounded theory has several steps. In the beginning, the research problem needs to be established (Corbin, Strauss, 1990). This research problem is to identify the content and form of political communication in the short period before the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister. The grounded theory approach does not test a theoretical concept but instead looks for contexts leading to a possible theoretical explanation of the phenomenon under investigation (Boestam et al., 2023). After the formulation of the research problem, data collection is necessary, which in the context of this paper we have done by collecting all the public messages on the official Facebook profiles of the political leaders.

At this stage, we equally set the research questions. The research sample consists of all parliamentary political party leaders. Subsequently, in the paper, we carried out coding of individual messages, or their categorization and classification into themes. We carried out this process using qualitative data analysis software- NVivo. Based on the results of message analysis we identify the content as well as the form of messages that help us to draw a picture of political atmosphere in the short period before the assassination attempt on the prime minister Fico. Several academic articles on the political communication of prominent political party leaders are available in the literature. An article entitled "Culture of Communication of Slovak Politicians (Rysová, 2021) informs about the level of political culture and communication. The paper is partly devoted to the analysis of political profiles of Igor Matovič and Ľuboš Blaha in the selected period. Political communication and social media are also dealt with in the article which compares Slovak, Czech and European realities. (Mihálik, Garaj, Bardovič, 2022). The potential of online communication is discussed in the article "Potential of Using Websites for Communication of Political Parties: the Case of Slovakia before the 2020 Elections". However, the authors of the study exclusively deal with websites as a tool for political communication (Butoracová-Šindleryová, Garaj, 2022). Political communication through the Facebook platform is also discussed in the study entitled "Political Communication of the MPS of the People's Party - Our Slovakia in Digital Area". This study deals with the far-right and now extra-parliamentary party (Bardovič, 2018). The study titled "Analysis of Political Speeches during the SARS-CoV-2 Pandemic in a Comparative Perspective of Male- and Female-Led Government" is a study analyzing posts also within the social network Facebook documenting the period of the first wave of the coronavirus (Horváth, Brix, Urc, 2022).

Analysis of the political communication of relevant political parties in the recent period is absent in the research space. Thus, the paper has the potential to provide insights that have not been previously treated in public research. The design of research thus established has its potential weak points. Our research only captures political communication on Facebook. We are aware that some of the messages that were delivered exclusively through other platforms of political communication are not addressed in this paper.

The paper starts by describing the research problem and the methodology used. The methodological approach of this study is complemented by the research questions, namely data processing as well as a literature search in the field. In the next section, the study discusses the theoretical aspects of political communication and social networking. Subsequently, the study processes the results by coding the data through qualitative data analytical software. Finally, the study presents the findings.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature is full of studies that address political communication within social networks. The populist and anti-scientific rhetoric of politicians has been strongly present in recent times. Such rhetoric has been shown to have a significant impact on society during the COVID 19 period in Brazil, for example, where it led to a decline in adherence to measures (Ajzenman, Cavalcanti and Da Mata, 2020). The rhetoric of political leaders can thus have a major impact on societal behaviour. A large study of 20 heads of state during the COVID 19 pandemic also dates from this period (Dada et.al.,2021). A similar study of the differences between political communication between male and female heads of government was also conducted by Horváth, Brix and Urc (2022). Gbúrová (2009) writes about language in politics and politics in language as crucial factors of political and social dimension in her book. Social networks have their fundamental specificities compared to the use of social media. Thus, they do not apply the same concepts as for standard media (Kilinger, Svenson, 2015).

Today, social networks such as Facebook are used to a huge extent to disseminate political communication. Studies show that one of the crucial landmarks in the use of this social network for the dissemination of political messages came in 2008 not only in relation to the election of the US president but also the candidates for the House of Representatives (Williams, Gulati,2013). Borah (2016) discussed the theoretical concepts of

political advertising, but also the emotional messages of individual American presidential candidates. He points out the different types of messages, where candidate McCain had a significantly higher percentage of fear messages, while Obama used more humour and enthusiasm. Metz, Kruikemeier and Lecheler (2019) write about the success of posting emotional and personal life posts in the political arena. Bossetta (2018) looks at the issue of social networks from a methodological perspective on how they work. He points out the differences between content on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) provide a methodological insight for interpreting the political as well. The negativity and positivity of posts in political settings is discussed by Auter and Fine (2016), who, through an analysis of 15,000 Facebook posts, link the form of the posts mainly to competitiveness in electoral competition.

In addition to political campaigning in the run-up to elections, Facebook is also heavily used for political communication in between elections to spread the post-Truth phenomenon. Facebook also plays a significant role in the dissemination of Fake News, conspiracies and negative to aggressive rhetoric. (Limbu,2024). Although in most cases, studies tend to look at the negative factors associated with the spread of conspiracies and negativity, there are also studies that examine the relationship of this social networking site in relation to the increase in voter turnout for example as reported by Haenschen (2016). Another example is a study on the relationship between Facebook and success in local elections on the island of Taiwan (Lin,2017). The relationship between voting behavior and media in terms of the broader context is also dealt with in studies by (Horváth,Machyniak, 2016) or Hotham (2020). One of the most extensive studies focusing on the impact of Facebook on participation is the study entitled "Social media use and participation: a meta-analysis of current research".

Mihálik, Garaj and Bardovič (2022) discuss political communication strategies within youth political organizations operating on Facebook, similar to Mihálik and Dzačovský (2018).

Thus, in the Slovak context, there have already been several studies that have focused on content analysis of the posts of certain Slovak politicians in their presentation of political communication on Facebook (Stradiotova,2021). In the Czech conditions, the focus on political communication has focused on Far-Right in the study by Filipec (2018). In both cases, the authors dealt with extremist and populist politicians. The role of social networks among top constitutional officials was addressed in Bratková (2015). In our study, we are concerned with the political

content as well as the rhetoric style of individual parliamentary party leaders. Similarly, Bagic Babac and Podobnik (2018) also dealt with the content of political communication in their study using Croatia as a case study. A similar example is also the study of Stieglitz et al. (2012) on the content of German political parties on Facebook. An analysis of individual posts and their relation to political success in Switzerland was conducted by Keller and Kleinen von- Königslöw (2018). A European perspective on political communication is given by Obholzer and Daniel (2016) in their study, which focused on the social network Twitter, but in terms of online political communication this study also remains relevant for our research. Strandberg's (2013) study provides a picture of the Finnish parliamentary elections of 2011, when social networks had not yet had such a significant impact in political party campaigning in European settings, and Sorensen (2016;2016b) focuses on Denmark.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political marketing is now an important part of political practice. Unlike marketing in business, political marketing targets potential voters rather than a specific product. The essence of political marketing is to gain as much political influence as possible after the elections (Matušková, 2009). Political marketing in any form can be defined as a complex of individual mechanisms, procedures, methods and models that are intended to convince potential voters to support a given political entity. It does not necessarily have to be a political party or movement, but political marketing can also be exclusively personalized in support of a particular political candidate (Štedroň et al., 2013). Political communication focuses on the process of information exchange between political actors such as political parties or politicians and the public.

This process includes not only marketing techniques but also broader communication strategies such as debates, press releases, interviews, political debates and the expression of political attitudes. Political communication is not limited to commercial techniques, but also includes values, ideologies and access to democratic discourse. Both political marketing and political communication aim at gaining support from the public. While political marketing uses communication as a tool for effective promotion, political communication aims at maintaining and enhancing relationships with the electorate. Political communication is a rather difficult scientific field to define, and it is essential to differentiate between

the two different meanings of the term. Political communication can be understood as a scientific discipline and as a practice. Within the scientific field, it is possible to observe its interdisciplinary character in the form of the intersection of several scientific fields (Křeček, 2013, p.7). In any case, political communication relates to the field of political power and governance. Without communication, there is no governance, but without communication, society cannot be governed either (Říchová, Jiráček, 2000, p.7). Historically, political communication has been a stable presence in the exercise of power, but its development has taken on enormous proportions in recent decades. While in the past decades political communication was dominated by print, television and radio media, today internet communication between political parties and their followers dominates to a significant extent. The shift to the internet space has brought about a number of fundamental changes in the field of political communication. One of the reasons politicians describe for moving to the online space is that it is a relatively easy, immediate and inexpensive approach to communication (Obholzer, Daniel, 2016). Online political communication is a very fast and interactive way of communicating political messages. The origin of social networking was primarily intended for interaction between friends, relatives and family members. In the next phase, the potential of social networking was adopted by companies to reach out to their potential customers, and it later gained a prominent place in the political sphere. Political communication through social networking has its undeniable advantages in the ability to share information in real time with anyone in the world. Social networks are different compared to traditional media in several areas. These include the quality of information shared, the scope and reach of information, and the possibility of frequency of message sharing (Agichtein et al., 2008).

While classical media transmit information one-way, in social networks any user can become a source of information and in this way, information can be disseminated to other sources. Classical media have had different tasks compared to social media nowadays (Slovák, 2023). Different social networks differ in the possibilities and scope of user contributions. While some social networks are more entertainment-oriented, others, such as Facebook and Twitter, also have considerable use in the political communication. The advantages of social networks in the field of political communication include connectivity. It is possible to connect an enormous number of users from anywhere in the world at any one time. Social networks are also a space where up-to-date information is available very quickly. In addition to traditional media in the form of TV, print newspapers and radio,

they are an essential source of information for the public. Facebook is an American social networking site that is part of the Meta Platforms company. Facebook was founded in 2004. Access to Facebook is free and Meta makes most of its money from advertising on this social network. The nature of Facebook has changed considerably over its 20 years of operation, where over time companies and political entities have started to use it. Number of authors, as already mentioned, have addressed the contributions of political parties. Recently, however, attention has shifted to individuals who have a strong influence on social networks, as evidenced, for example, by the number of followers or reactions on our chosen platform, Facebook. This personalisation has spilled over into political campaigns, which are increasingly personalised. The personalization of messages together with the use of social media interactivity have a result on voter engagement (Kruikemeier et al., 2013). According to some authors, such as Macko et al. (2015), politicians who use a personal approach in their online communication in the form of sharing their privacy, hobbies, etc. are more successful. In doing so, they seek to get closer to their followers on a personal level. Several authors describe this as the intimization of politics. Stanyer (2013) argues that it is a process of shifting values from private life to the public sphere.

There are multiple avenues for political communication on Facebook today. One option is the dissemination of messages through fan groups. Although political parties communicate their messages through party fan pages, there is significantly more focus on individual politicians, and not only party leaders, but also prominent Facebook influencers. As an example, the current Prime Minister and leader of the SMER party has over 300 000 followers. Political communication is also carried out through the fan pages of individual district and regional branches of political parties. In addition to posting statuses, politicians now upload videos to Facebook and add short stories or reels.

In addition to personal and party profiles, political actors can also communicate through Facebook groups. These may or may not be formal in nature. Their primary purpose is not political promotion but rather serves to communicate and inform among group members. They can be public, closed and secret groups. In addition, parties may also use advertising potential.

Facebook is a space of permanent communication and so-called permanent campaigning, which can create longer-term relationships with followers and potential voters (Lilleker, Negrine, 2006). Permanent campaigning is primarily about floating voters, which political parties

target on a longer scale than just briefly during the election campaign. It is quite interesting to observe the nature of individual contributions, where mobilising contributions predominate over informative ones. Equally interesting is the finding that posts with specific political contributions receive the greatest critical response (Štětka, Surowiec, Mazák, 2018).

The impact of political communication on users has its negative side. It is a polarized space that creates opinion homogeneous groups, the so-called bubbles, which are increasingly moving away from each other. Such fragmentation can ultimately cause opinion groups to stop communicating absolutely (Blumler, 2013). Political communication through social media has its own significant specificities. While traditional media such as television or radio were time-delayed or completely absent of feedback from voters or potential voters, contemporary communication through social media is about the principles of social interaction or multi-directional communication (Tasente, 2014). In this way, the so-called online political citizen is being created. This is a social network user who incorporates into a Facebook group or becomes a follower of a particular politician or political party. In the Slovak Republic, Facebook profiles of specific politicians are more popular than party profiles of political parties. Communication that is mutual in nature can give a false impression that the politician reflects their views and listens to them (Macková, 2017).

It seems that social networks are used by representatives of the entire political spectrum, regardless of ideological background. (Sorensen, 2016). There are two hypotheses associated with political communication through Facebook namely the normalization hypothesis and the equalization hypothesis. The equalization theory argues that internet platforms significantly help smaller political actors. Due to the possible financial difficulty during the campaign, online platforms provide a satisfactory solution for smaller political actors and politicians. Thus, even smaller political actors can reach a considerable number of potential voters. On the other hand, the normalization hypothesis suggests that online activities reward larger political parties and better-known politicians at the expense of marginal and lesser-known politicians. Thus, due to the availability of more funding, they may significantly outperform their political opponents. It also shows that significant resources are needed to manage and maintain professionally managed profiles. In this way, the differences between parties and politicians in terms of popularity can only widen, according to the normalization hypothesis (Azi-Sharon, 2018).

2.1 Affective polarization in the Context of Negative Campaigning on Social Media

Affective polarization refers to the growing emotional and value-based divide between two political or ideological groups. It is a process where individuals begin to perceive each other not only as political opponents but also as enemies or “hostile” groups with different values, lifestyles, and beliefs. There are several potential causes of affective polarization.

The causes of affective polarization are widely discussed, but two main perspectives have emerged. The first highlights the importance of identities: individuals with strong affiliations to their political party may develop a “tribal” mentality, behaving like sports fans supporting their “home team,” as Lilliana Mason describes it, which leads to animosity toward the opposing “team.” This dynamic becomes more intense when social and political identities overlap; for instance, ethnic and sexual minorities in the U.S. tend to favor Democrats, while white evangelicals lean toward Republicans. The second theory argues that policy disagreements are the main driver of affective polarization: people dislike opposing parties because they view their stances on key issues (e.g., abortion rights) as incorrect or harmful. This perspective emphasizes the rational foundations of affective polarization. Empirical evidence supports both viewpoints to varying degrees, and affective polarization is likely fueled by a blend of both rational and tribal factors (Reiljan, 2021)

A central feature of affective polarization is its association with emotional responses and feelings, both positive and negative, toward other political or ideological groups. This results in political differences being linked to strong negative emotions, such as hatred or disgust, towards those on the opposite side, which can lead to societal divisions and a diminished willingness to engage in dialogue or collaborate with individuals who hold differing opinions.

The following are key characteristics of affective polarization:

- Heightened emotional intensity – Affective polarization provokes strong emotional reactions, particularly negative emotions such as anger, hatred, and disgust, directed towards individuals or groups with opposing views or identities. These emotions often take precedence over rational thought.
- Demonization of opponents – In polarized environments, each side tends to portray the opposing group as morally corrupt or incompetent. This often includes the dissemination of negative stereotypes, misinformation, and prejudices about the other side.

- Creation of “us” vs. “them” divisions – Individuals increasingly align with their own group, viewing members of other groups as having conflicting values, opinions, or behaviors. This dichotomous view of the world intensifies tension and decreases tolerance for alternative perspectives.
- Reinforcement of groupthink and conformity – In situations of affective polarization, individuals face significant pressure to adhere to the norms and views of their group. While this strengthens internal cohesion, it reduces the capacity for open debate or the questioning of group beliefs.
- Decreased willingness for dialogue and compromise – As emotional divisions between groups deepen, there is a corresponding decline in the willingness to engage in constructive conversations with those who hold opposing views. This lack of compromise exacerbates conflicts and leads to stagnation.
- Formation of “echo chambers” – People often surround themselves with information that affirms their existing beliefs, such as through social media or curated news sources, which amplifies polarization and reduces the opportunity for individuals to challenge their views with alternative perspectives.
- Increased political or ideological identification – There is a growing trend where individuals strongly identify with political or ideological groups rather than with specific policies or issues. This shift results in a greater emphasis on group loyalty rather than critical engagement with particular matters or policies (Reiljan,2021)

In practical terms, this means that political values and decisions are no longer only assessed rationally but are heavily influenced by emotional responses, impacting interactions between different groups. Affective polarization is frequently linked with negative perceptions and the radicalization of viewpoints, which further entrenches political and societal divisions. According to Reiljan (2021), Slovakia ranks fourth in terms of affective polarization in European countries. The situation preceding the research period was already markedly negative, even in the absence of targeted negative campaigns on social media.

Studies indicate that negative campaigning significantly contributes to affective polarization. Research shows that exposure to extreme forms of negative campaigning, such as character attacks and populist rhetoric, increases affective polarization compared to exposure to positive messages.

Furthermore, populist attitudes exert both direct and moderating effects: populist individuals are more likely to “like” negative campaign messages (finding them more entertaining and justifiable) and report higher levels of affective polarization (Nai-Maier, 2024).

3 METHODOLOGY

From the methodological point of view, we have followed the principles of qualitative research. In our qualitative research, we have used grounded theory in our article. Grounded theory is an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data (Martin, Turner, 1986). Noble and Mitchell (2006) point out several basic features of grounded theory: Data collection and analysis occur simultaneously.

- Categories and analytic codes developed from data. Pre-existing conceptualisations not to be used—this is known as theoretical sensitivity (see below).
- Theoretical sampling used to refine categories.
- Abstract categories constructed inductively.
- Social processes discovered in the data.
- Analytical memos used between coding and writing.
- Categories integrated into a theoretical framework

Since we focused on political communication on Facebook, the data collection for the analytical part of the work came exclusively from this social network. In the research, we focused on the statuses of political party leaders and therefore exclusively collected data from the official Facebook profiles of Róbert Fico, Petr Pellegríni, Andrej Danko, Michal Šimečka, Igor Matovič, Milan Majerský, Richard Sulík and Branislav Gröhling. This sample is determined on the basis that these are leaders of political parties that entered the National Council of the Slovak Republic after the September 2023 elections. Data collection is limited to 15.5.2024, the date of the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Robert Fico. In total, we analyzed 632 statuses of coalition and opposition party leaders. For the purposes of the analysis, we used the NVivo computer software, which systematically organizes and processes qualitative data. When using grounded theory, we used induction and did not work with pre-established theories to test. The data were linked to our research problem, which consisted of the communication of political

elites in the short period before the assassination. In relation to the research problem, we set two research questions.

Research Question 1: What topics were communicated by individual representatives of parliamentary political parties in the period we have defined?

Research Question 2: Were the communications of the opposition party leaders more negative in the number critical or even hate messages?

Research Question 3: Did negative campaigning on Facebook exhibit main characteristics that contribute to affective polarization? (Increased emotional intensity, demonization of opponents, division into “us vs. them”)

When coding individual statuses, several Themes were created and within them several Sub-Themes. When coding statuses, we focused not only on the content, but also on the form of politicians’ statements. We focused primarily on positive or negative presentation of messages, elements of positivity, negativity, or evoking emotions or anger, or even hate. The limitations of our research include the fact that we only focused on communication on Facebook.

The selection of Facebook as the primary platform is relevant from multiple perspectives. Firstly, in the Slovak context, Facebook is the most politicized social media platform. Political representatives disseminate a significant portion of their messages through this channel. The table below provides an overview of follower counts across selected social media platforms used in Slovakia. The audience following the leaders of parliamentary political parties is more than three times larger on Facebook compared to Instagram. In the case of X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, the number of followers is negligible in comparison to the dominant platform, Facebook. Furthermore, some party leaders do not even maintain an official profile on these alternative platforms.

Figure 1: *Number of Followers on Various Social Networks*

Political Party Leader	Facebook	Instagram	X	Tik Tok
Robert Fico	323 000	49 100	11 000	-
Peter Pellegríni	350 000	98 600	11 000	44 000
Andrej Danko	112 000	17 800	900	21 000
Michal Šimečka	72 000	76 400	29 000	16 000
Richard Sulík	147 000	37 800	3 300	5 000
Branislav Gröhling	62 000	39 600	140	21 000

Igor Matovič	275 000	71 800	5 500	-
Milan Majerský	31 000	3 200	-	-

Source: Based on actual number of followers, 2025

In this study, we analyze the content of posts published by the leaders of parliamentary parties, without focusing on the reactions of followers and other participants—whether in the form of likes or dislikes, or in the content and nature of comments on these posts. We acknowledge that an analysis of responses to these posts, both in terms of content and the discourse of commenters, could yield valuable insights. However, the scope of this study, the analyzed timeframe, and the number of examined subjects limit the researchers' ability to conduct such a comprehensive analysis from this particular perspective.

The frequency of statuses varied between individual political party leaders. As part of the data evaluation, we evaluated the frequency of statuses of individual leaders of the government coalition and the opposition and compared them. In addition to frequency, we also analyzed the content of individual statuses as well as their form. For better visualization of the results, we used the word cloud of the NVivo program as well as other figures of this software.

4 RESULTS

An analysis of Facebook statuses yielded several insightful findings. Within our sample of parliamentary party leaders, we analysed a total of 632 statuses between October 1st 2023 and May 15th 2024. We coded all messages by their nature. Based on the coding and using a grounded theory approach, six Themes emerged in terms of the content of each post. For better data clarity, we separately coded the leaders of the coalition formed after the 2023 elections and the leaders of the opposition parties.

We aggregated the contributions of both coalition and opposition leaders into the following six themes:

- Domestic Policies
- Foreign Policies
- Criticism of the Government/Opposition
- Criticism of Others
- Presidential Election 2024
- Positive Messages

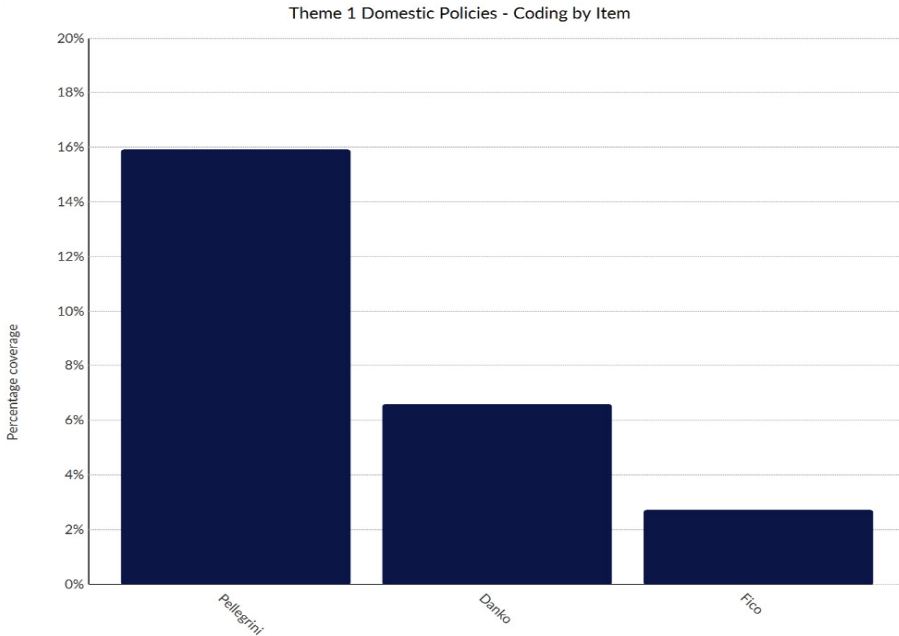
Other politically oriented statuses were classified in the “Others” group.

These are various announcements or mobilizations of their constituents, etc. Several statuses of political leaders are part of multiple themes. This was the case if the post focused on multiple topics or met the criteria for inclusion in multiple themes. All themes help us to form an idea of the topics of political communication that dominated Facebook in the period after the parliamentary elections until the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico.

Some of the themes also have their subthemes, as, for example, in domestic policies, there was a range of policies and quite marked differences between the various representatives of the governing coalition and the opposition. Defining the different themes that were present on Facebook between the party leaders is a partial clarification of the political atmosphere before the assassination. In addition to the content, there were significant differences in the way of communication, positive and negative messages, as well as in the style of language, where some party leaders were often aggressive and vulgar. For the sake of clarity of the study, we present the results of the coalition and the opposition separately, but we compare these groups with each other and equally point out fundamental differences within these groups.

Within the coalition, we analyzed a total of 251 statuses for Robert Fico (Smer-Slovak Social Democracy), Andrej Danko (Slovak National Party) and Peter Pellegrini (Voice-Social Democracy). Andrej Danko posted the highest number of statuses-97, Robert Fico posted 86 and Peter Pellegrini 68. The first theme- Domestic Policies- covered any statuses related to specific policies.

Graph 1: *Percentage Coverage of Codes Related to Domestic Policies*



Source: own processing, based on Facebook statuses, 2024

Within domestic policy, most of the contributions were announced as promises for the future. Of the 55 statuses in this group, as many as 11 of them were a promise rather than a policy already implemented. Of these 11 posts, as many as seven were from Andrej Danko. Andrej Danko's activity in policy promises is quite understandable, as his complexly structured party has been oscillating at 5 % for a long time and its preferences are on a downward trend. An example of a promise made by Andrej Danko is, for example, the status: *"Stadiums and sports grounds will be built to serve us all"* (Danko, 2023). Among the sub-themes within Internal Politics, the issues of the courts, the special prosecutor's office, the investigation into the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the shooting of the brown bear have emerged.

The second theme that emerged from the individual codes was the Foreign Policy. The nature of the submissions allowed us to develop two main sub-themes, which we label as "War in Ukraine" and "Sovereign Foreign Policy." Overall, foreign policy was less of a concern for politicians in the governing coalition, as it was the content of only 31 statuses. In principle, it

In this section it is necessary to dwell on the form of the individual contributions. Of the 55 statuses that criticized the opposition parties, only eight were from Peter Pellegrini's side. As many as 31 statuses were devoted to criticism of the opposition by Andrej Danko. In addition to his significant activity, he also used expressive vocabulary on several occasions when he called, for example, "progressives" as s..m. "Majerský continues to cooperate with the s..m of Slovakia. *He excuses himself for the rule of law, but he goes to the stands with the s..m*" (Danko, 2024). The Prime Minister, who also expressed himself in the following way, was not in possession of the refinement of his speech on several occasions: *"Not even a rat would do this, but we have to get used to it. I am at the European Council meeting in Brussels and I am receiving information from all sides about how "Mončiči", young Šimečka, fought against Slovakia yesterday"* (Fico, 2024b). Peter Pellegrini has come to criticise the opposition as a whole or a particular political party the least of all the government leaders, eight times in total. His speeches were mild, without expressive, vulgar or emotional language. For instance, he said: *"The Slovak opposition in Brussels is demanding a halt to EU funds for Slovakia. It is not doing harm to the Slovak government, but to the people who are waiting for it in the regions"* (Pellegrini, 2023).

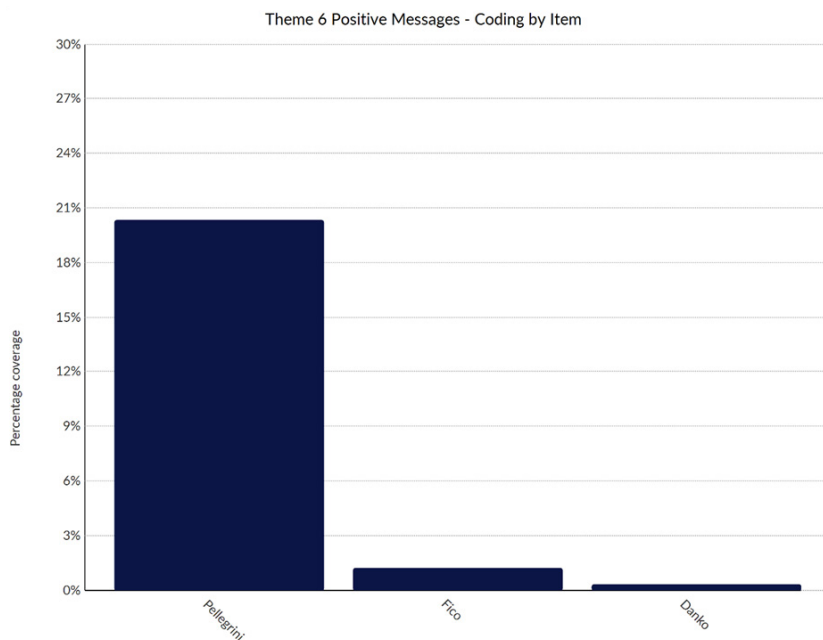
Critical posts defining themselves against, specific persons or institutions were the dominant substance of the statuses of parliamentary party leaders. For the sake of clarity, we divided the posts between criticism of political groups towards themselves and criticism directed towards the third sector, the media, or LGBTI.

Within a separate Theme called Criticism of Others, government leaders mainly criticized the media. Of the 50 statuses whose primary aim was to be critical of someone outside the opposition parties, almost half (23) were directed at the media. In addition to criticism of the media, there was also a sub-theme of criticism of the third sector and, in the case of the Coalition, of the 'slniečkári -the "do gooders" and 'Brussels'. Out of the total of 23 statuses directed at media criticism, Prime Minister Robert Fico wrote 13 statuses, Andrej Danko published eight statuses and Peter Pellegrini two statuses. The form of criticism among the individual government leaders was significantly different, which is also documented by the following posts: *"Anti-Slovak Newspaper Denník N pulls Slovakia into the hell of disrespect for education and professional career"* (Fico, 2023b). *"This place (RTVS) is dullsville"* (Danko, 2024b). *"Politics is not made from Bratislava or from the podium, but among the people. And I believe that next Saturday you will choose a president based on personal experience. And not by the image that the media portrays"* (Pellegrini, 2024).

A specific theme for the second half of 2023 and the first half of 2024 that emerged from the coding of the contributions is the 2024 Presidential Election. Within this theme, there was no need to create sub-themes as none of the themes were in any way dominant and the campaign included comments from the presidents of all parliamentary parties on various aspects of the presidential election. A number of posts from this theme are also included in other themes, particularly in the category of criticism of the opposition/government. Unsurprisingly, of the 23 statuses among the leaders of the ruling coalition, the then HLAS-SD leader Peter Pellegrini had the most posts in the campaign (11). Andrej Danko expressed himself through the status a total of 10 times and Robert Fico only twice. In terms of support for Peter Pellegrini, the statuses of Robert Fico and Andrej Danko were not particularly significant. It was rather a reserved support, which is also documented by the following statuses. *“For our voter, Peter Pellegrini is a more liberal politician. He refused our support in the first negotiations. Ivan Korčok is not an easy opponent for him. We still have time to decide in January, but since Peter Pellegrini is not decisive in his statements, the SNS cannot wait and procrastinate”* (Danko, 2023b). *“SMER-SSD voter may have different views on Mr. Pellegrini, but we know about him that, unlike Korčok, he will not drag us into war. That is one of the main reasons why we want and will vote for him”* (Fico, 2024c).

A separate group of contributions were those whose dominant feature was some degree of positivity. Thus, these were not specific policies or criticisms of opponents. Among such contributions were mainly those that alluded to and encouraged society towards a more cultivated dialogue or a higher political culture in general. From the perspective of the ruling coalition, Peter Pellegrini clearly had the highest representation, as out of a total of 23 statuses, no less than 20 were posted by him.

Graph 2: *Positive Messages Made by the Coalition Leaders.*



Source: own processing, based on Facebook statuses, 2024

When evaluating opposition leaders, we find, similarly to the case of the government coalition, fundamental differences in the content of the rhetoric of statuses and significant differences in the form of political communication. In the case of the opposition, we analyzed the statuses of the leader of Progressive Slovakia - Michal Šimečka; the leader of the OĽaNO (Slovakia) party - Igor Matovič; the leader of the KDH party - Milan Majerský and the leader of the SaS party - Richard Sulík (until 16.3.2024) and Branislav Gröhling (from 16.3.2024).

We analyzed a total of 381 statuses within the opposition parties. The opposition was thus more active in contributing statuses to Facebook. However, it should be noted that there are four opposition parties compared to three coalition parties. Nevertheless, the average number of statuses in the case of opposition leaders was approximately 95, while on the other hand, it was approximately 83. However, the differences in the frequency of posts within the opposition are significant. While Igor Matovič and Michal Šimečka added over 100 posts, in the case of Branislav Gröhling and Richard

Sulík, there were only 47 statuses. Milan Majerský - leader of the KDH - came closest to the average.

Forty-one statuses were published in connection with the first Theme - Domestic Polices. Most of them (7) touched on the issue of abolishing the Special Prosecutor's Office and the issue of amending the Criminal Code. The other subthemes were not that dominant. Overall, opposition politicians addressed statuses to issues such as pensions, construction of hospitals, or financial consolidation measures. The leader of KDH Majerský had the most posts in this area (18), followed by Michal Šimečka (13). The posts submitted by Milan Majerský and Michal Šimečka were without emotional overtones and submitted in a cultured manner. For example, we cite the statement of the leader of KDH: *"We reject the abolition of the Special Prosecutor's Office and the hastily made amendment to the Criminal Code! The fact that the government is trying to purposefully enforce these changes in a shortened legislative procedure in a non-transparent manner is, according to the KDH, an unacceptable interference in the functioning of the rule of law and legal certainty in Slovakia"* (Majerský, 2023).

The area of foreign policy was not most prominent in the political communication of opposition representatives on Facebook from October 2023 to May 2024. In total, opposition representatives commented on this topic 36 times. Within the individual topics, the perhaps somewhat surprising topic of the European elections dominated. It was followed by the topic of the war in Ukraine, with eight posts. Apart from these two subtopics, no other one received significant space.

The most prominent theme within the statuses in terms of the number of statuses was Theme- Criticism of the Government. There were 140 statuses, with the leader of OĽaNO (Slovakia), Igor Matovič, clearly having the highest representation. In total, he contributed to this number with 63 statuses. Most statuses criticized the government, but several were dedicated to individual government politicians, so we marked them as sub-themes. For example, there was a more significant representation of criticism towards Robert Fico and Andrej Danko, but Peter Pellegríni received the highest share of personal criticism. This fact is highly likely influenced by Peter Pellegríni's candidacy for President of the Slovak Republic. Peter Pellegríni was the subject of as many as 35 statuses of leader Igor Matovič. In this section, it is possible to see fundamental differences not only in the number of statuses attacking Peter Pellegríni, but also in considerable differences in the style of communication. Milan Majerský, for example, criticizes Pellegríni: *"Peter Pellegrini is more interested in collecting positions than in Slovakia. This*

style of politics is a threat because it hinders the development of the country” (Majerský, 2024). Richard Sulík’s statement is also critical: *“Pellegrini has exchanged Slovakia for a return to the past. Freedom and Solidarity will be a tough and responsible opposition and the voice of all decent people who care about Slovakia”* (Sulík,2023). Critical content about Peter Pellegrini was also part of Michal Šimečka’s statuses. *“It is a shame. Peter Pellegrini just proposed an all-night parliament session. He had recently refused, but Robert Fico ordered him to do so, and he obeyed again. Fico’s deputies, of course, approved it”* (Šimečka,2023). However, the content and form chosen by Igor Matovič were significantly different. Igor Matovič attacked Peter Pellegrini’s sexual orientation, used expressive expressions, and significantly interfered with the personal integrity of the presidential candidate.

An example is the statement: *“Pelle (Pellegríni) does not love women. He proposed that the statute of limitations for rape be halved. Another exemplary arrogant spit from the servant of the Mafia, this time in the face of a woman whose dignity was taken away by some male s...bag. This is how only a dummy of a man who despises women behaves. This is how Pellegrini beautifully grants impunity to dozens of deviants, whose crimes will suddenly be statute-barred and will never be punished again”*(Matovič, 2024).

In addition, Igor Matovič has repeatedly linked the government with the term Mafia. *“The MAFIA has just voted with 77 votes that it can grant itself impunity in a summary proceeding for stealing billions of euros from public funds - all of our money ... and as a bonus, they voted that the opposition will only get about 9 hours for debate. Pellegríni is Mafia fi..h”*.(Matovič, 2024b).

In Critics of Others, the leader of the OĽANO (Slovakia) party, Igor Matovič, is equally dominant. This is de facto the dominant topic of Igor Matovič because only six out of 48 statuses published in the category Criticism of Others belonged to someone other than him. To a dominant extent, the leader of OĽANO (Slovakia) criticized the media or progressives, similar to Robert Fico or Andrej Danko. Special criticism was directed at the leaders of some opposition parties, such as Michal Šimečka, but especially Richard Sulík, to whom Igor Matovič dedicated 10 statuses. Criticism was also addressed to a lesser extent to President Čaputová.

In many cases, the use of expressive or aggressive language stems from the operational principles of certain political parties, or more precisely, their leaders. When analyzing the form and content of political statements, it becomes evident that politicians such as Igor Matovič and Robert Fico predominantly employ a conflict-based political strategy rather than one oriented towards substantive problem-solving. Both leaders extensively

engage in labelling their opponents as representatives of “evil” from the opposing side. In the case of Igor Matovič, the term “mafia” is frequently utilized, whereas Robert Fico directs his attacks against the “anti-Slovak” opposition, the media, and progressives.

A significant dose of anger and aggression can be observed in the social media posts of Robert Fico, Andrej Danko, and Igor Matovič. An example is the post by Prime Minister Fico from December 17, 2023, where he states: *“In the EU, I was labelled a rational bastard with the remark that the more such bastards, the better.”*

He continues: *“The fraudsters and amateurs in the opposition have decided to make life miserable for Slovakia with their disgusting games in the EU. However, their attacks on their own state financially endanger our regions. If they think that by robbing Slovaks of European funds they will win their hearts, they are gravely mistaken”* (Fico, 2023c).

In this case, the prime minister refers to himself as a “rational bastard,” implying that this is a desirable type of politician. Indirectly, he suggests that a certain kind of rational cynicism is socially needed and justified. This reflects an approach to ethical and moral questions, where they should take a backseat to a technocratic style of governance focused on “common sense.” At the same time, he offensively labels the opposition as amateurs playing disgusting games with the aim of harming Slovakia. Such messages from the prime minister and the leader of the strongest party in the country can have serious consequences for society—something that would be of particular interest to sociologists and psychologists.

Labelling the opposition as incompetent amateurs whose goal is to damage Slovakia is potentially dangerous, as it might even encourage thoughts of physical attacks. The issue here is not just the content of his message but also the highly aggressive form of communication used by Prime Minister Fico.

An example from the opposite end of the political spectrum is a politician who heavily relies on conflict-driven rhetoric, portraying politics as a battle between good and evil—Igor Matovič. In one of his posts, he states: *“Why on earth should I talk about some ‘dezolát’ (a derogatory term for someone perceived as misinformed or backward), who swallows every piece of filth that comes out of Fico’s mouth, as a respectable voter? What good would that do? I do not respect him; I consider him a fool who, through his stupidity, harms Slovakia and even his own children”* (Matovič, 2024c).

statuses was most evenly distributed in this topic when, out of a total of 62 statuses, 16 were from Igor Matovič, 15 from Milan Majerský, 20 from Michal Šimečka, and 11 from Branislav Gröhling. However, the contributions were significantly different. While Michal Šimečka, Milan Majerský, and Branislav Gröhling focused more on a positive campaign for Ivan Korčok, Igor Matovič promoted an anti-campaign towards Peter Pellegríni. For illustration, we present examples of statuses: *“On Saturday, please vote for Ivan Korčok so that we can be rightfully proud of the president”* (Gröhling, 2024). *“We support Ivan Korčok!” In the presidential election, we elect a head of state who will represent all people in Slovakia, especially in this challenging period of the struggle for the rule of law. KDH recommends electing Ivan Korčok in the presidential election, who, at this time and among the given candidates, is closest to fulfilling the criteria for such a head of state and, at the same time, has a real chance of winning the presidential post. We expect Ivan Korčok to represent all citizens, including Christians and conservatives, and to respect the constitutional values of protecting life, human dignity, and marriage”* (Majerský, 2024b). *“Pellegrini granted a general amnesty to mafians. As a bonus, he reduced the statute of limitations for rape of women and sexual abuse of children by half. An ideal president for a mafia state that despises victims of sexual deviants”* (Matovič, 2024d).

On the topic of positive messages, Milan Majerský had the most significant representation together with Michal Šimečka, followed by Richard Sulík and Branislav Gröhling. Igor Matovič had the most minor representation of this type of status. Political criticism took a back seat, for example, during the assassination of Prime Minister Fico, when even the most critical opposition representative, Igor Matovič, wrote a cultivated post on Facebook. The leader of the biggest opposition party Michal Šimečka wrote: *“I am shocked and horrified by the shooting of Prime Minister Robert Fico in Handlová. We unequivocally and strongly condemn any violence. We believe that Prime Minister Fico will be okay and that this terrible act will be clarified as soon as possible”* (Šimečka, 2024b).

By presenting these findings, we de facto answered the research questions. Their wording was as follows: *“What topics were communicated by individual representatives of parliamentary political parties in our defined period?”* The second research question follows the first research question. Were the communications of the opposition party leaders more negative in the number of critical or even hate messages? The first question is represented by individual themes across the political spectrum. The individual areas are based on the political reality of the second half 2023 and the first half

of 2024. The results of the analysis of the statuses of individual opposition representatives show a more sizeable number of critical messages, which is quite logical. Despite this, there were also fundamental differences between the coalition and the opposition. The most critical leaders of the political parties are Robert Fico and Igor Matovič, in terms of scope and form. The second research question also addresses the form. Some of the statuses, especially from Robert Fico and Igor Matovič, were criticisms that contained expressive, offensive words that interfered with personal integrity. To a lesser extent, Andrej Danko also meets these attributes. On the contrary, in terms of positive statuses and terms of form, Peter Pellegríni, Michal Šimečka, and Milan Majerský were dominant. In the case of the statuses of Richard Sulík and Branislav Gröhling, interpreting the results is quite tricky since it was the smallest sample. Their activity on Facebook during this period was significantly lower than that of other party leaders.

DISCUSSION

We acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly the fact that it does not examine the reactions of discussants on Facebook. However, there are valid reasons to assume that comments under posts by political party leaders would not provide representative insights. A significant number of likes, comments, and followers appear highly suspicious, as many originate from Sri Lanka, India, or Bangladesh (Slovak Spectator, 2025). These questionable practices of purchasing followers, likes, and utilizing artificial intelligence hinder a meaningful assessment of audience interactions with these posts.

Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that most commenters are either strong supporters of a particular politician or staunch opponents. For these reasons, deriving relevant conclusions from audience reactions is highly problematic. Additionally, audience engagement is significantly influenced by the emotional nature of political posts, as noted by Tarullo (2020). Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan have demonstrated that among Facebook followers of German politicians, posts with both positive and negative emotions attract more comments than those without affective words or expressions (Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, 2012).

Political posts and their accompanying comments have also been analyzed in the study *Study of Podemos Discourse during the European Election Campaign 2014* (Sampietro, Ordaz, 2015). The study highlights the predominantly negative nature of comments under posts by the party

during the European elections. Political posts often serve as a space for reaffirming one's opinions or seeking confrontation with an audience from the opposing political spectrum. This finding supports the hypothesis that social media functions as an echo chamber, amplifying and reinforcing similar viewpoints (Pecile et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Political communication of representatives of parliamentary parties after the 2023 elections until the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister brought a relatively wide range of discussion topics. Among other things, communication on Facebook showed that the political vocabulary between representatives of political parties shows significant differences in terms of cultural, rep. uncultural, political expressions. From the point of view of the content of political discussion on the social network Facebook, the posts concerned a significant majority of one of the following topics: Domestic Policies, Foreign Policies, Criticism of the Government/Opposition, Criticism of Others, Presidential Election 2024 and Positive Messages. These topics represented more than 600 statuses of political party leaders. Within individual topics, criticism from the opposition towards the coalition was more prominent, but in some cases also criticism towards opposition partners, the media or civil society. We noted significant differences in the frequency of statuses on individual themes as well as in language. In general, party leaders used Facebook significantly more for criticism than for communicating policies in the domestic or foreign sphere. Igor Matovič, Robert Fico and Andrej Danko were dominant in critical statuses. In addition to the frequency of statuses whose priority goal was an offensive against someone, these were often statuses beyond the bounds of decent political vocabulary. Expressive expressions, insults and hate speech were part of the statuses of these leaders. Critical statuses were also produced by other leaders, but their frequency and impact in terms of aggression were lower. The category of statuses with positive emotion can be mainly attributed to the statuses of Peter Pellegríni, Milan Majerský and Michal Šimečka. In the case of Richard Sulík, as well as his successor Branislav Gröhling, the samples of statuses are relatively small. The contributions of Igor Matovič, Robert Fico and Andrej Danko contributed the most significantly to political and social polarization. Negative campaigning significantly influences affective polarization. Based on an analysis of 632 Facebook posts by leaders of Slovak parliamentary parties, we conclude that negative campaigning constitutes

the largest share of all analyzed posts. Combined with a strong presence of anger, aggression, insults, and vulgarity, political campaigning via Facebook contributed to an increasingly polarized atmosphere, which culminated in the 2024 assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico.

The extent to which they correlate with the commission of an assassination attempt is a question for more extensive research. The field of future research holds great potential for examining the relationship between political messages and social media platforms. It is essential to investigate the extent to which a given social medium influences affective polarization, particularly through comparative studies and related analyses.

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