

# 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*

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

<b>Igor Matovič</b>	275 000	71 800	5 500	-
<b>Milan Majerský</b>	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

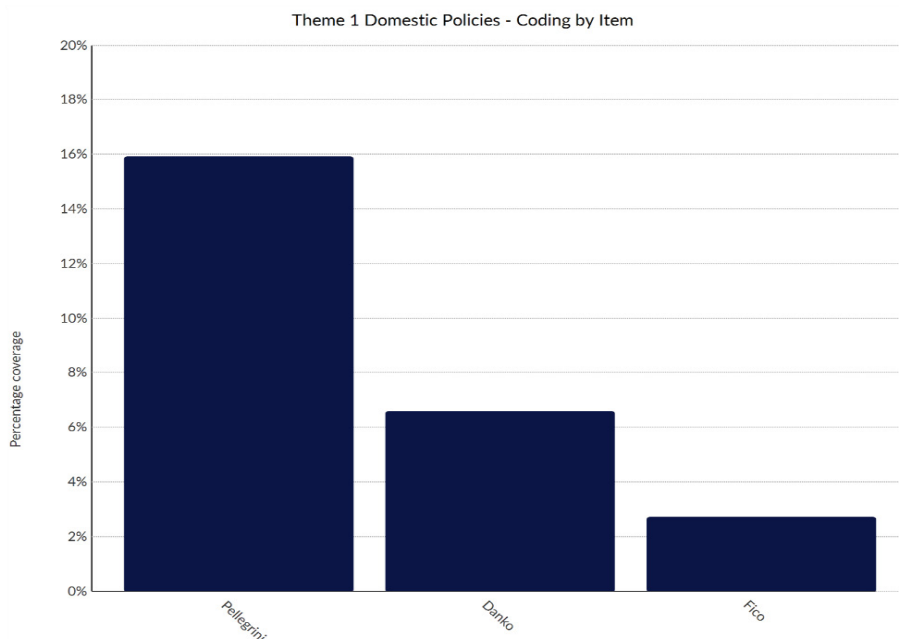
Other politically oriented statuses were classified in the “Others” group.

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



can be said that the space for foreign policy was significantly limited by the articulation of necessary changes on the domestic scene (abolition of the special prosecutor's office, the criminal law, changes in national television and radio), as well as by the presidential campaign of Peter Pellegrini. In the area of sovereign foreign policy, out of 11 statuses, up to 10 were written by the official profile of Robert Fico. He often used harsh language, as evidenced by the following statuses: "I informed Ursula Von Der Leyen that Slovakia will have its own view in Brussels" (Fico, 2023), or: "We are preparing not to function as sheep and listen to the American command, there has already been such a government here" (Fico, 2024).

The third theme is called criticism of the opposition/government. This was the largest group of statuses from both the government coalition and the opposition. In the case of coalition party leaders, these were criticisms of specific individuals, but also of the entire opposition or the past government. We also included President Zuzana Čaputová, who was the former deputy chairwoman of the Progressive Slovakia party, in the group of the opposition. Apart from her, the leader of the strongest opposition party also extensively covered this topic, Michal Šimečka, and the presidential candidate in 2024, Ivan Korčok. The manner of criticism was often indiscriminate, with opposition leaders being labelled s..m or rats by government officials.

**Figure 2:** *Most Used Words of Government Leaders within Theme Criticism of the Opposition*



Source: own processing, based on Facebook statuses, 2024

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).

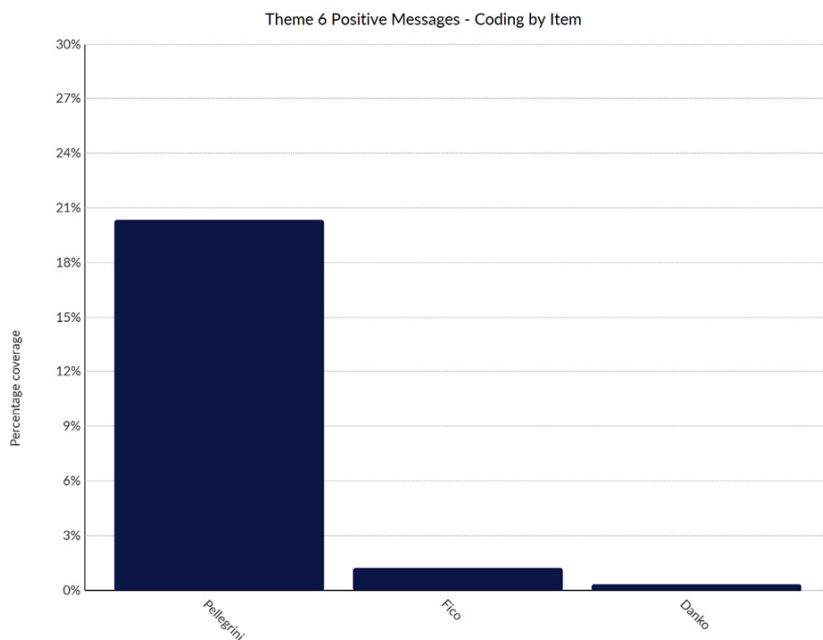
Critical posts defining themselves against, specific persons or institutions were the dominant substance of the statuses of parliamentary party leaders. For the sake of clarity, we divided the posts between criticism of political groups towards themselves and criticism directed towards the third sector,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