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LOVED, HATED, OR IGNORED? PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND PARTISANSHIP IN SLOVAKIA

Olga Gyárfášová¹ - Martin Slosiarik²

Abstract

When studying social and political dynamics in modern representative democracies the relationship between citizens and political parties cannot be neglected because it is essential for understanding social processes. The concept of party identification largely follows the classic work of research on voting behavior - The American Voter (Campbell et al., 1960). It is understood as exogenous predispositions which affect attitudes and political behaviour. It is mostly seen as a positive trait and affirmation. However, in post-Communist countries (and not only there) we see strong negative party identification, operationalized as a party that an individual would never vote for or perceives as distant and evoking negative feelings. Challenged by the question of the dynamics of, and relationship between, positive and negative partisanship this paper contributes to the research of partisan identification, positive as well as negative. Based on empirical data from several surveys the study shows the dynamics of party identification in Slovakia. There are partisans who hold either positive or negative party identification, or both, or none. The representation of different types depends heavily on the pattern of electoral competition. Though the study concentrates on single country case – Slovakia - it may identify more general trends of political partisanship in the region and beyond in times of intensely polarized politics.

Keywords: Political parties, Political identities, Positive and negative party identification, Type of Partisans

INTRODUCTION

Love and hate are usually two sides of the same coin. And like other objects, political parties can be loved or hated and perceived as closed or very distant. The relationship between citizens and political parties cannot be neglected when studying the social and political dynamics of modern representative democracies because it is essential for understanding political processes. Political parties are a kind of “transmission belt” between

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citizens and politics: they represent citizens' values, opinions, and interests, and they design, promote, and implement public policies.

The public's attitude towards political parties and the degree of identification with them can take a wide variety of forms. Uncritical emotional attachment, either to the party itself, or - more often - to its leader, is as problematic as the rejection and negative evaluation of parties and/or politics in general. Both extremes prevent rational evaluation of the performance of political parties and weaken responsibility and accountability. On the other hand, partisanship, or identification with a party, is crucial for voters' decision-making and thus also for the stability and predictability of the democratic system as such.

In most academic writing the concept of party identification follows the classic work by Angus Campbell and his colleagues *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960), which deals primarily with voting behavior. Campbell and the so-called Michigan School saw partisanship as an essential factor in voters' electoral decision-making. Party identification was originally defined as the sense of personal attachment which the individual feels towards the party of their choice and also as "the individual's affective orientation to an important group-object in his environment" (Campbell et al., 1960, pp. 121-122). The concept clearly refers to social psychological identification and understands this as a type of social identity. Campbell rejected the social structural variables identified as an explanatory category by Paul Lazarsfeld and the Columbia School in the 1940s (Lazarsfeld et al., 1968). The social psychological approach of the Michigan School emphasized individual perception and subjective identification and claimed that it is not the social structure that determines how people live (and vote), but it is how people perceive the social structure that can form and shape their "living spaces" (Campbell et al., 1960).

In line with this tradition Russell J. Dalton postulates that party identification is a long-term, affective attachment to one's preferred political party and these party identities are a potent cue in guiding the attitudes and behavior of the average person. Furthermore, partisans tend to repeatedly support their preferred party, even when the candidates and the issues change. Party ties mobilize people to vote to support their party, or even to work for the party during the campaign (Dalton, 2016, p. 1).

Though party identification could have positive and/or negative forms, the positive one attracted more academic attention and was broadly used as explanatory variable in voter choice or electoral participation in general.

The approach of the Michigan School de facto introduced into political science research what has become one of its central topics today: emotions

and affective ties and affect-based partisan identities. Campbell and his team said many decades ago that it is not rational choice, nor objectively understood social structure, but party identification and party identity that creates enthusiasm for politics, maintains system stability and motivates political engagement. On the other hand, the absence of stable and permanent party identities creates space for undemocratic groups that can intensify the degree of polarization in public discourse and destabilize democratic institutions (Huddy, Banker, Davies, 2018).

Since its introduction in the 1950s and 60s the concept of party identification has been widely disputed and still poses theoretical and methodological challenges. Currently, a wide range of literature demonstrates the importance of partisanship as a central element of democratic politics (Dalton, Weldon, 2007; Goren, 2005; Green 2004; Green, Palmquist, Schickler, 2002; Iyengar et al., 2012; Dalton, 2016; Huddy, Banker, Davies 2018; Ward, Tavits, 2019; Elliot, 2023 and other). At the same time the concept is heavily contested, and we agree with Elliot (2024, p. 584) that “there is a fundamental plurality in the ways that individuals experience psychological attachment to political parties, and this plurality has important consequences for its empirical study and its value for democracy”.

The following article deals with various perspectives of the relationship of citizens to political parties and focuses on a more detailed analysis of the concept of party identification, positive and negative, the factors determining different types of partisanship and the implications this has. The main goal is to identify the degree of (positive and negative) party identification in Slovakia and to undertake an empirical study of four types of party affiliation. Our results provide evidence that positive party identification has been on the decline within the last 10-15 years, and that recently the number of apathetic partisans is on the rise. Both phenomena are closely interlinked with the process of partisan de-alignment followed by high voting volatility.

We proceed by reviewing the academic literature on political partisanship, including the debate around its operationalization and research. Subsequently, we introduce the Slovak case study, emphasizing why negative partisanship is important for understanding political processes in Slovakia. We then turn to our research objectives and research design. We utilize data from a special ad hoc representative survey conducted in spring 2022 on a sample of almost 3,000 respondents which mapped both positive and negative political partisanship. A similar survey was repeated in fall 2024 on a smaller sample and under completely different political circumstances. Finally, we present, interpret, and discuss the findings.

1 CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1 “Unmoved mover” or “running tally”?

Within academia there is a long-running debate about the nature and functioning of partisanship. On the one hand, the traditional conceptualization sees partisan identity as the exogenous and most stable of all political predispositions: it is seen as the “unmoved mover” of political behavior. On the other hand, the revisionist conceptualization holds that partisanship is unstable and responsive to party performance and policy agreement. In this view it is a “running tally”, meaning that it is evaluative and changeable, and that there is a volatile orientation towards parties (Fiorina, 1976, 1981; Johnston, 2006; Oscarsson, Holmberg 2020).

According to the traditionalist view, party identification as a stable trait arises in early adolescence through political socialization in the family. It is seen “as exogenous predispositions, an ‘unmoved mover’ that affects attitudes and behaviour but is at the same time not affected by those variables” (Oscarsson, Holmberg, 2020, p. 2). In later years, with the dominance of rational choice theory, the affective and expressive components were toned down in favour of the instrumental and cognitive components of party identification. The revisionists theorized that party identification is more volatile than originally assumed.

The most influential reconceptualization of the role of party identification in shaping citizen choice was presented by Morris Fiorina. He described party identification as a “running tally” or an evaluation that was continually updated, being affected by political events and parties’ issue positions, but with considerable elasticity (Fiorina, 1976). This questions the traditional assumption that party identification is a fundamental position which, according to Fiorina, cannot be understood as identity. Instead of such an assumption, it is necessary to look at the concept as the sum of the evaluation of parties according to their actions in the past.

The revisionist model approaches identification with a political party as a constructed decision that voters make based on the information they receive. Thus, the revisionist conception assumes that party loyalty is updated in response to a number of short-term stimuli, and also that citizens modify their party identity as required by experience and the current evaluation of a number of factors (Fiorina, 1981). Fiorina in his later work accepted some arguments of the traditionalist point of view but in principle adhered to his initial concept and stated: “Party ID may move slowly, but it moves” (Fiorina, 2003, p. 7).

In any case, there is now little doubt that party identification – moving or unmoving - cannot be overlooked. Research shows that party identification is the most stable political predisposition in voter behavior (Dalton, 2016). Moreover, according to several theorists, it is so significant that it prevails over all other motives (Thomassen, Rosema, 2009). On the other hand, the growing volatility of voting behavior is evidence that the tie changes over time, even in the case of strong identification.

In addition to the element of identity, party identification is also defined by the time horizon. From the very beginning, party identification was conceptualized as a permanent orientation. This is the reason why the Michigan School often refers to party identification as long-term loyalty to a party, which should persist in the minds of citizens for a long time (Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil, Nevitte, 2001).

Dalton argues that partisanship is an extremely stable predisposition with real political consequences or also “A primary value of partisanship is as a heuristic that cues political choices” (Dalton, 2020, p. 75). Similarly, Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler (2002) explicitly defined partisanship as an individual’s central identity, able to last longer than individual political campaigns, and which significantly shapes voters’ perceptions. As the authors state, if people feel a sense of belonging to a certain social group, they absorb the doctrinal positions that that group defends. However, party identification occurs, once it emerges in early adulthood, it often persists. It does not come and go with electoral cycles but forms a fundamental component of how individuals perceive politics (Green, Palmquist, Schickler, 2002). For this reason, party identification has become a central element in modern research on voting behavior (Oscarsson, Holmberg, 2020).

1.2 “Unmoved mover” or “running tally”?

Most academic literature focuses on the positive aspects of political partisanship, above all in its effects on voting. Of course, that is not the whole story. Oscarsson and Holmberg note that political partisanship “is best to be considered to be at the same time beneficial as well as detrimental to democratic citizens and democratic system”. (2020, p. 3) They claim that the “Janus face of emotional attachments to political parties is that they can work as helpers and blinders to individual citizens, and they can bolster or undermine processes of democratic representation and electoral accountability” (ibid). So, when analyzing the phenomenon, we should have this “warning” in mind.

Oscarsson and Holmberg designed a simple two-dimensional categorization. Combining partisanship as good or bad and macro vs. micro level, they construct four theoretical types, where each of them covers several phenomena:

Table 1: Partisanship for good and for worse

<p>Partisanship a good thing: A. Macro-level: mass-elite linkage; political mobilization; interest representation; political stability</p>
<p>B. Micro-level: heuristics; making sense of the political world; attitude formation/consistency; political literacy/civic skills</p>
<p>Partisanship is a bad thing: C. Micro-level: misperception; denialism; fact avoidance; motivated reasoning</p>
<p>D. Macro-level: system polarization; overheated public discourse; misrepresentation; failure of accountability</p>

Source: Oscarsson – Holmberg, 2020, p.3.

The “bad sides” of partisanship have consequences at both macro and micro level. As mentioned in the introduction, uncritical partisanship could at the individual level lead to a misperception of a party’s positioning or performance, and suppressing the cognitive components of evaluation in favor of emotional affective perception might be harmful for democratic competition.

The negative consequences at the macro level are above all polarization and overheated public discourse – a phenomenon which has recently been on the rise.

At the individual level, the downside of a strong attachment to one party is that it “can develop into strong negative feelings toward the out-party and its partisans, thus fostering political tribalism and non-constructive public discourse” (Oscarsson – Holmberg, 2020, p. 4). This type is close to what Rose and Mishler (1998) identified as negative partisanship.

The debate around the effects of partisanship has intensified within recent years due to the rise of affective polarization and the negative consequences of affect-based partisan identities on the quality of democracy (e.g. Achen, Bartles, 2016 ; Ward, Tavits, 2019; Wagner, 2021). Achen and Bartels argue that for most people, partisanship is not an ideological proximity, but a

reflection of where people like me belong (Achen, Bartels, 2016, p. 266). In other words: ideology is more often a consequence of party identification than its cause (ibid.).

1.3 “Unmoved mover” or “running tally”?

Based on long-term data from national election studies and international CSES research, we can conclude that party identification is generally declining, but not disappearing (Holmberg, Oscarsson 2020). For example, in the USA, where comparable data have been available since 1952, the proportion of those who answer positively to the question of whether they are close to a party had fallen from 74% to 63% by 2016. Another example is Sweden, where there was a drop from 65% at the beginning of the 1960s to 24% in 2018 (Holmberg, Oscarsson, 2020, pp.16-17). The Swedish example is probably closer to Western European multiparty democracies, where there has been a significant loosening of socio-structural ties to political parties, but also a reduction in affective identification (although the aim of this study is not to investigate what is the cause and what is the effect). American society is a different case due to several circumstances: a system of two strong political parties and a strong, generation-long identification with their positions, which are often completely opposite.

Holmberg and Oscarsson conclude that there has been a decrease in the strength of party identification across most established democracies over the decades, and they see this as a negative trend because it has made governing less predictable and short-sighted. However, their conclusion is “down, but not out”. In their opinion the factors behind the change have to do with polarization and the number of effective political parties (Holmberg, Oscarsson, 2020, pp. 26-27).

1.4 Negative political partisanship

The interest in negative party identification is much lower than the interest in positive identification, although its importance for voting behavior has been empirically confirmed many times (Caruana, McGregor, Stephenson, 2015; Mayer 2017; Medeiros, Noël 2014; McGregor, Caruana, and Stephenson, 2015; Rose, Mishler, 1998).

Negative partisanship is also relevant when applying the revisionist model. From this point of view, party identification reflects positive and negative retrospective evaluations of the activities of political parties. It

admits the possibility of both stability and change of party identification. While a positive evaluation of a particular party can influence the voter to form a positive relationship with it, it is also possible that a predominantly negative evaluation of a party can give the voter an incentive to form negative ties (McGregor, Caruana, Stephenson, 2015).

In the early stages of research into party identification, academics hypothesized that positive and negative evaluations are two opposite ends of a bipolar continuum where individuals divide political parties into us versus them groups (Medeiros, Noël, 2014). Such differentiation occurs in two basic ways. The first is preferring the group to which one belongs and the second is not having a feeling of belonging to other groups (Brewer, Brown, 1998). In the first case group members have a tendency to exaggerate the favorable characteristics of the group to which they belong. In the second case, they exaggerate the negative characteristics of opposing groups, and the individual's own group is considered superior to the competing group (Green, 2004). From this perspective, negative party identification would be the simple opposite of positive party identification. However, current research deviates from this traditional notion in certain cases and declares that these two phenomena do not have to occur simultaneously. Even though negative and positive party identification can coexist and have a certain influence on each other, positive party identification does not necessarily presuppose the existence of negative party identification and vice versa (McGregor, Caruana, Stephenson, 2015). In other words, positive and negative partisanship do not have to go hand in hand and condition each other or even co-exist at the same time. Even Dalton, who is in principle very positive about partisanship and sees it as very valuable concept, points out that "there are times and conditions where partisanship can act as blinkers or blinders to reasoned political choices. At these times the negative aspects of PID may exceed the positive" (Dalton, 2020, p. 85).

The concept of negative political partisanship was extensively developed by Richard Rose and William Mishler (1998) in connection with research in post-Communist countries in the first decade after the fall of totalitarian regimes. Strong negative identification was related to the rejection of the previous regime and its main political force, the Communist Party, and support for the formation of a pluralistic party democracy. Negative partisanship is described as "the identification of a party that an individual would never vote for" (Rose, Mishler, 1998, p. 222). Based on empirical surveys Rose and Mishler pointed out that work with negative identification is essential for understanding political developments in post-Communist

countries. Introducing negative partisanship, they combine and create four types of partisanship: open, closed, apathetic and negative (ibid.) Paradoxically, this concept which was so typical in the post-Communist context is now becoming more prominent in mature democracies with the rise of right-wing populism (Bankert, 2020, p. 92).

Rose and Mishler, by combining two dimensions of party identification, created four different types of partisanship depending on whether people declare positive or negative party identification, both or neither (1998). Negative partisans can name a party that they perceive as distant, a party they would never vote for, but they have no positive party identification: they do not have a party that is close to them (Table 2). The authors argued that “the predominance of negative partisans in post-Communist countries makes party competition today relatively unstable, for while most voters identify a single point – a party that they will not support – they have no stable commitment to a party they would vote for” (Rose, Mishler 1998, p. 223). This results in high volatility between elections. Closed partisans have both a party that is distant from them and a party that is close to them. They take party competition seriously and live in a world of “Us” versus “Them”. Open partisans are positively committed to a political party but do not identify a party that they would never vote for. According to Rose and Mishler, it is this group that contributes to the stability of a party system and the stability of democracy by reducing hostility towards other parties and thus being more open to accepting a democratic alternation of power. Apathetic electors are those who show no identification, either positive or negative. According to a survey conducted in 1995 the representation of this type of voter was only 3% in Romania, 9% in Poland, 19% in Hungary and 40% in Slovenia (ibid., p. 224). On average the most frequent type of voter in the post-Communist states surveyed was “negative partisanship (52%). The authors hypothesized that (as Václav Havel observed) during the Communist era what took place was not indoctrination but rather alienation from party politics (ibid., p. 220).

Table 2: Types of partisanship

	Positive party identification (Positive PID)		
		YES	NO
Negative party identification (Negative PID)	YES	Closed partisanship	Negative partisanship
	NO	Open partisans	Apathetic partisans

Source: Rose – Mishler, 1998, p. 223.

This four-type typology has been applied and empirically explored as part of the Polish Electoral Studies. Marta Żerkowska-Balas (2022) in her study goes beyond separate analysis of positive and negative party identification and following Rose and Mishler’s (1998) four-fold typology she looked at the interplay of the two variables to provide a better insight into ambivalent political partisanship. The author concludes that in Poland there are not only positive and negative partisans, but these two types or variables can appear in various combinations. The situation is very dynamic, which should primarily be attributed to changes in the level and dynamics of political competition. Her findings are in contrast to previous research which found that negative partisans are not prone to developing positive identity but are more disposed to becoming apathetic partisans (and vice versa). She points out that “The increasing number of positive partisans and decreasing number of negative ones should reduce electoral volatility and improve the quality of political accountability, which is still a problem in post-communist democracies” (Żerkowska-Balas, 2022, p. 18).

2 SLOVAKIA’S POLITICAL CONTEXT OF PARTY IDENTIFICATION

In spring 2022, when the first survey was conducted, a center-right coalition lead by the movement Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO) had clearly won the 2020 parliamentary election and was in government. The country was slowly recovering after the COVID 19 pandemic. The leader of OĽaNO, Igor Matovič, had initially been appointed Prime Minister, but after a year he agreed to step aside and allow a cabinet reshuffle because his chaotic governing and aggressive political style was heavily criticized. However, the situation did not calm down very much and

in summer 2022 one of the coalition parties left the government, which then “survived” as a minority cabinet without the confidence of parliament until spring 2023, when it was recalled by the president and replaced by a technocratic interim government. The government faced huge external and internal challenges: first the COVID pandemic, then high inflation, energy crises, and the war of aggression of Russia against Ukraine, Slovakia’s neighbor, which brought tens of thousands of war refugees to the country. Moreover, the governing coalition suffered from intra-coalition conflicts and animosities.

During the 3.5 years of the government led by the OĽaNO movement the opposition strengthened its popularity. The largest opposition party, Direction-Social Democracy (Smer-SD) split in 2020, and the breakaway Voice-Social-Democracy (Hlas-SD) initially had higher support but later this decreased slightly, and Smer-SD got stronger. The early election held in 2023 took place in a very tense atmosphere. The winner was Smer-SD, followed by a newcomer to the Slovak parliament, Progressive Slovakia (PS). Five other parties reached the 5% threshold for obtaining parliamentary seats under Slovakia’s system of proportional representation. The new government was formed shortly after the election by three parties: Smer-SD, Hlas-SD and the Slovak National Party (SNS). It held a narrow majority of 79 of the 150 seats in parliament. The leader of the strongest party, Smer-SD’s Robert Fico, took the office of Slovak prime minister for the fourth time. The two largest parties in parliament, Smer-SD and the opposition PS, represent the two main competing blocs and are the major political rivals. Smer-SD, while claiming to be a social democratic party, is in reality a populist right-wing nationalist party. It promotes a “sovereign Slovak foreign policy” and is reminiscent of Viktor Orbán’s government in Hungary in its stance towards the EU, Ukraine, and Russia. On the other hand, Progressive Slovakia stands for a markedly pro-European, liberal, and progressive agenda. The radicalization and polarization between the coalition and opposition gradually increased. By fall 2024, when our second survey was conducted, the two main political parties – Smer-SD representing the governing coalition and the opposition party PS – had reached similar levels of potential electoral support.

All in all, the structure of political competition changed significantly between spring 2022 and fall 2024. The 2023 election produced not only the alternation of power but also clear representatives of the two antagonistic camps who were relatively balanced in terms of their electoral support: Smer-SD on the coalition side and PS for the opposition.

3 METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

As stated in the literature empirical measurement of political identification is a methodological challenge, particularly if using standardized questionnaire-based surveys. Previous research on party identification is accompanied by a general consensus according to which party identification includes three basic components of investigation: a) whether people identify with any parties, b) which parties they are, and c) how strong influence party identification has on voting behavior. However, there is no precise agreement about how the concept of party identification should be operationalized and measured. International political science research applies several approaches. Indicators can be derived from voting intention or directly from voter choice. If we assume that there is a strong correlation between voting decisions and identification, we can consider the intention to vote for a party as a positive identification, and vice versa: a firm decision not to vote for a party is negative identification.

The CSES (Comparative Studies of Electoral Systems) – a global comparative project about electoral behavior – consistently applies the party identification indicator (PI or PID)³, as it is used in national election studies in the USA and many Western European countries. This method also captures the intensity of attachment, measuring weaker and stronger identification. In addition, the CSES project applies a like-dislike scale, and based on this indicator a kind of “mental map” of relationships related to the perception of political parties can be created identifying the vectors of closeness vs. distance (cf. Gyárfášová 2018). However, for both indicators, it is important to note that the CSES is a post-election survey, and it is plausible to assume that the election results themselves and reflections on one’s own vote-choice in a given election can influence them. Without exception, in all countries included in the CSES research, party identification and voter choice were strongly correlated.

More sophisticated methods of measuring party identification are presented by Alexa Bankert (2020, pp. 89-101), focusing more on party identity and the degree of identification measured by a battery of attitude questions measured on a no/disagree scale, such as “When I talk about this

³ The wording of the CSES questions is as follows: “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?” If the response is NO, the next question is: “Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than the others?” If YES, an open-ended question follows: “Which party do you feel closest to?” And finally: “Do you feel very close to this party, somewhat close, or not very close?” (<https://cses.org/collect-data/>).

party I say we instead of them, I have a lot in common with other supporters of this ...” Questions formulated in this way indicate belonging to some group, that is, a collective identity defined by common proximity to a political party. Opposing statements then indicate a negative party identity.

Even though identification with a political party, political partisanship and party attachment are central concepts in political science research, in Slovakia there are practically no systematic studies focused on these issues, not to speak about analysis of the linkage between positive and negative partisanship, types of partisanship, and their origins and affects. Our study aims to empirically test the distribution of the four-type model on the Slovak data. Furthermore, we address some of the gaps in the literature and examine the following research questions:

- What are the trends in party identification since 2010?
- What is the distribution of positive and negative partisanship?
- What political parties are voters more likely to identify with positively or negatively?
- What is the distribution of the four types of partisanship?
- What are the roots of different types of partisanship: are they embedded in the socio-demographic structure or political attitudes (left-right, liberal-conservative, pro-EU – anti-EU)?
- What is the dynamic of closed partisanship?

For the purposes of this analysis, we use data from the CSES modules 2010, 2012, 2016, and 2024, as well as the two ad hoc representative surveys, which contain two pairs of questions - one on positive identification and the other on negative partisanship - which are applied to construct the four-type model of partisanship. Additional questions on ideological orientation, electoral preferences and demographic questions are used as independent variables for further analysis.

The CSES surveys were conducted on representative samples of the adult inhabitants of Slovakia eligible to participate in the general election. In all four fieldwork surveys there was probability sampling⁴.

To illustrate the trends in party identification we utilized the CSES data and operationalized party identification as the positive response to the question: “Do you usually think of yourself as close to any particular party?” If YES, an open-ended question followed: Which party do you feel closest to?

⁴ Data files and all details about the fieldwork of surveys are available in Slovak Archive of Social Data (<https://sasd.sav.sk/sk/>).

The ad hoc surveys on representative samples were designed to capture the four types of partisanship and to measure positive as well negative party identification. We operationalized them as declared closeness, positive feelings for a party on the one hand and distance or negative feelings to a party on the other hand. We applied a binary alternative “yes” or “no”, or I don’t know. In follow-up questions both surveys asked, “Which party do you feel closest to?”, which were open-ended questions (with just one option) coded by authors of this paper.

The first ad hoc representative survey was conducted in April-May 2022, on a sample of almost 3,000 respondents (N=2 909) using quota sampling. We repeated the same questions in another survey in September 2024, also on a representative quota sample, about a year after the 2023 general election. Both surveys were conducted by the FOCUS agency. Between spring 2022 and fall 2024 the political constellation had changed completely, which was also reflected in our results.

4 RESULTS

4.1 How does party identification evolve over time?

Studies of partisanship are relatively rare in Slovakia, and if there are any, they use different indicators, so it is difficult to follow trends over time. Reflections on the relationship between the public and political parties in Slovakia can go in several directions. One of them is trust in political parties in general, as institutions.

The results are evident: in the long term, across different political constellations and across different social environments, political parties are the least trusted institutions in Slovakia. For example, in fall 2003, only 12% of respondents trusted political parties in general (Gyárfášová 2004). Twenty years later - in 2023 - according to the DEKK Institute slightly more, but still only 25%, of the population expressed trust in political parties (Trends [dis]trust ..., 2023), which is the lowest among all institutions, even taking into account that vertical trust in general is low.

Measured by declared closeness to a political party, CSES data show that the share of those who identify with a political party has decreased by 33 percentage points since 2010 when measured within CSES surveys. However, we see that the share of partisans it is not directly proportional to electoral participation (cf. McAllister, 2020). On the contrary: the data for four general elections show the opposite trend. The explanation for this

is that it is becoming more and more common for voters to declare “the party I am voting for is the lesser evil” as the reason for their vote choice (Gyárfášová, Hlatky, Slosiarik, 2024, p. 135). Another background factor, which can be a cause or a consequence, is high volatility. The findings for the 2023 parliamentary election showed that aggregate as well as individual volatility increased between the 2020 and 2023 elections. This relates to both intra- as well as inter-bloc volatility. Intra-bloc volatility continued to be high, especially in the civic-right bloc of Slovak politics. And, compared to elections since 2010 as a whole, intra-bloc volatility increased substantially within the nationalist-left bloc. This was probably a result of Smer-SD’s radicalization on sociocultural and foreign policy issues, which attracted former voters of the radical right. When it comes to inter-bloc volatility, the volatility study showed that voters are also increasingly willing to switch between the civic right and the nationalist left in response to poor government performance. In fact, the movement of voters from the civic right to the nationalist left – largely in response to the inefficiency and mismanagement of the OĽaNO-led governments –in 2023 resulted in the highest level of inter-bloc volatility since 2010. A similar pattern occurred in 2020 when voters who had been disappointed by political corruption and scandals changed from Smer-SD and its coalition partners to opposition parties. Since coalition building largely follows the structure of the two blocs, punishment of the incumbents seems to be the primary factor underpinning inter-bloc volatility (Gyárfášová, Hlatky, Slosiarik, 2024, pp. 129-134).

Table 3: Are you close to any political party? (% of YES responses) and turnout (% of eligible voters)

	Declared closeness to a political party	Turnout in the respective election
2010	66.2	58.8
2016	43.8	59.8
2020	42.3	65.8
2023/2024	33.3	68.6

Source: CSES Slovakia; Statistical Office of the SR.

Those who expressed closeness to a party subsequently indicated which party it was. The findings for all years (and elections) are clear: it is

predominantly the party that the voter chose in the past parliamentary election. Strong partisan biases reflect electoral competition and outcomes. Since the question was always asked after the election, the findings may reflect the choice recalled by the voter, and for each of the parliamentary elections surveyed the party that most voters declared they were close to was usually the one which won the election. One exception is the 2020 election when OĽaNO won by large margin, but immediately after the new government was formed it very quickly became less popular.

4.2 Four types of partisanship

The basic distribution shows that negative party identification prevails: 62.7 percent of respondents in 2022 and 52.3 percent in 2024 said there was a political party from which they felt distant (Table 4). Even though Rose and Mishler’s argument was related to the early years of post-Communist transformation, given the distance most people felt from the communist party/ies representing the previous regime, a widespread feeling of distance from political parties still exists even 30+ years after the regime change. At the same time more than 68.3 percent (2022) and 64.4 percent (2024) of the public do not identify any party as close to them.

Table 4: Distribution of four types of partisanship

	Do you think you are close to any political party; do you have positive feelings for any party?		And is any political party distant from you, do you have negative feelings towards any party?	
	2022	2024	2022	2024
YES	31.7	32.2	62.7	52.3
NO	68.3	64.4	37.2	39.9

Source: FOCUS 2022, 2024.

Comparing the two measurements we see a slight decrease in the relative number of negative partisans (from 63% to 52%) (Table 4). This decline may appear inconsistent but could be explained by the great unpopularity of the former government, since not only the voters of the then opposition, but also many government coalition voters, distanced themselves from OĽaNO.

After the 2023 elections, these strong negative feelings, especially towards OĽaNO (later renamed Slovakia), partially disappeared.

In 2022 the public expressed closeness to the opposition parties Smer-SD and its splinter Hlas-SD. Smer-SD, due to its broad electorate, stayed at the top of the ranking even as a governing party in 2024. The clear front-runner among opposition parties was now Progressive Slovakia: around the time of the 2023 election and afterwards the liberal party became the political home of a large part of those who expressed positive political identification for an opposition party. The dynamics between Smer-SD and Hlas-SD reflects the combining of voters since both parties describe themselves as social democrats and are like connected vessels. In spring 2022 the level of their popularity was about the same, but in the run-up to the 2023 elections Smer-SD caught up and had clearly overtaken Hlas-SD by 2024.

Table 5: Which party do you feel closest to? (open-ended question, only parties which were named by at least 2% of respondents)

	2022	2024
Direction- Social Democracy (Smer-SD)	20.0	27.6
Voice- Social Democracy (Hlas-SD)	18.2	12.1
Republic (Republika)	11.2	7.7
Progressive Slovakia (PS)	9.9	23.1
Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO)	9.3	3.5
Freedom and Solidarity (SaS)	8.8	5.7
Christian Democratic Movement (KDH)	5.1	5.7
People´s Party – Our Slovakia (ĽSNS)	3.5	3.5
We are a Family (Sme Rodina)	3.0	3.0
Alliance (Magyar Szövetség - Maďarská aliancia)	2.5	3.9
Slovak National Party (SNS)	2.0	3.4

Source: FOCUS 2022, 2024.

The ranking of parties perceived as distant changed even more: once OĽaNO was no longer a governing party it lost its relevance and the party most often seen as the most distant is Smer-SD, followed by its main opponent, PS. The main actors have changed, but the findings clearly

show that the pattern of political competition is stable, and preferences concentrate on the main actors representing the two conflicting sides of the political landscape.

Table 6: *Which party do you feel most distant to? (open-ended question, only parties which were named by at least 2% of respondents)*

	2022	2024
OLaNO	36.0	11.0
Smer-SD	29.7	40.3
ĽSNS	18.2	1.7
PS	3.4	28.3
SaS	2.8	3.1
Republika	2.6	3.5
SNS	0	6.6

Source: FOCUS 2022, 2024.

The combination of questions – closeness and distance - makes it possible to compile a four-type scheme as introduced by Rose and Mishler. We also could compare 2022 and 2024 (Table 7).

Table 7: *Four types of partisans (in %)*

	2022	2024
Closed partisans	27.3	27.9
Open partisans	4.4	4.3
Negative partisans	35.5	24.4
Apathetic partisans	32.8	43.5
N=	2.909	1.017

Source: FOCUS 2022, 2024.

The findings indicate that in 2022 negative partisanship (respondents

who do not have any positive affiliation but do have a negative one) was the most common type with almost 36%. This type declined in 2024, which might be due to the fact that both the voters of the coalition as well as the opposition parties' voters still feel close to the party they voted for in the previous year's election.

In 2024 the largest group were apathetic partisans, who do not feel either close or distant to any party. They constituted roughly 44 percent of respondents, which was an increase of more than 10 percentage points since 2022. Apathetic partisans are usually not interested in politics, they are permanently alienated from it and represent the core of non-voters. This means that, using Hirshman's typology (1970), they opt for the exit strategy instead of voice or loyalty. However, democracy needs active, participating citizens, and without them it is hollowed and vulnerable. Thirty-five years after the regime change it is hard to speculate about the legacy of the previous regime, but we assume that partisan apathy is not a result of Communist indoctrination having caused anti-party resentment (cf. Rose, Mishler, 1998) but rather a reflection of frustration and dissatisfaction with the quality of democracy and the performance of democratically-elected political parties. More recent studies apply the term "apartisans": individuals who lack any positive or negative partisanships (Meléndez, 2022).

Closed partisanship means that positive and negative identification goes hand-in-hand. In both years this type stayed at about the same level: 27-28 percent. But we see a shift in what political parties feed the positive and negative poles.

The smallest group are the open partisans. They have a positive identification without feeling a negative distance from any particular party. Open partisans who are positively committed to a political party and do not identify a party that they would never vote for represent a very marginal group.

The four types of partisans differ in their social and demographic profile. Closed partisans are more likely to be found among older people (65+), and we also see a quite significant gender gap: men are more likely to be found among closed partisans, they also have clearer positions on the left-right and liberal-conservative dimensions, and they more frequently disagree with the statement "there is no party to vote for". Negative partisans are more evenly distributed across social groups and ideological orientations. And finally, apathetic partisans are more likely to be found among women than men, and among the unemployed and women at home, young people, and those with a centrist or ambivalent ideological orientation.

The different kinds of partisans are characterized more by their political

preferences measured as voting intention and trust towards party leaders than by demographics and ideological orientations. Closed partisans are above all supporters of the non-parliamentary radical right party Republika, then supporters of Smer-SD (particularly those who trust deputy chair Ľuboš Blaha), and voters of Progressive Slovakia (PS). To a lesser extent, before the last elections, this group included supporters of the then ruling party OĽaNO and then extra-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia.

Negative partisans are more likely to be undecided voters, but otherwise it is a category which is relatively evenly distributed across different social groups. The same could be said about apathetic partisans, most of whom are the non-voters.

Table 8: Four types of partisans vs. voting intentions, 2022/2024 (in %)

	Closed partisanship		Negative partisanship		Open partisans		Apathetic partisans	
	2022	2024	2022	2024	2022	2024	2022	2024
Slovakia (average)	27	28	36	24	4	4	33	44
Smer-SD	49	50	25	12	6	9	20	29
PS	46	48	40	21	2	6	12	26
OĽaNO	42	42	28	27	6	0	25	36
HLAS-SD	42	31	25	13	7	11	27	45
KDH	40	42	34	27	6	0	20	31
SaS	35	43	44	32	3	5	18	19
SNS	21	47	31	17	14	0	33	37
Republika	53	42	26	28	4	2	17	28
Undecided	6	6	51	36	2	1	42	59
Non-voters	3	3	36	28	2	1	59	68

Source: FOCUS 2022, 2024.

In 2024 we see a completely different pattern. 60% of Smer-SD adherents see PS as the party they feel to be distant, and 79% of PS supporters have the same opinion about Smer-SD. The antagonism between the two parties grew enormously from 2022 onwards. So we could conclude that the main

trend is not so much an increase in closed partisanship in general but rather changes in the parties against whom antagonism is directed. In 2024 the adherents of Smer-SD and PS made up half of all closed partisans.

It is remarkable that in addition to the main dividing line - coalition vs. opposition and its main representatives (OĽaNO vs. Smer-SD in 2022 and Smer-SD vs. PS in 2024) - we see a “moving third pole”. In 2022, PS voters, who were at that point adherents of an opposition party without seats in parliament⁵, felt distant from the main governing party OĽaNO but also from the radical right-wing opposition parties ĽSNS/Republika. In 2024 Republika voters perceived themselves as distant from PS movement, but the opposite was not true. The negative perceptions of Smer-SD voters were fueled not only by PS but to an even greater extent by OĽaNO, and also by the other main opposition parties - SaS and KDH. In 2024 OĽaNO supporters' views of Smer-SD represent the strongest rejection of all and is a clear example of closed partisanship. Hlas-SD voters are an interesting case. In 2022 they clearly distinguished themselves against the main government party OĽaNO and to a lesser extent against the extreme right-wing ĽSNS. In 2024, with the party in government, they distance themselves from PS, but less radically than Smer-SD supporters.

All in all, the conflict lines between OĽaNO vs. Smer-SD in 2022 and Smer-SD vs. OĽaNO as well as Smer-SD vs. PS in 2024 represent the greatest antagonisms at the level of voters' perceptions.

⁵ Progressive Slovakia/Spolu (as a coalition) missed the 7 percent threshold in 2020 election and did not enter parliament but one MP elected for another party later switched to PS.

Table 9: Which parties are declared as distant

Party (supporters)	Distant Parties in 2022	Distant Parties in 2024
Smer-SD	OĽaNO (79%), PS (6%)	PS (60%), OĽaNO/Slovensko (21%)
PS	OĽaNO (50%); ĽSNS (25%); Smer (1%)	Smer (79%); SNS (8%), Republika (5%)
OĽaNO /Slovensko	Smer (78%), ĽSNS (15%)	Smer (94%)
Hlas-SD	OĽaNO (65%), ĽSNS (14%)	PS (44%); OĽaNO (14%); Republika (11%)
Republika	OĽaNO (72%), PS (11%)	PS (53%), Smer 18%
SaS	Smer (50%), ĽSNS (31%)	Smer (61%), SNS (18%)
KDH	Smer (52%), ĽSNS (23%), OĽaNO (14%)	Smer (44%), SNS (22%), OĽaNO (13%), PS (13%)

Source: FOCUS 2022, 2024.

LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into party identification and partisanship in Slovakia, several limitations must be acknowledged.

The most relevant one is related to the availability of data. In Slovakia we not only lack a specifically designed survey which would provide more indicators covering the phenomenon analysed but also regular surveys covering at least the key variables mapping closeness and distance towards political parties. In order to conduct deeper analysis it would be necessary to have trend data which would cover all crucial moments of political developments in the country.

Secondly, the study works with standardized questions used in a quantitative survey, analysing party identity in depth, and complementary qualitative research would be very beneficial. Alternative or additional explanations would be available. Furthermore, comparison with other countries with similar development cannot be conducted.

CONCLUSION

This study analysed political partisanship in Slovakia from different angles. Above all we provided evidence that in a longer time perspective, positive identification with political parties in general declined significantly. Whereas in 2010 about two thirds of citizens felt close to a political party, it was only about one third in 2024. At the same time, this has not had any effect on the level of turnout in parliamentary elections. On the contrary, while party identification decreased, turnout increased. Based on other surveys and analyses we could hypothesize that voter choice is becoming less determined by positive party identification, with people very often voting for the lesser evil, or indulging in negative voting, triggered by voting “against” and not “for” a political party. Another closely-related phenomenon is high volatility since there are no stabile alignments – sociostructural and/ or emotional – which could work as stabilizers of electoral behavior. Another explanation – which would need further research – is connected to rising polarization vs. mobilization. Petra Guasti and Aleš Michal, on the basis of their empirical analysis of the relationship between polarization and mobilization within Central Europe, point to the clash of populist and non-populist forces in society, which sets in motion complex dynamics of mobilization. They argue that “The rise of populist movements in CEE has intensified political polarization and created a complex mobilization dynamic both for democracy and for autocracy” (Guasti, Michal 2025, p. 6). In other words: polarization may not strengthen party identification but may increase voting mobilization.

Secondly, we focus on positive and negative partisanship in 2022 and 2024. It is a relatively short time span but marked by very turbulent political developments. We saw some changes in the portion of those who declared that there was a political party distant from them, with a decrease from 63% to 52%. This decline in negative partisanship may appear illogical but it could be explained by the high unpopularity of the 2020-2023 governments, when not only the voters of the then opposition, but also of the coalition, distanced themselves from the main coalition party OĽaNO. After the 2023 elections, this negative emphasis lost relevance for a substantial part of the public.

Thirdly, we applied the four categories of partisanship designed by Rose and Mishler in the earlier years of post-communist transformation as these also reveal the mode of political partisanship in the later period. We find that apathetic and negative partisans are the two most widespread groups.

This information complements the findings about negative partisanship. Low trust in political parties and a decline in party alignment together with massive de-alignment, and sometimes brief and very fluid re-alignment, complete the broader picture of Slovaks' relationship to political parties. After almost four decades since the first democratic "founding" election, there is still no stability in the political landscape. There are many short-lived parties, and this is a barrier to establishing more stable relationships and alignments to a political party.

Finally, we took a closer look on closed partisans because this type embodies the deep polarization which is symptomatic for the contemporary pattern of political competition. Survey results for 2022 and 2024 show that polarization is stable but the parties concerned are changing according to the structure of political competition. Furthermore, as in earlier studies from the previous decade, we find that a certain "tripolarity" of political identity occurs, which means that in addition to the main dividing line corresponding to the coalition-opposition divide, some additional conflict lines exist, such as attitudes towards radical-right parties. Still, looking back on the 2024 political constellation from a 2025 perspective, we could argue that the logic of polarization may reduce the dividing line just to cover the main conflict, and the "third" pole will depend on the ad hoc political context and unexpected alliances. An example of the latter is the September 2025 Constitutional Amendment, which passed because opposition MPs from the Christian Democratic Movement and OĽaNO/Slovakia voted with the parties of the government coalition.

This analysis of political partisanship in Slovakia illustrates that positive and negative partisanship are independent concepts. They cannot be viewed just as the opposite poles of the same scale but are a distinct qualitative phenomenon. More in-depth research would be necessary to uncover how voters' affective ties to parties shape political identities and in-group vs. out-group relations. Going back to the theoretical debates around political partisanship, we could say that Slovakia is closer to a running tally than to an unmoved mover, but retrospective assessment may not be based on cognitive evaluation, but rather the emotional affect and the search for the lesser evil. Furthermore, we should not overlook apathetic partisans, who neither love nor hate but - as a consequence of alienation from politics - simply ignore political parties. This does not mean that they cannot support a party in an election based on a short-term, emotionally charged decision, and new parties above all could successfully address voters who do not have any previous party identification.

Recently, in a time of rising affective polarization, the personalization of party politics, and the growing relevance of emotions as a determinant of political behavior, the importance of understanding political partisanship is growing. Ideas about alternative political identifications emerge and come with new concepts that better reflect political reality. For example, Carlos Meléndez, using the case of Latin America, has developed the category of post-partisan political identities (Meléndez, 2022). Future more in-depth studies will be needed to determine how these current trends determine political partisanship in Slovakia. Additionally, in spite of declining partisanship political parties remain the key players and mediators of representative democracy. Future research should focus more on the link between partisanship (positive as well as negative) and electoral behaviour. Another important focus is on the mechanisms of how voters, and citizens in general, can hold parties accountable based on their rational evaluation of public policies and not just on uncritical partisan identification. Also, the challenge of party – voter alignment would deserve more academic consideration in the future. And finally, many European societies face similar problems, so that analyzing party identification in a broader comparative framework can bring inspiring results and a deeper understanding of current trends.

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DISINFORMATION AS A WEAPON: MEDIA TACTICS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE IN THE UKRAINIAN CONFLICT

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Abstract

This article critically examines disinformation as a strategic weapon in the Russian-Ukrainian war, arguing that it forms a core pillar of hybrid conflict by targeting cognition and perception rather than solely battlefield outcomes. The study aims to define and investigate key research problems: how disinformation campaigns are structured and disseminated; which objectives they pursue (shaping opinions, eroding social cohesion, delegitimizing authorities, justifying aggression); and how effectively Western responses mitigate their impact. Methodologically, it employs qualitative content analysis of state media, digital platforms, and social networks, tracing techniques from fabricated news and manipulated audiovisuals (deepfakes) to coordinate bot/troll operations, and reviews counter-disinformation policies and media-literacy initiatives by the EU, NATO, and allied actors. Major findings show Russia operating as a particularly sophisticated information-warfare actor, with campaigns that manipulate emotions—fact-checking, education, detection technologies, and international cooperation—have value but face structural limits due to rapid content diffusion, platform dynamics, and growing distrust of institutions.

Keywords: *Disinformation, Misinformation, Psychological Warfare, war in Ukraine, social media*

INTRODUCTION

The state of research on the war in Ukraine is already quite extensive; however, the issue of disinformation is still discussed too rarely. Scholars and policy reports describe Russian disinformation as part of a “hybrid war” strategy, operating alongside conventional military action (Pomerantsev, 2019; Paul & Matthews, 2016). Research highlights a “firehose of falsehood” approach – high-volume, multi-platform messaging with little concern

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for consistency – used to distort facts and overwhelm audiences (Paul & Matthews, 2016; EUvsDisinfo, 2023).

Academic and institutional analyses stress the range of media tactics: seizure of TV and radio infrastructure in Crimea and Donbas (Bachmann & Gunneriusson, 2015), use of state broadcasters (RT, Sputnik), and expansion into digital platforms. The Internet Research Agency and bot/troll networks have been widely studied for their role in spreading Kremlin narratives (Starbird et al., 2019; NATO StratCom COE reports). Recent literature also addresses synthetic media: the 2022 Zelenskyy deepfake is cited as an early but significant example (Chesney & Citron, 2019; EUvsDisinfo, 2022).

From a psychological perspective, research shows how propaganda seeks to undermine morale and cognitive stability, sowing doubt, confusion, and distrust. Case studies include fabricated atrocity stories (“crucified boy”), conspiracy theories about U.S. biolabs, and denial campaigns after Bucha (European Digital Media Observatory, 2022). Scholars of political communication emphasize the framing of Ukraine as a “Nazi state” or NATO as aggressor, narratives designed to legitimize Russian actions (Huang, 2015; Carter & Carter, 2023).

Policy and institutional responses are another major strand. Analyses of EUvsDisinfo, NATO StratCom, and StopFake underline the importance of systematic monitoring and fact-checking, though effectiveness is debated due to the speed and volume of disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; ISD, 2025). Recent work stresses the need for media literacy and resilience-building rather than reactive debunking (Adjin-Tettey, 2022).

Overall, the literature shows that Ukraine has become both a laboratory and showcase for modern disinformation warfare. Studies converge on the view that Russian tactics have grown more sophisticated, shifting from broadcast propaganda in 2014 to globalized digital manipulation by 2022–23. Yet research also emphasizes Ukraine’s resilience and the growing body of comparative, cross-national studies that situate the conflict within broader debates on authoritarian propaganda, democracy, and information security. Given the sophistication and persistence of Russian information operations since 2014, there is a pressing need to examine disinformation in the Ukrainian conflict as a weapon that combines media tactics with psychological warfare, in order to better understand its impact on societies, security, and democratic resilience.

The article is structured as follows: the first section reviews theoretical frameworks and relevant literature; the second outlines the methodology; the third analyzes selected case studies of disinformation campaigns; the

fourth discusses vectors of diffusion and their systemic effects; and the final section evaluates countermeasures and draws conclusions about the broader implications of disinformation in hybrid warfare.

1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of disinformation campaigns in the context of the Ukrainian conflict requires a theoretical framework that allows us to understand the hybrid nature of contemporary communication, the psychological dynamics activated by propaganda and the structural role of digital media in producing consensus or disorientation.

In this perspective, it is necessary to conceptually distinguish between disinformation, misinformation and propaganda (Søe, 2021). Disinformation refers to the intentional dissemination of false information with the aim of manipulating opinions or behaviours; misinformation, on the contrary, includes unintentional errors, often amplified by users in good faith; finally, propaganda is configured as a broader set of persuasive techniques, sometimes also based on real facts, but aimed at supporting a cause or a worldview through a selective and manipulated use of information.

A fundamental starting point for understanding the strategic use of information in conflicts is represented by classical studies on propaganda. Harold Lasswell, already in the 1930s, defined propaganda as the management of collective opinion through the manipulation of significant symbols (Lasswell, 1927). Starting from this definition, several theoretical lines have developed, including the “manufacturing consent” by Herman and Chomsky (1988), according to which traditional media act as information filters that serve power, selecting what is shown or hidden based on economic and geopolitical interests. These theories, although developed in a pre-digital context, remain essential to understanding the logic of selection and hierarchization of news even in contemporary media.

With the advent of social media, however, there has been a radical transformation in the production and dissemination of information. Information is no longer conveyed exclusively by centralized actors such as newspapers or television broadcasters but is produced and disseminated horizontally by a multiplicity of subjects, including anonymous users, automated accounts and state actors operating undercover. This shift has produced a fragmented, decentralized information ecosystem that is highly vulnerable to manipulation.

The concept of “information disorder”, proposed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), helps to describe this scenario: it is a system in which disinformation, misinformation and malinformation are intertwined, fuelling an epistemic confusion that makes it difficult to distinguish the true from the false, the fact from the opinion.

Within this ecosystem, the concept of “cognitive warfare” also fits in, which emerged in the NATO context, which encompasses a set of practices aimed at influencing not only what people think, but how they think. From this perspective, disinformation is not limited to spreading false content, but acts on a deeper level, interfering with the cognitive processes of individuals, destabilizing common sense, creating internal divisions and fuelling distrust in institutions (Pomerantsev, 2019).

Within the theoretical framework, it is necessary to further clarify the meaning of the concept of “cognitive warfare”, placing it within both the cognitive science debate and international security doctrines. Within NATO, the term is defined as the set of operations aimed at influencing individual and collective mental processes, affecting perception, attention, memory, and judgment to alter the behaviour of social groups and entire populations. Unlike traditional propaganda or simple information manipulation, the focus of cognitive warfare is the ability to intervene in the cognitive mechanisms that determine the construction of reality, exploiting psychological vulnerabilities rooted in the biology of the nervous system.

The connection with neuroscience and cognitive psychology is essential. Research on reconstructive memory, like Elizabeth Loftus (2005), shows that individuals do not remember information passively, but reconstruct it through pre-existing narrative schemas, facilitating the impact of false visual attributions. On the neurocognitive level, several studies by Antonio Damasio (1994) have highlighted the importance of somatic markers, according to which decisions and judgments are guided by rapid and automatic emotional responses that precede rational processing, making audiovisual content particularly effective in influencing actions. Video narrative, which combines highly emotionally charged images with an immediate narrative structure, is one of the most powerful vectors for activating these mechanisms.

In this sense, contemporary disinformation operations can be interpreted through the framework of “narrative warfare”, described by Ajit Maan and Paul Cobaugh (2018) as a conflict that unfolds through the construction and competition of collective stories. Narrative warfare aims to structure interpretative frameworks through which individuals understand complex

events; the effectiveness of narratives depends on their ability to activate consolidated cognitive schemas and produce identity coherence. The goal is not only to persuade, but to shape the very way the public interprets reality: a logic fully consistent with the definition of cognitive warfare formulated in the NATO context. In this theoretical framework, disinformation is not simply the imposition of false content, but the production of alternative narratives that are cognitively plausible and socially recognizable.

The strategic dimension of cognitive warfare becomes clearer when integrated into Russian security doctrines. Although the Western concept of the “Gerasimov Doctrine” has often been misunderstood, the writings of General Valery Gerasimov (2013) and his emphasis on “nonlinear conflict” have contributed to the perception that Russia views information as an operational domain equal to traditional military domains. More relevant than the Western debate, however, is the Russian notion of *informatsionnoe protivoborstvo*, or “information counteraction”, which encompasses both psychological influence and technical-information warfare. Russian strategic communications structures (StratCom), as established by the General Staff and the Ministry of Defense, operate according to a logic that combines long-term narratives, psychological operations, and the systematic exploitation of digital media. Within this framework, video content, visual representations, and the construction of manipulated audiovisual testimonies play a central role, as they enable simultaneous action on the narrative, emotional, and cognitive levels.

Integrating perspectives from neuroscience, cognitive psychology, war narratives, and Russian military doctrines allows us to understand the complexity of the phenomenon under examination. Disinformation is not limited to communication, but operates as a form of systemic cognitive manipulation, built on processes deeply rooted in the human mind and translated into strategies that state actors incorporate into their geopolitical vision. The explicit inclusion of these elements in the theoretical framework is essential to demonstrating why the campaigns analysed in the Ukrainian case are not isolated episodes, but part of a consolidated paradigm of cognitive conflict, in which the battle for perception becomes a fundamental strategic objective.

In this regard, the approach of social psychology is particularly useful, which highlights how people tend to believe information that confirms their previous opinions, also known as confirmation bias (Casad, 2025), are influenced by narrative framing (framing effect) and react emotionally rather than rationally to content with a strong visual or linguistic impact.

The theoretical framework cannot ignore the analysis of the algorithmic mechanisms of digital platforms (Cinelli et al., 2021). The latter are not neutral: through systems of personalization and amplification of content, they amplify polarizing, emotionally charged, and sensationalist content, creating real echo chambers and contributing to the radicalization of public opinion. In this sense, disinformation is not only a content “external” to the system but becomes structurally integrated into the logic of how digital media works.

This multidisciplinary theoretical framework, which draws on the sociology of communication, cognitive psychology, hybrid warfare studies and algorithmic analysis, forms the basis for the analysis of the case studies that will follow. Understanding the functioning of disinformation campaigns in the Ukrainian conflict requires grasping the interaction between content, tools and recipients within a complex, dynamic and ideologically contested media environment.

A recurring limitation in studies of disinformation in the Ukrainian conflict is the underestimation of the role of cognitive mechanisms that determine the reception of manipulative messages, particularly when they take audiovisual form. The conceptual distinction between misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda alone is insufficient if it is not linked to the ways in which individuals process information. Cognitive psychology research shows that exposure to emotionally charged content reduces the capacity for critical evaluation, as visual information activates rapid judgment processes based on the effect heuristic (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), a mechanism in which the truth value attributed to content depends on its emotional intensity rather than its factual validity.

These processes are particularly relevant for video content, which today constitutes a privileged form of digital propaganda. The cognitive impact of video is amplified by what Paul Messaris (1994) called the “illusion of authenticity”, a tendency to interpret moving images as intrinsically truthful, even when manipulated or decontextualized. Platforms themselves foster this effect through algorithms that reward visual retention and emotional engagement, as illustrated by Zeynep Tufekci (2018) in her analysis of algorithmic radicalization.

The widespread use of deepfake videos, selective editing, short-form content, and clips extracted from context demonstrates how information warfare is not limited to the dissemination of counter-factual messages but exploits the cognitive vulnerabilities inherent in audiovisual reception. In this context, the “truthiness effect”, described by Norbert Schwarz (2004),

particularly stands out: images and clips associated with a claim increase its credibility even when they provide no evidentiary evidence. In the Ukrainian context, many of the campaigns analysed in the literature, from Zelensky's deepfake to the manipulated videos related to the Bukha massacre, built their effectiveness not only on false content, but on the visual form that made them cognitively fluid and immediately processable.

This theoretical orientation also allows for a more solid foundation for the discussion of policy recommendations. Countermeasures are weak when they fail to incorporate an analysis of the cognitive processes that disinformation exploits. Textual media literacy alone is insufficient in an ecosystem dominated by video content; to be effective, educational strategies must include critical decoding of audiovisual language, knowledge of editing techniques, awareness of the cognitive biases that make visual content more persuasive, and training to recognize signs of manipulation that often escape superficial analysis. Education in cognitive resilience must therefore begin by recognizing the psychological vulnerabilities that make populations susceptible to visual propaganda. Without this focus, countermeasures risk being limited to belated debunking, unable to impact the perceptual dynamics activated at the very moment of exposure to the content.

Understanding the dynamics of disinformation in the Ukrainian conflict requires an approach that goes beyond the interpretative frameworks of political science or communication studies, but integrates perspectives from diverse disciplines, whose interactions explain the complex and hybrid nature of contemporary information operations. The phenomenon does not respond to a single logic: it is simultaneously a political device, a psychological process, an algorithmic product, a strategic act of hybrid warfare, and a cultural phenomenon that operates on the construction of common sense. From this perspective, disinformation becomes a point of intersection between disciplines that normally operate on different levels, but which, in the digital context, converge to describe a single space of cognitive conflict.

Communication studies allow us to reconstruct narrative techniques, frame manipulation, and the use of media as tools for building consensus. Cognitive psychology allows us to analyse the mental processes that make certain messages more persuasive, from the effects of the availability heuristic to the relevance of emotion as a catalyst for credibility. Computer science, through the analysis of algorithms and platform architectures, shows how content dissemination is structurally conditioned by automatic

amplification systems and profiling models that prioritize sensationalism over verification.

Studies on international security and hybrid warfare highlight the strategic nature of disinformation, not as a random or spontaneous phenomenon, but as an integral part of military doctrines and psychological operations conducted by state actors. Sociology and anthropology also contribute to explaining the cultural dimension of credibility, the construction of collective identities, and the emergence of interpretive communities within polarized information ecosystems (Rid, 2020).

An interdisciplinary approach not only allows us to interpret the complexity of the phenomenon but also enables us to understand its regulatory implications. Counteracting policies are effective only when they recognize the multilayered nature of disinformation: purely technological interventions are ineffective without an understanding of cognitive biases; literacy initiatives are weak without knowledge of geopolitical influence strategies; platform regulation is incomplete if it fails to consider the role of audiences' political culture and the social construction of information authority. The integration of these disciplines reveals that disinformation is not an anomaly of the media system, but a space where technology, psychology, and political power converge to redefine what appears plausible, credible, and legitimate within a society.

2 SOCIAL MEDIA AS VECTORS OF DISINFORMATION

The examination of the disinformation campaigns implemented during the war in Ukraine highlights an extremely sophisticated, modular and adaptive communication system, in which traditional propaganda techniques merge with the dynamics of the contemporary digital ecosystem. Rather than being disorganized or sporadic, disinformation linked to the conflict presents itself as a coordinated set of operations designed to have a profound impact on both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of the populations involved, and to manipulate the international perception of the war (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

2.1 The Bucha Massacre

One of the first large-scale campaigns was developed in connection with the events in Bucha, a Ukrainian town recaptured by Kyiv forces in March 2022 (Vakulina, 2025). The images of civilians being executed in the streets,

their hands tied behind their backs and showing obvious signs of torture, sparked a strong international reaction, and were immediately cited as evidence of war crimes committed by the Russian military. In response, the Kremlin's media machine activated an aggressive counter-narrative, centred on the accusation that the scene was "staged" by the Ukrainians themselves. Videos and articles by RT and Sputnik claimed that the bodies were disposed of after the Russians withdrew, insinuating that they were actors, before further retracting the narrative by claiming that they were killed by Ukrainian artillery (EUvsDISINFO, 2024).

At the same time, a video was shared on Telegram and Twitter in which the alleged "corpses" could be seen moving slightly, or "raising their hands", as evidence of the staging, except that these were distortions due to the reflection of a drop of water on the window of the car from which the film was taken (Maldita.es, 2022). The widely discussed footage used by Russia to deny the accusations against Bucha comes from a TV broadcast published on April 2, 2022, by the YouTube channel of Espresso.Tv, a Ukrainian TV station (European Digital Media Observatory, 2022). In turn, the video published by Espresso.Tv had originally been published on Facebook the same day by Ilya Novikov, a Russian lawyer of Ukrainian origin who has defended several Russian political prisoners.

The same anti-Ukrainian narratives arrived, via the pro-QAnon channel "The Real Great Awakening"³, even in Italian conspiracy Telegram channels, such as "Cesare Sacchetti"⁴ and "QANON ITALIA"⁵. This highlights how these narratives are propagated through social media through personalities or groups apparently unrelated to pro-Russian narratives.

The attempt was clearly twofold: on the one hand, to discredit the moral authority of Ukraine, and on the other to disorient the global public, instilling systematic doubt about the veracity of any source, even in the face of evidence documented and verified by independent reporters.

2.2 The Biolab Fraud

A second emblematic example is the spread of the theory of US biological laboratories in Ukraine. This narrative has taken hold since March 2022

³ Telegram channel link: https://t.me/Q17_Awakening. The video was posted on April 3, 2022. To find it, simply search for the word "Bucha" in the channel's chat.

⁴ Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/cesaresacchetti>. The video was posted on April 4, 2022.

⁵ Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/QITALIA>. The video was posted on April 4, 2022.

and continues to this day, with the amplification by the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, and with the support of Russian state media and diplomatic accounts (Echols, 2025). In January 2025, Russian state broadcaster Sputnik repeated Zakharova's allegations in a series of posts on the social media platform X. Neither Zakharova nor Sputnik provided documents or sources to support their claims.

The thesis claimed that the United States, in collaboration with the Ukrainian government, had set up secret laboratories for the testing of pathogens, in violation of international conventions. This theory was then taken up by conspiracy influencers, personalities of the US radical right and Italian alternative media, contributing to creating a narrative convergence between anti-vax, anti-NATO and pro-Russian environments. The strategy behind this campaign was clear: to relaunch a frame capable of delegitimizing the West in the eyes of global public opinion, building the image of an aggressive and criminal NATO, in contrast to the Russian narrative of the "defensive war". Once again, disinformation acted not only on the content level, but also on the emotional one, evoking primal fears of contamination, unethical experimentation, and hidden power structures.

But contrary to what one might think, the theory does not originate in Russia, nor in Ukraine, but in the United States, specifically on Gab, a social network frequented by extremists and conspiracy theorists (Vagnozzi, 2022). On February 14, 2022, a user posted a map of the alleged laboratories, but the post went unnoticed. On February 24, the day of the Russian invasion, the Twitter account @WarClandestine reposted the map claiming that Russia was hitting those laboratories and accusing the US of preparing new biological weapons (Collins & Collier, 2022). According to the Anti-Defamation League, the account is owned by Jacob Creech, a former soldier with ties to the QAnon movement, who is also active on Telegram where he spreads disinformation (ADL, 2022). Creech quit his job at a wine shop due to discontent with the health measures and the liberal political environment. On March 3, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the United States "has built two biomilitary laboratories in Kyiv and Odessa, where pathogens are created". On March 8, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova revealed that the "Kyiv regime" has hidden American "biological weapons".

As Thomas Rid, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of the book *Active Measures*, pointed out in an interview with NBC News, the Kremlin has a long history of spreading disinformation and accusing the United States on the subject. For Rid, this type of fake news serves above all

to divert attention from the real use of chemical weapons by Russia (Collins & Collier, 2022). In the early 1980s, the Russian army had used chemical weapons in Afghanistan and Laos, and it was precisely in that period that bizarre theories about mosquitoes genetically modified by the CIA to spread encephalitis had appeared.

For instance, in Italian Telegram channels, the narrative quickly resurfaced - not only in the groups mentioned above but also across numerous channels in other countries, such as 'ULTRA Pepe Lives Matter'⁶. In this sense, as Leonardo Bianchi points out, the entire story of the "Ukrainian biolabs" shows how there is now a total convergence between Russian propaganda and Western conspiracy theories.

In Italy, the narrative gained ground shortly before the Russian invasion of 2022, with users sharing maps of the alleged locations of the biolabs on social networks such as Gab and Twitter/X (Branca, 2023). Propaganda has linked these alleged labs to Russian attacks, presenting them as part of a special operation to thwart a joint US-Ukrainian crime.

One of the most significant and recent phenomena in the disinformation landscape surrounding the Ukrainian conflict is the marked shift in information manipulation toward visual content, particularly short videos, selective editing, and synthetic products generated by artificial intelligence. The spread of deepfakes, such as the notorious case of Zelensky's fake video calling for surrender, is not an isolated incident but the beginning of a structural trend. The ability of audiovisual content to trigger rapid emotional responses makes these materials particularly effective in influence operations. Neuroscience has shown that highly emotionally impactful visual stimuli activate the amygdala even before cognitive control processes kick in, orienting judgment based on immediate, non-analytical impressions. The simple exposure effect, studied by Robert Zajonc (1968), helps us understand why repeated video fragments, even if unreliable or manipulated, end up acquiring a sense of familiarity and therefore verisimilitude.

These dynamics emerge clearly in the cases analysed. The video disseminated to deny the Bucha massacre, constructed through the perceptual illusion of a moving corpse, demonstrates how the visual medium allows for the exploitation of errors in perception that the public tends to interpret as "direct" evidence. Video manipulation operations adopted in the context of the war in Ukraine have highlighted a growing technical ability to imitate textures, voices, and facial movements, creating an information

⁶ Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/PepeMatter>.

environment in which visual authenticity can no longer be taken for granted. The strategic shift from text to video therefore constitutes a structural shift in the way disinformation spreads, as the emotional component typical of audiovisual media amplifies the cognitive mechanisms mentioned above, making factual verification more difficult and delayed after the moment of reception.

3 DIFFUSION VECTORS

In addition to specific narratives, it is important to analyse the diffusion infrastructures. The analysed campaigns have made extensive use of digital platforms such as Telegram, where pro-Kremlin channels reach millions of subscribers and act as primary information hubs. Telegram, due to its technical architecture, allows the publication of highly graphic content without filters, and facilitates virality through the forward chain, or the chain of forwarding between groups and channels (Hern, 2024), like “Donbass italia”⁷, managed by Vincenzo Lorusso, Italian journalist and correspondent from Lugansk for “International Reporters”. The platform is active on several channels, including a website, a Telegram channel with over 42,000 subscribers, and a presence on Rutube.

On Twitter/X, campaigns have been supported by automated and semi-automated networks, with accounts created ad hoc or stolen from other users, capable of artificially promoting manipulative hashtags such as #IStandWithRussia or #UkraineNazis (Fraser, 2022).

Despite the restrictions imposed by the EU (European Council, 2022) on the transmission and distribution of RT (Russia Today) content, the broadcaster continued to operate through a network of proxy sites and alternative platforms (Maristany de las Casas & Reyes, 2025). These sites, often disguised as independent news sources such as “InfoRos” or “NewsFront”, replicate RT’s content, making it difficult for European authorities to effectively monitor and block the spread of Russian propaganda.

Taking the Italian case as an example, RT and other pro-Kremlin actors have exploited Italian culture and media to amplify their narrative. Through collaboration with local cultural organizations, the promotion of events, and participation in television programs, Russian propaganda has found fertile ground in Italy.

⁷ Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/donbassitalia>.

This strategy has allowed them to reach a wider audience and legitimize pro-Russian positions in the Italian public discourse. Such influence operations aim to:

- undermine European support for Ukraine by portraying Russia as a liberator rather than an aggressor.
- legitimize Russia's occupation of Ukrainian territories by presenting Russian authorities in Luhansk and Donetsk as legitimate representatives.
- erode trust in Western media by promoting RT and its affiliates as "truthful" sources of information (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025).

As we have mentioned, confirmation bias is one of the most relevant psychological mechanisms in the spread and persistence of disinformation (Casad, 2025). This is the tendency of individuals to seek out, interpret, and remember information in a way that is consistent with their pre-existing beliefs, while ignoring or downplaying data that contradicts them. In the context of the Ukrainian conflict, this mechanism has been widely exploited by disinformation campaigns.

For example, users already critical of NATO or distrustful of mainstream media were particularly inclined to accept, without verification, theories about American biolabs in Ukraine or claims that the Bucha massacre was staged. Such narratives were embedded within a cognitive framework predisposed to reinforce worldviews centered on conspiracy, Western manipulation, or Russian heroism. Consequently, disinformation not only takes root more readily but also becomes resistant to correction, even when confronted with concrete evidence to the contrary.

Closely related to this psychological concept are echo chambers, closed information environments in which users are exposed almost exclusively to content that reinforces their own opinions, due to algorithmic selection and interaction with homogeneous social networks (Cinelli et al., 2021). These environments amplify confirmation bias and drastically reduce the possibility of encountering alternative points of view or verifiable information.

In the Ukrainian case, Telegram channels, Facebook groups and X profiles linked to the anti-vax, QAnon or anti-establishment world have functioned as real echo chambers. Within these spaces, disinformation narratives have found fertile ground because they are shared and repeated by actors perceived as "reliable" in the context of the information bubble. The case of the influencer Giorgio Bianchi is emblematic: his "counter-hegemonic"

narrative, shared in information environments already hostile to the official version of the facts, has been strengthened through repetition, the selectivity of sources and the absence of contradiction (Global Times, 2022).

Echo chambers, therefore, not only facilitate the spread of disinformation, but multiply its impact, creating epistemically isolated communities that are increasingly difficult to reach with traditional debunking interventions. In the context of the war in Ukraine, there has been an increasing use of what can be defined as “intermediated disinformation”, that is, the dissemination of strategic narratives through third parties who have no apparent direct affiliation with the state authorities involved in the conflict, but who in fact act as privileged vehicles for their communication agenda (Starbird et al., 2019).

This category includes the so-called “gray influencers”: opinion makers, freelance journalists, writers or academics with an aura of independence and credibility, who nonetheless consistently contribute to the dissemination of narratives aligned with the interests of the Kremlin (Guerzoni & Sarzanini, 2022).

Their role is particularly insidious, as it occupies a liminal space between overt propaganda and independent opinion, thereby making it more difficult for the public to discern the boundary between information and manipulation.

One of the most emblematic cases is that of Giorgio Bianchi, an Italian photojournalist with a long experience in covering conflict areas, particularly in Donbass⁸. Bianchi has built his profile on a narrative that presents itself as “counter-hegemonic” (Global Times, 2022), focused on the criticism of the mainstream media and the Western version of events. His approach relies heavily on a rhetoric of “truth from the field”, which mixes documentary content with geopolitical readings strongly unbalanced in favour of the Russian narrative.

Bianchi has often accused the Italian media of manipulating the news in favour of Ukraine and has produced interviews aimed at dismantling Russian responsibility for war crimes, as in the case of the bombing of the hospital in Mariupol. His interviews, however, have been criticized for the selectivity of the sources and for the tendency to provide a unilateral vision, often marked by selective omissions and strategic ambiguities that serve to construct an anti-Western narrative.

⁸Giorgio Bianchi Photojournalist, Telegram channel link: <https://t.me/giorgiobianchiphotojournalist>.

During the war in Ukraine, he often criticized Western media for their alleged distortion of events. For example, he accused RAI (Italian Radio and Television) of having wrongly attributed a Ukrainian missile attack on Donetsk as if it had been carried out by the Russians (l'AntiDiplomatico, 2022). Bianchi also interviewed Marianna Vishegirska, the influencer linked to the Mariupol hospital bombing, in an attempt to refute the accusations against Russia. However, the interview was criticized for omitting crucial details and thereby contributing to the spread of disinformation (Puente, 2022).

In terms of strategic communication, these influencers operate through a combination of rhetorical techniques that include the appeal to authenticity, the systematic critique of official sources, the selective use of direct testimony and the re-proposal of consolidated frames (e.g. aggressive NATO, neo-Nazi Ukraine, mendacious Western media). This narrative arsenal not only favours the legitimization of the Russian position but also undermines the capacity of Western audiences to make an autonomous and informed judgment. Gray influencers thus represent a crucial component of contemporary cognitive operations, which do not so much aim to convince, as to confuse, saturate and paralyze public discourse.

From a theoretical point of view, their role can be interpreted considering the concept of “contested information environments”, in which the distinction between political communication, information, propaganda and disinformation becomes increasingly blurred (Forner, 2024). Within these environments, the truth-value of content is subordinated to its social performativity: what matters is less its accuracy than its credibility, shareability, and alignment with existing identity frameworks. In this context, grey influencers function as intermediaries between the mainstream and alternative infosphere, serving as catalysts of distrust, polarization, and epistemic disintegration.

3.1 The Interconnected Czech-Slovak Information Space as a Regional Vector of Disinformation

Adding to this general picture is a regional peculiarity that directly affects Central Europe, and the Czech-Slovak region. The Czech and Slovakian infospheres display a level of interconnection that makes them unique in the European landscape (Zachová, 2024). Disinformation content often circulates simultaneously in both languages, both in the form of subtitled videos and through the rapid adaptation of the message to local audiences.

Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok host numerous channels and pages that operate across the Czech-Slovak space, where the same manipulated video can be reposted with dual subtitles, leveraging a shared linguistic and cultural background. This intermingling is also reflected in the analysis of comment sections, where a spontaneous blend of Czech and Slovak is frequently observed, indicative of the natural informational permeability between the two contexts. This feature allows disinformation to spread more rapidly, as a narrative introduced in one country can easily penetrate the other without the need for complex translations or cultural adaptations.

This interconnected information ecosystem represents an important variable in the dissemination of the campaigns analysed, as it creates a multiplier effect: manipulative content is relaunched in parallel networks that feed off each other. Pro-Russian or anti-Western networks present in Slovakia, some of which were already established before 2022, have found fertile ground in their linguistic and cultural proximity to the Czech public, contributing to the rapid intensification of narratives hostile to Ukraine. The Czech-Slovak context thus emerges as a shared information space, characterized by the continuous circulation of visual content, often difficult to distinguish between the two national sides and consequently highly exposed to the cross-border dynamics of contemporary disinformation.

An analysis conducted by GLOBSEC in “Russian Embassy in the Slovak Information Space” (2024) examines the Russian Embassy in Slovakia’s communication strategies during 2024, focusing specifically on content shared through its Facebook and Telegram channels. Through a selection of fifty posts with the highest engagement between August and October 2024, complemented by a longitudinal analysis spanning the entire year, the report identifies the narratives systematically promoted, as well as the amplification network connecting the embassy to profiles, groups, and media outlets—both national and transnational—engaged in disseminating pro-Kremlin propaganda.

The report highlights how the embassy’s Facebook account (Vel’vyslanectvo Ruska na Slovensku / Посольство России в Словакии), with over 68,000 followers, and its Telegram channel, with approximately 4,900 subscribers, operate not only as institutional communication tools, but as active nodes of a broader information ecosystem, which exploits feedback interconnections to spread disinformation, revisionist narratives, conspiracy theories, and divisive messages regarding the conflict in Ukraine. Monitoring work shows how symbolic events—historical anniversaries,

commemorations, and anniversaries—are systematically used to relaunch messages favouring the Russian narrative, often blending identity values, historicist rhetoric, and cultural references to strengthen the emotional and symbolic appeal of the propaganda. This tactic anchors communication in a Slovak socio-cultural context, favouring the legitimization of pro-Russian views within a domestic discourse.

Another key aspect highlighted by the report concerns the existence of a very large network of outlets, pages, and groups—estimated in the hundreds—that operate with a pro-Russian narrative and collaborate with or amplify the embassy’s content: a parallel media ecosystem that blends traditional media, social media, and less institutional digital channels. This amplification pattern demonstrates how propaganda is not confined to official channels but is embedded in a broader context of connected information actors, making it more difficult to distinguish between diplomatic discourse, media content, and political-ideological propaganda. GLOBSEC’s analysis highlights that the actions of the Russian embassy in Slovakia go far beyond mere cultural or institutional diplomacy: they constitute a deliberate strategy of media and informational influence, part of a transnational “information warfare” project that exploits the dynamics of the Slovak context—historical, linguistic, political, and technological—to convey narratives favourable to Russia and hostile to Bratislava’s European and Atlantic integration.

Among the vectors of dissemination amplifying manipulative narratives related to the Ukrainian conflict, the shared information space between the Czech Republic and Slovakia is particularly relevant. This shared information space is characterized by a level of linguistic, cultural, and media interconnection unique in the European Union. This proximity produces a permeability effect that allows disinformation content to circulate across both national contexts more rapidly than in other European regions. The near-total mutual intelligibility of the two languages facilitates the immediate reuse of manipulated videos, extracted statements, montages, and synthetic content, often distributed bilingually or with simultaneous subtitles in both languages.

The Czech-Slovak digital environment is also characterized by a convergence of communication practices, manifested in the intermingling of languages in comments, the intertwining of social groups, the algorithmic cooperation that unites the feeds of users from both countries, and the presence of pages, channels, and influencers operating indiscriminately on both information markets. This interdependence allows disinformation

to exploit a nearly unified ecosystem, which acts as a single echo chamber capable of amplifying and legitimizing pro-Russian narratives. Analyses conducted by research centers such as GLOBSEC demonstrate that the Russian Embassy in Slovakia systematically uses this regional space to relaunch content that, once inserted into Czech circulation, finds additional channels of dissemination and broader forms of social validation.

This dynamic offers interesting comparisons with other European cases, such as the cross-border information system connecting Italy and Italian-speaking Switzerland or, more broadly, regional ecosystems that share a common language or strong cultural proximity. The Czech-Slovak region, however, stands out for the intense circulation of manipulated video content, fostered by an audience accustomed to consuming media in both languages without a perception of discontinuity. In this sense, the region constitutes a unique vector of dissemination within the EU, where the propagation of disinformation benefits from a linguistic and social infrastructure that multiplies its speed, reach, and cognitive resilience.

3.2 The Rise of Video-Based Disinformation and Synthetic Media

The recent evolution of the information ecosystem demonstrates a clear shift toward forms of disinformation primarily based on video content, a phenomenon that represents a structural transformation and not a simple change in format. Manipulative narratives related to the war in Ukraine have made extensive use of decontextualized clips, selective editing, artificial audiovisual products, and deepfakes generated by artificial intelligence models, which exploit users' cognitive weaknesses particularly effectively (Chesney & Citron, 2019). Unlike textual disinformation, videos trigger immediate and difficult-to-modulate emotional processes, as rapid visual processing engages neurological circuits, such as the amygdala, responsible for automatic and pre-reflexive responses. Video narratives therefore possess an intrinsic capacity to inspire intuitive credibility, accentuated by the simple exposure effect that increases familiarity and, consequently, the perception of the veracity of repeated content.

In the context of the war in Ukraine, this shift is evident both in state-sponsored influence operations and in the spontaneous circulation of manipulated content by online communities. The deepfake of President Zelensky, released in the first weeks of the invasion, represents one of the first examples of the strategic use of synthetic media to attempt to undermine the morale of the Ukrainian population and influence international public

opinion. Similarly, clips related to the Bucha massacre, manipulated to create visual ambiguity around the presence of bodies in the streets, demonstrate how audiovisual media allows for the construction of alternative narratives by exploiting perceptual margins that users interpret as direct evidence. The growing availability of video generation tools and the ease with which short clips can be extracted, reassembled, and refined contribute to making the distinction between authentic and synthetic content increasingly complex.

The emergence of video as the dominant vector of disinformation requires a rethinking of countermeasures, as textual denials or simple fact-checking are often insufficient compared to the persuasive power of images. Fact-checking techniques arrive temporally after the immediate emotional impact, and this structural gap between perception and correction contributes to the persistence of false content even after the deception has been exposed. Video thus emerges as the centre of gravity of contemporary disinformation, capable of shaping public perception through a direct interaction with the neurocognitive processes that govern the intuitive assessment of reality.

4 EFFECTS OF DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS

Equally significant is the capacity of these campaigns to produce systemic effects. First, they operate through cognitive saturation: flooding the information environment with conflicting versions of the same events generates confusion, disorientation, and an erosion of trust across all information sources.

This effect, known as the “firehose of falsehood”, was described by Paul and Matthews (2016) as a strategy privileging quantity and repetition over coherence or plausibility. In many respects, Russia’s contemporary propaganda recalls Soviet-era techniques, marked by intensive information manipulation and the subtle induction of behaviors favorable to propagandists, often without recipients’ full awareness.

Second, campaigns often trigger real reputational crises. On 4 August 2022, Amnesty International published a report entitled “Ukrainian fighting tactics endanger civilians” (Amnesty International, 2022), which claimed that the Ukrainian armed forces had endangered civilians by placing bases and weapons systems in residential areas, including schools and hospitals. The Amnesty International report is not a form of disinformation per se, as it was written by one of the most authoritative international human rights organizations, and its conclusions – although highly controversial – were based on field observations. However, the way in which the content

was used, decontextualized and amplified by Russian media and other pro-Russian information actors represents a classic example of disinformation instrumentalization (Meduza, 2022). Although the report stressed that such tactics did not justify Russia's indiscriminate attacks, its publication sparked strong reactions (Saric, 2022). Russian state media such as RT and Sputnik gave the report a huge boost, ignoring the criticism Amnesty received from experts, Ukrainian activists, and even its own members. The news was presented as "definitive proof" of Ukrainian guilt, without mentioning the context or the disproportion of violations between the two sides (The Moscow Times, 2022).

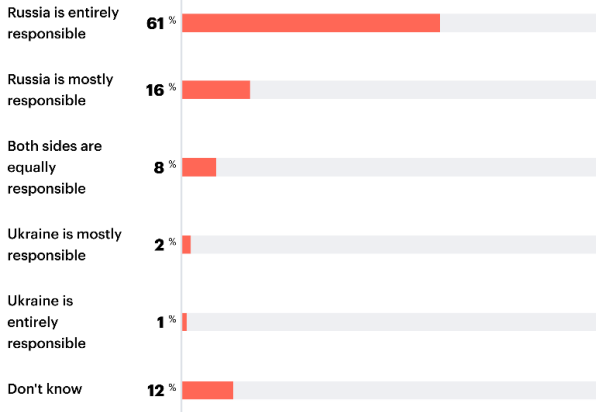
The report was widely criticized by Ukrainian experts and officials, who said it was misleading and potentially useful for Russian propaganda. Amnesty International's director in Ukraine, Oksana Pokalchuk, resigned in protest, saying the report had become a tool of Russian propaganda (Robinson, 2022). A leaked internal review later called the report's language "ambiguous" and "imprecise", raising further questions about its legal validity (Posener, 2024). The report has been used by Russian propaganda to discredit Ukraine and Western human rights organizations, presenting it as evidence of Ukrainian violations and calling into question the credibility of Western NGOs. These dynamics demonstrate that disinformation does more than just falsify facts: it produces alternative realities, generates internally coherent narratives, appeals to deep emotions, and organizes the collective perception of the world (Alhajjar, 2022).

The campaigns under examination are not mere rhetorical exercises but performative acts of communication aimed at reshaping geopolitical realities by redrawing alliances, legitimacy, and identity. The Ukrainian case thus represents an advanced laboratory of cognitive warfare, where boundaries between communication, psychology, technology, and diplomacy are increasingly blurred. Yet the measurable effects of these efforts in the West appear limited: a recent YouGov UK survey of over 8,000 respondents found that 61% consider Russia solely responsible for the conflict, 8% attribute blame to both sides, and only 1% hold Ukraine responsible (YouGov UK, 2025).

Figure 1: *Who is responsible for conflict in Ukraine?*

Do you think that Russia or Ukraine are more responsible for starting the current conflict in Ukraine?

All adults (8173 GB adults - 19 February 2025)



YouGov | What the world thinks | yougov.co.uk

Source: YouGov UK, 2025

Similarly, a Reuters/Ipsos poll conducted on March 3–4 found that an overwhelming majority of Americans reject the notion that Ukraine bears greater responsibility for Russia’s war: 70% of respondents disagreed with this claim, while only 7% supported it (Reuters, 2025).

Figure 2: What Americans think of Trump's Ukraine rhetoric

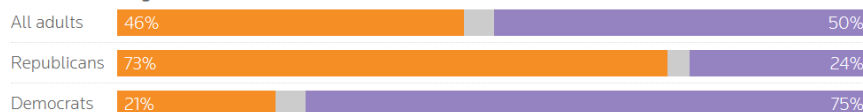
What Americans think of Trump's Ukraine rhetoric

● Agree ● Don't know/Didn't answer ● Disagree

Ukraine is more to blame for starting the war



The U.S. should get a share of Ukraine's minerals



A Reuters/Ipsos poll of 1,174 U.S. adults was conducted March 3-4, 2025. The margin of error is +/- 3% for all adults and +/- 5% for other groups.

Source: Reuters 2025

However, an analysis made by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue highlighted the role of some Italian journalists active in Donbass and Russia in the spread of Russian propaganda in Italy, representing not only a media problem, but also a threat to national security.

In the analyzed period, i.e. January - March 2025, contents linked to the connected networks "Donbass Italia", "Contronarrazione" and "Russia non è il mio nemico" (translated: "Russia is not my enemy") reached 1.84 million users on X, generating 4.03 million impressions (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2025). This demonstrates the ability of these campaigns to permeate the Italian digital discourse and influence the political debate.

Despite EU sanctions against RT, the channel maintains a presence in Europe through events and documentaries, exposing flaws in the enforcement of restrictive measures. The pressing challenge is to strengthen control mechanisms and develop more effective strategies to counter disinformation. At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume these efforts target only Western audiences. In recent years, Russia has significantly expanded its activities in the Global South, achieving notable results by long employing information operations as a central instrument of its foreign policy.

Despite restrictions by several Western platforms, Russian state media such as RT continue to enjoy a substantial global presence, claiming to reach around 700 million people in over 100 countries via 22 satellites and more than 230 operators. RT is particularly influential in Latin America, the Middle East, and North Africa, where it operates through traditional media infrastructures and partnerships with local outlets. Africa is a good example of Russia's growing presence. In addition to the growing Russian physical presence on the continent, which we have already discussed above, disinformation operations are constantly growing. Russia has managed to skilfully exploit post-colonial resentments, especially towards the French in the Francophone Sahel and Central Africa, positioning itself as an alternative to the West and a natural ally of African countries in their anti-colonial struggle (Presl, 2024).

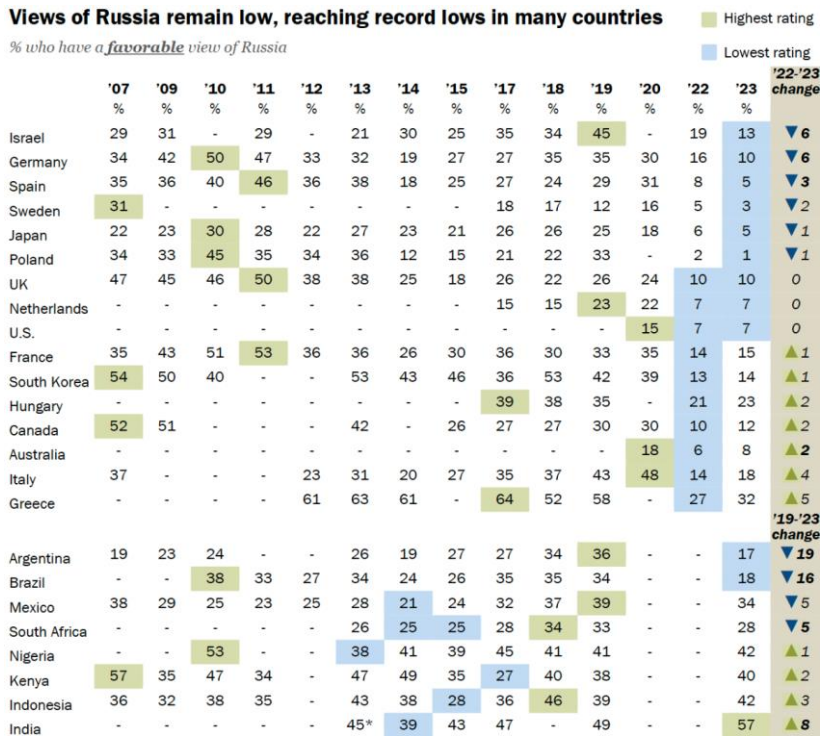
As a result, there is unprecedented support for the Kremlin in several African states. This is evident in the demands of Burkina Faso citizens for Russian intervention in the country, and in Niger's demands to replace ties with France with a Russian partnership (Voice of America, 2022). In a demonstration of Russia's growing prestige in Africa and the effectiveness of its information operations, in March 2022, 26 African countries refused to support a United Nations resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Mathekga, 2023). But Russia is achieving similar results and information successes in the Middle East. Thanks to its presence in Syria, it has invested for years in creating platforms aimed at Arab audiences and has actively used disinformation to promote its interests. For example, it has launched disinformation campaigns to divert responsibility for chemical attacks in Syria from the Syrian regime to the West or NGOs. RT Arabic, the Arabic-language branch of Russia Today, is one of the most popular news sites in the region with as many as 15 million monthly views, behind only Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya⁹.

RT Arabic's significant online presence, which often publishes content at two or three times the speed of Al-Jazeera or the BBC, means that pro-Kremlin propaganda is broadcast directly to younger generations in the Arabic-speaking world (Politico, 2023). The Arab Youth Survey 2022 found that nearly one-third (31%) of young Arabs aged 18–24 attribute the war in Ukraine to the United States and NATO, while only 18% place the blame on Russia (Borshchevskaya, 2023).

⁹Data taken from Similar Web, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/arabic.rt.com/#traffic>.

The analysis of a greater success, beyond the borders of the West, by Russian disinformation is also confirmed by the Pew Research Center¹⁰. While efforts to counter Russian disinformation are succeeding in Western countries, the situation in the global South is very different.

Figure 3: Views of Russia



Source: Pew Research Center, 2023

¹⁰Pew Research Center, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2023/07/10/overall-opinion-of-russia/>.

5 COUNTERMEASURES

In a context in which narratives multiply, fragment and often contradict each other, democratic societies are exposed to a form of permanent cognitive stress, which undermines not only the ability of citizens to distinguish truth from falsehood, but also the very stability of public debate as a shared space for rational deliberation. Democracies, by their nature open, pluralistic and tolerant of dissent, thus become privileged targets for operations that exploit these very characteristics to create division, polarization and decision-making paralysis.

One of the most serious consequences of disinformation is the erosion of trust (Di Domenico & Ding, 2023): trust in the media, perceived as biased or manipulated; trust in political representatives, accused of acting on ideological or opaque bases; trust even in the very concepts of truth, objectivity and competence. In some contexts, the systematic dissemination of false or distorted news has led to the emergence of a climate of generalized suspicion, in which every source is perceived as potentially interested or compromised.

This radical scepticism, although born as a legitimate reaction to the manipulation of information, can quickly degenerate into information cynicism, making the population vulnerable to any alternative narrative if it presents itself as “against” the official version (Lee & Jones-Jang, 2022). This is a dangerous epistemic short circuit, because it paves the way for the delegitimization of democratic institutions and favours the rise of populist, authoritarian or openly pro-Russian forces. In response to this scenario, in recent years there has been a strengthening of institutional and civil initiatives aimed at combating disinformation in a systemic way. At the European level, one of the most significant projects is EUvsDisinfo, a platform born in the context of the European External Action Service¹¹ and aimed at monitoring, analysing and debunking pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns targeting EU member states.

Through linguistic tracking, narrative analysis and cataloguing of recurring messages, EUvsDisinfo not only exposes the main falsifications, but also highlights their rhetorical dynamics, privileged recipients and strategic objectives. In parallel, numerous collaborative fact-checking networks have grown, often organised along transnational and inter-organisational lines. Initiatives such as the European Fact-Checking Standards Network¹²

¹¹The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/_en.

¹²European Fact-Checking Standards Network, <https://efcsn.com/>.

or the European Digital Media Observatory project¹³ represent concrete examples of how the response to disinformation must necessarily be shared, interdisciplinary and multilevel.

These initiatives, however, clash with some structural limits:

- first, the speed with which disinformation spreads, especially on social networks, is often greater than the capacity of verification structures to react;
- second, simple debunking is not always sufficient to change already rooted beliefs, especially in the presence of cognitive biases, strong ideological affiliations or closed information environments;
- third, the legitimacy of the same actors responsible for debunking can be questioned by those who see these practices as a form of disguised censorship. For these reasons, combating disinformation requires more than reactive fact-checking but must be accompanied by a structural investment in media education and in the cognitive resilience of citizens.

Media education, understood as the development of critical capacity in the analysis of sources, in the understanding of the mechanisms of information production and in the decoding of narrative frames, represents one of the most promising and long-lasting responses to the problem of disinformation (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). It must be conceived not only as a school module or an occasional campaign, but as a structural component of educational systems, capable of forming informed, aware and responsible citizens. In parallel, it is necessary to promote forms of digital civic literacy also for the adult population, through accessible tools, community initiatives, public programs and partnerships between institutions, media and civil society. Cognitive resilience is cultivated not merely through information delivery, but above all through the cultivation of critical thinking, epistemic empathy and awareness of one's own cognitive limits.

An effective strategy to counter misinformation must be built on an understanding of the cognitive mechanisms that make individuals vulnerable to manipulation, since purely informational or normative interventions are insufficient when faced with the pre-reflective power with which emotional and visual content influence perception. Psychological research has demonstrated that the human mind processes information through two complementary systems: one intuitive and fast, and the other analytical and

¹³European Digital Media Observatory, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-digital-media-observatory>.

slow. Misinformation primarily affects the former, exploiting immediate emotional responses, cognitive shortcuts, and heuristics that operate outside of conscious control (Kahneman, 2011). Images and videos activate the amygdala even before rational evaluation occurs, generating a sense of intuitive authenticity that makes subsequent informational corrections less effective (Damasio, 1994).

The phenomenon of cognitive “fluency,” according to which individuals tend to consider as true what appears familiar or easily processed, further contributes to the persistence of misinformation. This mechanism has been systematically described by cognitive psychology and confirmed by numerous studies on reconstructive memory (Schwarz, 2004; Loftus, 2005). For this reason, simple fact-checking strategies, while necessary, often fail to reverse established beliefs, as the correction occurs after the initial emotional impact. Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) show that misinformation can leave “memory residues” that continue to influence judgment even after refutation.

The paper’s final recommendations must therefore be reformulated to take these cognitive constraints into account. Effective media literacy cannot be limited to the transmission of knowledge on platforms or reliable sources but must include a component of education in the perception and recognition of one’s own cognitive vulnerabilities. In contexts most exposed to visual propaganda, such as Ukraine and neighbouring countries, counteraction strategies must consider the ecology of online attention. “Pre-bunking” and visual literacy are particularly effective because they intervene at the stage when users form their first impression of the content, before its cognitive crystallization. Studies on the preventative treatment of deepfakes show that visual warnings are more effective when applied at the platform level and when they explain not only that the content may be fake, but also why it is manipulable (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

From this perspective, countermeasures cannot be presented as simple operational recommendations, but rather as part of an integrated approach that recognizes the neurocognitive dimension of disinformation. Only by connecting verification, training, and regulatory policies to the dynamics that govern human judgment (emotion, memory, fluency, and narrative structure) is it possible to reduce the lasting impact of manipulative campaigns. The goal is not only to correct the falsehood, but to cognitively make it more difficult for it to take hold.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, disinformation is not a marginal or incidental phenomenon but a structured, strategic, and pervasive instrument embedded at the core of contemporary hybrid warfare. Far from serving merely as propaganda, disinformation campaigns function as vectors of cognitive warfare, reshaping perceptions, influencing collective behavior, destabilizing democratic societies, and molding consensus or dissent on a global scale.

In response to the first research question, the analysis shows that disinformation in the Ukrainian context revolves around three core frames: the delegitimization of Ukraine as a sovereign state (e.g., accusations of Nazism, claims of using civilians as human shields); the demonization of NATO and the West (e.g., alleged secret biolaboratories, claims that NATO expansion caused the war); and the construction of a defensive narrative for Russia (e.g., portraying military operations as necessary to protect Donbass populations). These narratives circulate across multiple channels, from Russian state media to social platforms, influencers, bots, troll farms, and third-party Telegram channels. Particularly effective has been the strategy of 'intermediated disinformation,' which leverages the apparent credibility of independent voices to conceal pro-Russian messaging.

Regarding the second question on public opinion, findings indicate uneven impacts. In Western countries, support for Ukraine remains broadly stable, though pockets of pro-Russian sentiment persist, alongside declining public attention to the conflict. Beyond the West—particularly in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—Russian propaganda has been more effective, exploiting anti-Western narratives and post-colonial grievances to foster geopolitical alignment. Even within Western societies, disinformation has polarized debate and eroded trust in democratic institutions and traditional media, leaving information environments fragmented and vulnerable.

In addressing the third question, the study demonstrates that disinformation campaigns pursue psychological (undermining resilience and morale), political (weakening domestic and international consensus for Ukraine), geopolitical (eroding Western unity while expanding Russian influence in the Global South), and strategic (obstructing Western responses) objectives. Their most insidious effect lies in cognitive saturation, producing an information space dominated by systematic confusion that blurs distinctions between truth and falsehood.

Finally, the fourth question reveals that countermeasures remain uneven and insufficient. Initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo, fact-checking networks, and media literacy programs provide valuable tools of democratic resilience, yet their effectiveness is constrained by the speed, scale, and adaptability of disinformation campaigns. Ex post debunking often arrives too late and is further limited by cognitive biases and entrenched beliefs. The real challenge is therefore systemic and cultural: strengthening societies' cognitive resilience, embedding critical media education, and fostering transparent, responsible, and cohesive communication ecosystems.

Ultimately, the Ukrainian conflict exemplifies a 21st-century paradigm of warfare in which the struggle for narrative dominance is as decisive as control of territory. The future of democracies thus depends not only on defending physical borders but also on safeguarding the symbolic and cognitive domains of truth and critical judgment.

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IS RELIGIOSITY LINKED TO VOTER PREFERENCE? THE HUBER CENTRALITY OF RELIGIOSITY SCALE AND POLISH VOTERS

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Abstract

The purpose of conducting the present study was to attempt to link religiosity with the electoral preferences of Poles, as expressed during the 2023 parliamentary elections. In view of the diversification of religious practices in Polish society and the intensification of secularisation tendencies, it was noted that it is religiosity and attitudes to it that may constitute the contemporary axis of socio-political divisions in Poland. Since the indicated religiosity is gradable, and the results of analyses based on the declarative sphere do not provide a solution to the indicated issue, the Huber Centrality of Religiosity Scale was used in the research. The statistical analysis of the survey conducted after the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland (N=1069) allowed us to solve the following research questions: Q1: Are the electoral preferences of Poles related to their religiosity? Q2: Which electoral committees are supported by the most religious voters? Q3: Which electoral committees are supported by the least religious voters? The analysis as a whole indicates that the religiosity of Poles in the declarative sphere differs from their actual religiosity, and that the degree of religiousness of the respondents determines the diversity of their electoral preferences.

Keywords: Religiosity, Voting preferences, Voting behaviour, General elections, Centrality of Religiosity Scale.

INTRODUCTION

According to Yilmaz Esmer and Thorleif Pettersson (2007), religion plays a significant role in shaping election outcomes. This role is stronger if the stronger is religiosity in the country and society (Haynes, 1998; Stark, Finke, 2000). Poland is a country with strong religious traditions, where for centuries Christianity and especially Catholicism played an important role in social and political life (Dzidek, 2007; Kracik, 2010). During the most difficult times for Polish statehood, i.e. both the 123 years of partitions, the period of the two world wars and later, the rule of the communist regime, the Church was the mainstay of Polish freedom, when the word 'Pole' came

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to be equated with the word 'Catholic' (Cywiński, 1982; Gaworski, 2019; Pieniężny, 2024; Płachecka, 2022; Żaryn, 2003).

Despite the significant role of the Church in the political transformations made in Poland in 1989 (Kowalczyk, 2012), recent years have seen a diversification of religious practices in Polish society with a marked intensification of secularisation tendencies (Błaszczczyński, 2024; Mariański, 2024). As Irena Borowik (2016, pp. 10-12) points out, these tendencies manifest themselves significantly in four areas: (1) a decrease in participation in religious services and reception of Holy Communion, (2) the similarity of the model of religiosity of young women, to the model previously characteristic of young men, (3) frequent protests against the activities of the Catholic Church, and (4) criticism towards the Church as an institution, clergy and catechists. Arkadiusz Fordoński (2021, p. 11) further points out that Polish society has already transformed from a 'society of fate', commonly sharing religious values and norms, into a pluralised, also religiously 'society of choice'.

The issue of introducing a strong separation of the state from the Church, i.e. from the institution representing the religious sphere, was also raised more and more boldly in political discourse, especially in the election campaign before the 2023 parliamentary elections (Szczerbiak, 2025). The most significant demands of this type are: the desire to remove crosses from public space, the desire to remove or limit religious teaching in schools, to terminate the concordat or to close down religious broadcasting stations (Pieniężny, 2024, p. 45-46).

Research in recent years has increasingly indicated that religiosity does not unite but divides Poles (Pieniężny, 2024; Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik, 2017). Therefore, the social cleavages theory, proposed by Stein Rokkan and Seymour Lipset (1967), is taken as the starting point for the present discussion. As the studies of the cited authors indicate, the religious divide is an important sociopolitical division for voter preferences (state vs. church as one of the four main axes of sociopolitical divisions). Confirmation of this thesis as a permanent element of Polish reality is visible in research on Polish voters over the years, almost from the beginning of the systemic transformation initiated in 1989 (Borowik, 2010; Grabowska, 2003; Jasiewicz, 1993; Mariański, 2016).

However, it is important to note that the declarative sphere does not indicate the causes of the analysed problem, as analyses indicate that people declaring themselves to be religious vote in different ways, as the understanding of religiosity itself is diverse and gradable (Secler, 2016;

Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik, 2017). In view of such a transformation of the understanding of religiosity in Polish society, the use of the Huber Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS), which allows for the gradation of religiosity (Huber, 2003; Zarzycka, 2007), should be considered justified. It is the fact that religiosity (its understanding and relevance in the perception of individuals) is gradable, and at the same time differentiates Polish voters, that has provided the stimulus for the present study.

The aim of the research was therefore to attempt to differentiate the religiosity of Poles and its relationship with their voting preferences expressed during the 2023 parliamentary elections. After the indicated election, a survey was conducted on a group of adult Poles (N=1069), the statistical analysis of which allowed to solve the following research problems: Q1: Are the electoral preferences of Poles related to their religiosity? Q2: Which electoral committees are supported by the most religious voters? Q3: Which electoral committees are supported by the least religious voters? The following hypotheses were attempted to be answered: H1: The degree of religiosity of voters differentiates their electoral preferences. H2: The most religious voters prefer groupings that are conservative in ideology. H3: The least religious voters choose groupings that are ideologically liberal.

1 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

As indicated in the introduction, the social cleavage theory proposed by Rokkan and Lipset (1967) is the starting point for the reflections carried out. Its authors focused on a historical perspective in the study of their contemporary social and political divisions. In doing so, they pointed out that history, and especially the conflicts rooted in it, are the determinants of these divisions. Stein Rokkan (1962) noted that there is a certain framework within which voters make their decisions.

This theory assumes three main points: (1) Societies differentiate into groups along demographic or socio-economic dividing lines. (2) Within these groups there is a commonly shared collective identity and shared values and attitudes. (3) There are also some organisational expressions of collective identity that make collective action possible (Bartolini, Mair, 1990).

Lipset and Rokkan attempted to conceptualise the relationship between major historical processes, divisions in society and the institutionalisation of the party system, and analysed in historical perspective the processes of democratisation and the formation of party systems taking place in Western

European states (Potulski, 2019). In doing so, they noted that there are four main categories of socio-political divisions in contemporary Western European states that have not changed since the 1920s. Lipset and Rokkan have succumbed to a phenomenon that can be compared to the freezing of party divisions even after the indicated social conflicts have ceased. One such division (alongside that between centre vs. periphery, agriculture vs. industry and landlords vs. workers) was that between state and church. As the authors of the theory pointed out, this was a division on an ideological level, in which the interests of the church striving for certain moral standards are juxtaposed with the state's desire to control all areas of life. This conflict also manifested itself in economic issues (Lipset, Rokkan, 1967).

Importantly, however, especially today, the transformation associated with the formation of the information society implies a transformation of the social structure and thus the emergence of new lines of social division and related conflicts. Conflicts related to the formation of the information society may become politicised, affecting the nature of political competition (Potulski, 2019).

Although the theory originated many years ago, having been criticised quite strongly and legitimately in the later period (Dalton, Flanagan, Beck, 1984; Franklin, Mackie, Velen, 1992; Knutsen, 2006; Nieuwbeerta, Ultee, 1999), it is so well established in the social sciences and historically enduring in its basis and nature that it can be constantly reinterpreted and adapted to specific, changing social and political systems. It is this feature that is its strongest point.

It is not the disappearance of the left-right axis that has given rise to criticism of Rokkan's and Lipset's theory, but precisely the emergence of new axes of division, which are also visible in Poland, which is also the subject of this work. It would seem that in the face of the rapid development of the world, great social changes and revisions of key sociopolitical issues had to and still have to take place. Thus, it seems that in Poland it is the political parties that shape the conflicts or at least are active players in them, when it comes to defining the meaning of these conflicts and their boundaries. As Hubert Tworzecki (2019) points out, polarisation in Poland has taken on the character of top-down polarisation and was, or even still is, driven by a large segment of the political class. In this context, a valuable observation from the point of view of the present work was made by Wojciech Łukomski and Ireneusz Sadowski (2013), who noted that institutions such as trade unions and churches are often vehicles for alignments in opposition to each other, and thus that religion is used to build support among the electorate

(both in a positive way, which involves winning over religious voters, and in a negative way, which involves attracting voters who are negative towards religion or a religious institution).

A review of this theory through the prism of new socio-political divisions in Poland (Zarycki, 2007), focusing on the electoral act itself, indicates the reason for the formation and transfer of political support expressed by the electoral act, in the face of the mixing of 'old' and 'new' sociopolitical divisions in contemporary Polish society. The emergence of new problems, or rather new political issues, while increasing the importance of cultural values, including religious values, at the expense of economic values (Hooghe, Marks, 2018), changes the nature of political conflicts. It is no longer a struggle to improve the quality of existence in the material sense, but a struggle for values, as confirmed by research conducted in Poland (Jasiewicz, 2022; Pieniężny, 2025; Szczerbiak, 2025).

Although many years have passed since the emergence of Rokkan's and Lipset's theories, what has not changed is the fact that social and political divisions exist around momentous issues. However, this momentousness is nowadays understood differently, and issues once considered trivial, such as the presence of religious symbols in public space, for example, are rising to become crucial for societies. However, these divisions play a politically identical role as at the time of the emergence of the theory of social divisions, allowing not a rejection of the theory, but a more advisable reinterpretation adapting the theory to contemporary social and political reality. From the perspective of this work, it is also very relevant that Rokkan and Lipset focused on the relationship between state and church as a social conflict that gives a possibilities to political competition in the contemporary world. This relationship has a particular expression in a rapidly secularising Poland, where religion itself occupies a differentiated place in the consciousness of individuals.

The strength of Rokkan and Lipset's concept of linking individual voting behaviour, with something understood as 'historical memory', or relating it to large, socially influential historical processes, is undeniable. The theory is universal and has not become obsolete, making it useful in explaining the electoral preferences of Poles. It draws attention to one of the key divisions on the 'secular state' - 'religious state' axis, which can be constructed or only reinforced by political elites seeking an electorate (Kitschelt, 1995).

1.1 Measuring religiosity - Centrality of Religiosity Scale

The verification of the indicated individualisation of religion on the part of individuals had to be examined on an empirical level. In view of the noticeable change in the understanding of religiosity by Poles, from the historically shaped society of fate, characterised by the unification of the role and importance of religion in social life, to the contemporary one - the society of choice, in which a differentiated approach to religiosity is visible, which is no longer a constant, but a variable that can be differentiated, the best tool for this was the use of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale proposed by Stefan Huber (1996; 2003; 2004).

The proposed scale is derived from two classic approaches to the study of religiosity: The Allport-Ross Religious Orientation Scale and the Glock-Stark Dimensions of Religiosity Scale. The first of these approaches, proposed by Glock and Stark (1965), is a multidimensional sociological approach. As understood by these authors, religiosity is a multidimensional structure that is shaped independently by five representative and common dimensions: religious beliefs, religious practices, religious experiences, religious knowledge and the consequences of religiosity.

The approach proposed by Allport and Ross (1967) opts for a psychological recognition, of religiosity as a personal reference to the value at the basis of all things. Religiosity in this sense can be measured by pointing to the individual as a point on the axis spanning between an external and an internal religious orientation. If this orientation is internal, religiosity becomes mature, and thus, in contrast to external (immature) religiosity, the motivations centred around religiosity are stable in nature. Consequently, religiosity becomes a personal experience of the religion adhered to, which can be relevant or irrelevant to the individual and thus to the choices he or she makes.

From these foundations comes the theoretical combination of both approaches, proposed by Stefan Huber (1996; 2003; 2004), which seems to capture the essence of religiosity most fully. For in it, religiosity is understood as a system of personal religious constructs. This is because the strength of a person's experiences and behaviour derives from these constructs. The more often religiosity takes centre stage, the more religious the individual is and the more often his or her choices are motivated by religious issues. In this approach, the contents and meanings given to religious constructs, which can take different forms, are crucial, so that religious experiences and behaviours are a function of the centrality and content specificity of the system of personal religious constructs of individuals (Zarzycka, 2007).

Huber proposed to operationalise the model of religiosity thus proposed on a constructed scale comprising 15 questions divided into 5 essential dimensions of relevance. Among them, he distinguished: worship (which asked about the frequency and subjective importance of an individual's participation in religious services), religious experience (which asked about the experience of transcendence), prayer (which asked about the frequency and importance of an individual's contact with the transcendent sphere), religious beliefs (which asked about the subjective evaluation of the existence of forms of transcendent reality), and interest in religious issues (which asked about thinking and seeking information related to religion). The analysis of the answers to the indicated questions makes it possible to indicate the variation in the level of religiosity of individuals and its importance for the respondents, which provides an opportunity for further analyses that also address other variables, such as the voting preferences analysed in this work.

1.2 Data and methodology

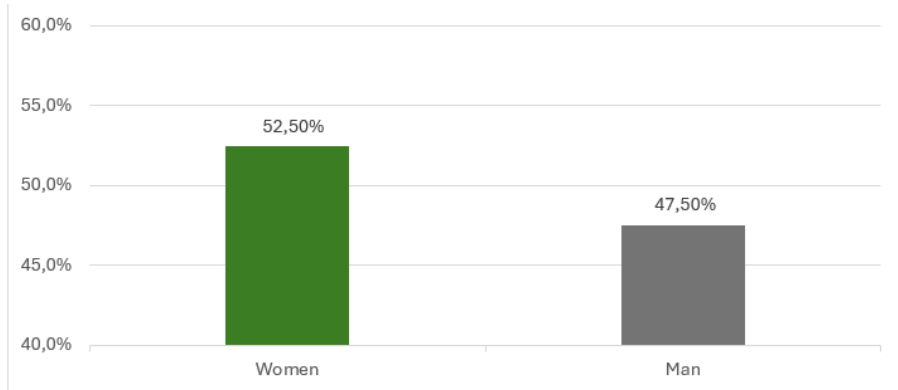
In order to realise the aim of the study and to indicate the link between religiosity and the electoral preferences of Poles in the 2023 parliamentary election, a survey was conducted using the direct survey technique. It took place immediately after the indicated election, as it was assumed that such temporal proximity would allow respondents to keep their own electoral preferences in mind. The survey was conducted between 1 December 2023 and 26 April 2024.

The survey sample consisted of 1,069 people. This number was calculated on the basis of the annual reports of the Central Statistical Office (Główny Urząd Statystyczny) on the population of Poland. The study population was divided by stratified-quota selection. Quota selection included variables such as gender and age, while stratified selection included place of residence by voivodeship and urban-rural. The percentage of each of these variables in the research sample corresponded to the percentage of each group in the entire adult population of Poland, as expressed in the annual publications of the Central Statistical Office, in this case for the year 2023, when the research began. It was conducted using the accessibility method, by means of direct questionnaire interviews. In the course of the survey, 1,712 questionnaires were distributed, of which 1,371 (80.1%) were completed. Of these, 1069 (62.4%) were qualified for analysis. The only qualifying criterion was the completeness of the questionnaire. The study was conducted by the Author

of this article, with the help of researchers from various academic centers in Poland, who assisted in distributing the questionnaire. Importantly, neither the Author nor the researchers distributing the questionnaires helped respondents fill out the survey, provided comments, or answered their questions, so they did not influence the results of the study.

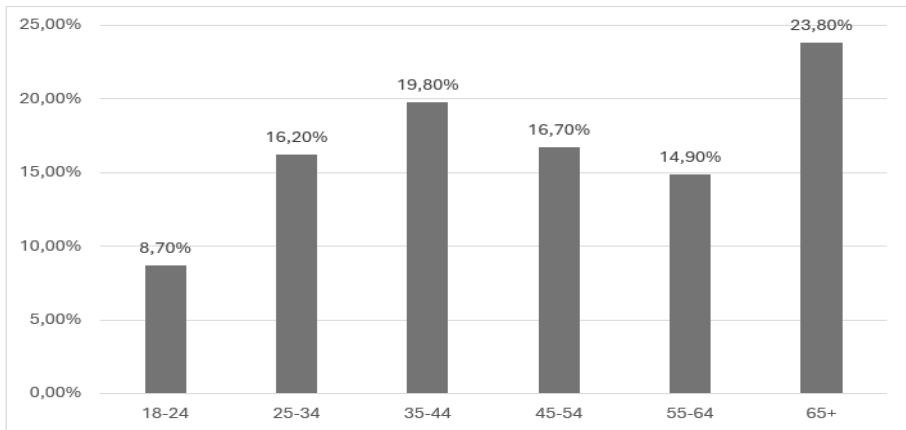
The breakdown of the sample by quota-matched variables - gender and age - is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1: Gender breakdown of the research sample in percentage term



Source: own elaboration.

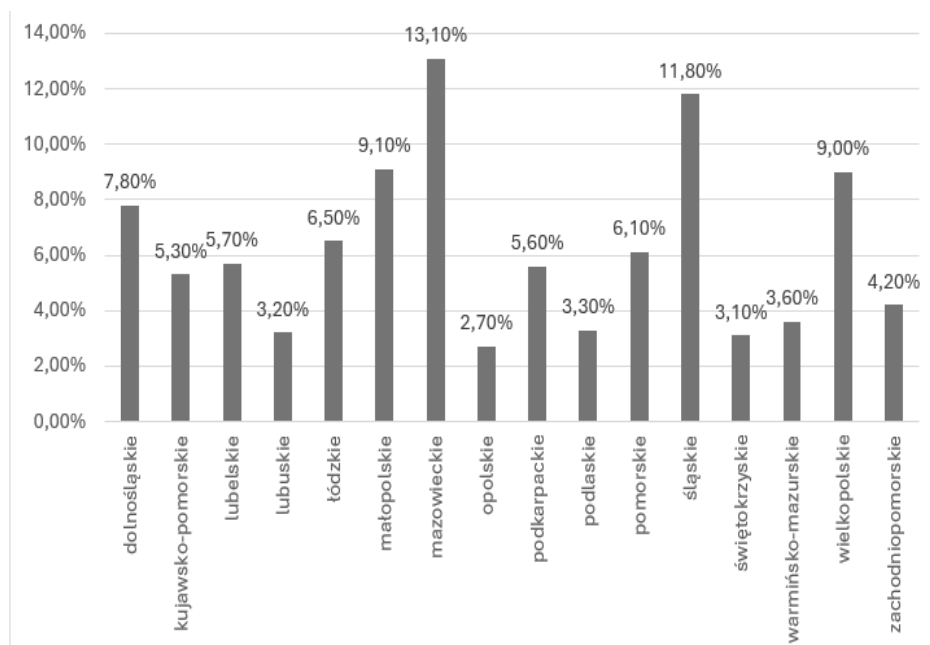
Figure 2: Distribution of the research sample by age in percentage terms



Source: own elaboration.

In terms of place of residence, 421 (39.4%) respondents declared they lived in a rural area, while 648 (60.6%) declared they lived in a city. In the latter group, a city of up to 20 thousand inhabitants was inhabited by 203 (19.0%) respondents, a city of over 20 thousand but up to 50 thousand inhabitants was inhabited by 77 (7.2%) respondents. A city of over 50,000, but up to 100,000 inhabitants was inhabited by 46 (4.3%) respondents. 240 (22.5%) respondents lived in a city with more than 100,000 to 500,000 inhabitants, and 82 (7.7%) respondents lived in cities with more than 500,000 inhabitants. The breakdown of respondents by province of residence is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Respondents' place of residence by province (voivodeship) in percentage terms

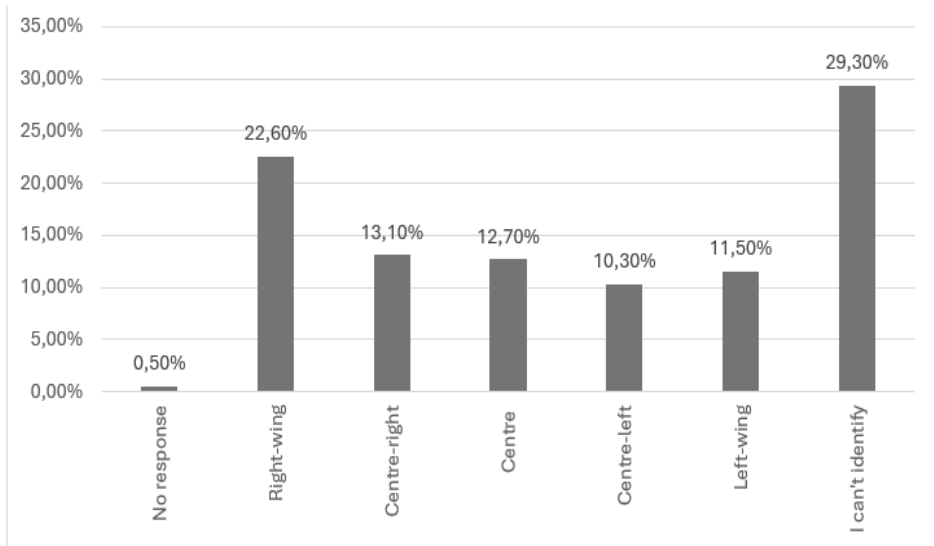


Source: own elaboration.

The metric section of the questionnaire also examined other variables, which, however, were not representative strata of measurement. These included, for example, the education of the respondents.

The political views declared by respondents varied. These are shown in Figure 4

Figure 4: *Political views declared by respondents*

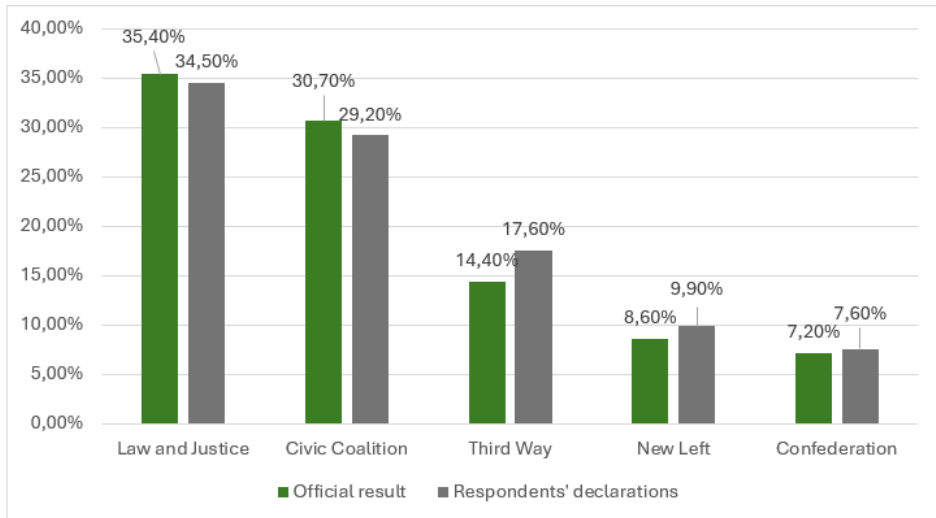


Source: own elaboration.

5 people (0.5%) chose not to answer this question. 242 respondents (22.6%) declared having right-wing views. Centre-right views were closest to 140 respondents (13.1%). 136 respondents (12.7%) declared holding centrist views. 110 respondents (10.3%) held centre-left views and 123 (11.5%) held left-wing views. The largest group - 313 respondents (29.3%) indicated the answer 'don't know/can't tell'.

As for the voting preferences presented by the respondents in 2023, they seemed to mostly coincide with the official election results presented by the State Electoral Commission. This is evident in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Respondents' election preferences in 2023 against the official results of the elections to the Sejm of the Republic of Poland



Source: own elaboration based on data from the State Election Commission (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza).

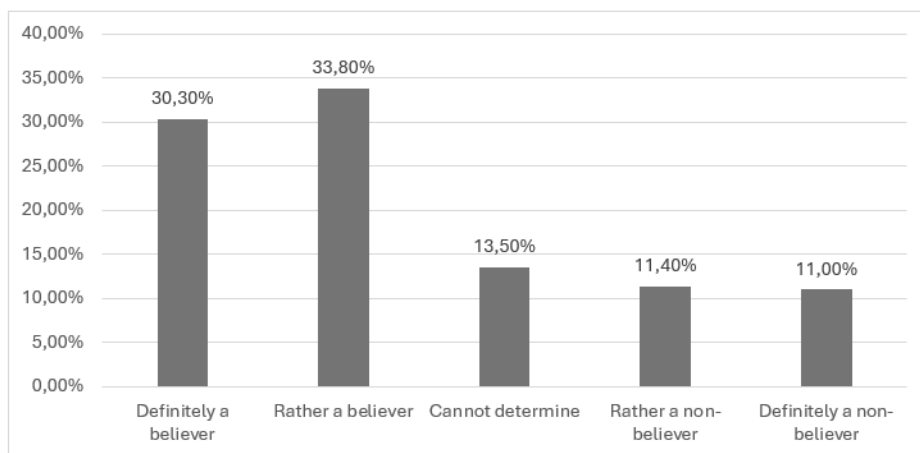
However, the declared voter turnout in the survey exceeded the actual turnout. 933 respondents (87.3%) declared their vote for a specific election committee in 2023. The actual turnout for the 2023 parliamentary elections was 74.4%.

The survey conducted in this way was then subjected to statistical analysis, carried out using SPSS Statistics software. In the course of the overall analyses, missing responses or incomplete responses were rejected for specific analyses. Due to the nature of the analyses carried out, the focus was on the analysis of frequency tables and cross-tabulations, which sufficiently allowed the necessary analyses to be carried out, indicating significant conclusions.

2 RESULTS

Consideration of the relationship between religiosity and respondents' voting preferences began with an indication of the religiosity of the surveyed group itself. This was initially done at the level of the individual declarations of the respondents. The distribution of respondents' declarations of religiosity is presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6: *Distribution of respondents' declarations of religiosity in percentage terms²*



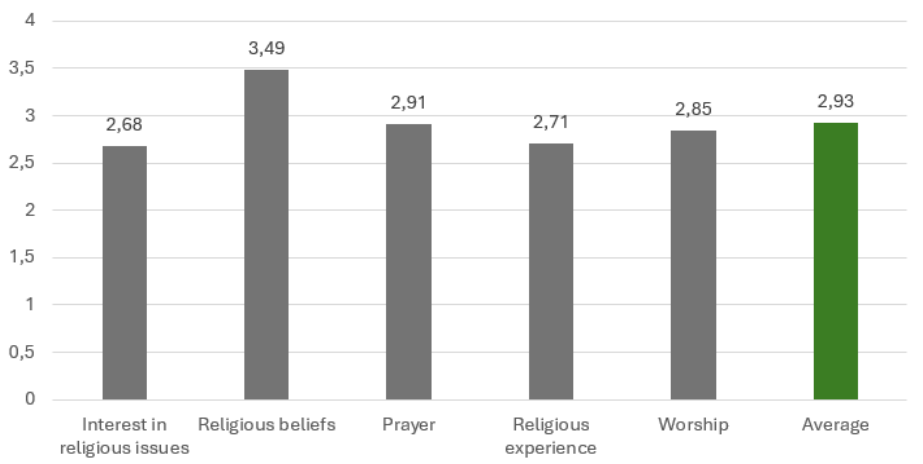
Source: own elaboration.

On a declarative level, more than 64% of respondents describe themselves as believers. A total of more than 22% of the respondents consider themselves to be non-believers. It is interesting to note the indication of 13.5% of those who could not specify whether they are believers or not. This percentage seems to represent the same group that, at the time of the 2020 National Census, just over 20% refused to answer the question on religious affiliation (Koseła, Grabowska, 2024).

This fact, as well as issues related to the changes in religiosity evident in Poland, urged us to reach for a more sophisticated tool for measuring religiosity. This was, as already mentioned, the Centrality of Religiosity Scale. The average responses to each of the five dimensions of religiosity relevance are shown in Figure 7.

¹ Scale mean: 1-5: 2,38; median: 2,0; dominant: 2; SD: 1,326.

Figure 7: Mean responses to the five CRS dimensions of religiosity relevance³



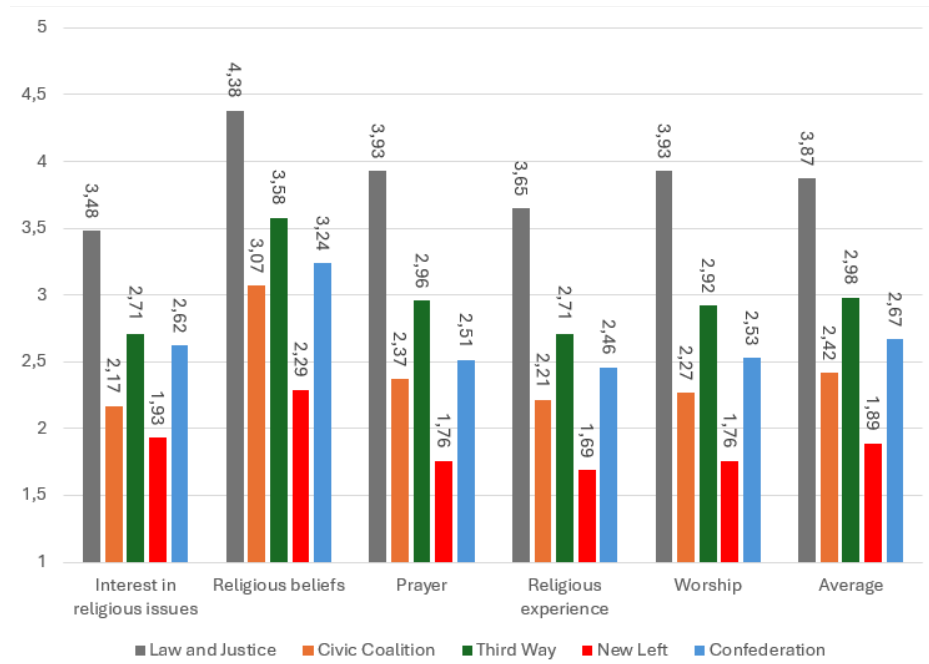
Source: own elaboration.

Although the mean of the five-point declarative scale was 2.38, the mean of the also five-point CRS scale was already 2.93. This means that subconsciously religiosity is more important to the overall respondents than in their own evaluations. The graph indicates that respondents' interest in religiosity and religious experience in their lives are most below average, while respondents' religious beliefs are strongest among them.

After pointing out the relationship described above confirming that it is the CSR that provides a reliable and complete indication of respondents' religiosity, taking into account the nuanced nature of the problem, an attempt was made to link religiosity to the voting preferences of the group surveyed as expressed in the 2023 general elections. To this end, the averages for all dimensions of relevance of the respondents' religiosity were crossed with the declarations of their electoral preferences. In this way, characteristics of the religiosity of the electorates of the five electoral committees that won representation in the Polish Parliament were prepared. These were: Law and Justice, Civic Coalition, Third Way, New Left and the Confederation.

³ 1-5 Scale mean: 2,93; Statistics of the following dimensions: (1) Interest in religious issues: median: 3.0; dominant: 3; SD: 1.195; (2) Religious beliefs: median: 4.0; dominant: 5; SD: 1.337; (3) Prayer: median: 3.0; dominant: 2; SD: 1.400; (4) Religious experience: median: 3.0; dominant: 2; SD: 1.301; (5) Worship: median: 3.0; dominant: 2; SD: 1,39

Figure 8: Mean responses to the five CRS dimensions of religiosity relevance among voters of each political party



Source: own elaboration.

The analysis of the data collected in the chart above shows that the electorates of the different political parties vary considerably in terms of religiosity. Importantly, religiosity corresponds to the ideological profiles of the political parties. The electorate of Law and Justice, which often refers to Christian heritage and values, is by far the most religious of the electorates of all political parties with parliamentary representation. The electorate of the Third Way and the Confederation should be considered as moderately religious voters. The former of these committees can be described as centrist, while the latter as right-wing, but both of them declare respect for the Christian tradition. The electorate of the ideologically centre-left Civic Coalition and the left-wing New Left should be considered the least religious voters. The ideological embedding of Polish political parties on the conservatism-liberalism axis would be an ideal reflection of the religiosity of their electorate, set on an identical axis.

CONCLUSION

The entirety of the considerations carried out allows linking the religiosity of voters in Poland with their electoral preferences. The aim of the present research, which was to attempt to differentiate the religiosity of Poles and its connection with their electoral preferences expressed during the 2023 parliamentary elections, has been achieved.

The analysis allowed a number of important conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, the religiosity of Poles in the declarative sphere differs from their actual religiosity, expressed through the use of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale, a scale that has proved to be very useful in view of the changes in religiosity in Poland, consisting in its individualisation and gradation in the lives of individuals. Indeed, the results of the analysis show that religiosity at the conscious level is often defined less significantly than at the subconscious level.

Secondly, the analysis showed that the degree of religiousness of the respondents thus determined differentiates their voting preferences. The analysis showed a correlation that the more religious the respondent, the more often he/she declares support for ideologically conservative groupings, while the less religious the respondent, the more willingly he/she transfers his/her support to liberal and left-wing ideological groupings, which may indicate religiosity as one of the key axes of sociopolitical divisions in Poland, referring positively to the social cleavage theory. These observations also made it possible to positively address all proposed hypotheses.

The whole analysis carried out proved that the social cleavage theory, proposed in the 1960s, by Stein Rokkan and Seymour Lipset, especially the division into rival actors: Church and State as one of the key axes of sociopolitical dispute, is still relevant today. Using a revision of some of its assumptions, explaining the place of religion in Poland through this prism, especially after the 2023 parliamentary elections, is possible and legitimate. This is because the analysis has shown that Law and Justice voters are those who should be considered the most religious. At the opposite pole would be the voters of the Civic Coalition and the New Left, who are religious to the least extent.

The demands to revise or terminate the concordat and to limit the role of the Church in the state are, in a way, a continuation of the conflict of the Church in Poland with the partitioners, occupiers and later with the state authorities during the People's Republic of Poland. Even at a time when the Church appeared to be close to the state authorities, there was rivalry

on many levels. The key here is to point out that the State-Church rivalry is a large and significant social conflict, arising many years ago, so it fully exhausts the historical aspect, which confirms the validity of the application of the social cleavage theory.

Religiousness is therefore a very important factor in shaping Poles' electoral preferences. The overall analysis conducted also confirms observations made in other countries (Langsæther, 2019; Norris, Inglehart, 2011; Olson, Green, 2006; Raymond, 2011) and in Polish studies of recent years (Pieniężny, 2024; Turska-Kawa, Wojtasik, 2017). This does not mean, however, that continuing to conduct this type of analysis is without justification. On the contrary - in view of the dynamic changes in the place and role of religiosity both in the state, society and in the individual lives of individuals, cyclical research on the indicated topic seems to be necessary and essential.

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HOW TO RESPOND TO HATE SPEECH AND FAKE NEWS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

As new media continue to shape the digital information space, the occurrence of disinformation, hate speech, and fake news is evolving rapidly. These issues arise as a consequence of information overload and information disorder catalysed by digital transformation. This phenomenon is recognised globally as a significant challenge for public institutions, democracy, and public policy. In general we address disinformation with two approaches: hard and soft response activities and tools. Both approaches are complementary to each other and together create a multi-response approach to disinformation. This study aims to examine the viability of the hard response approach alone. This approach typically serves as a reactive measure by targeting the source or the creator of disinformation. We explored the dimensions of hate speech, fake news and disinformation, highlighting the growing pressures that necessitate a multi-response approach. A survey was conducted in 2023 to investigate fake news and hate speech, with a particular focus on the perceived viability of response activities and tools among local politicians and communal practitioners in Slovakia. The primary result of this research lies in enhancing the ongoing discourse about the multi-response approach, emphasising the significance of hard response activities and tools, supported by both theoretical desk research and empirical evidence. A further benefit of the study is that it confirmed the feasibility and success of the examined hard responses. These differ for disinformation, as well as for fake news and hate speech.

Keywords: *Disinformation, Hate speech, Fake news, Information disorder, Local politicians, Response activities and tools, Slovakia*

INTRODUCTION

The current digital society is shaping the transformation of the information environment. While there are significant benefits, such as the

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immediate dissemination and access of information, it also gives rise to problems like information overload and information disorder. These issues manifest as false and harmful information, including disinformation, fake news, hate speech, and various forms of inaccurate content (Farte, 2024; Maati et al., 2024; Schirch, 2021). It is recognised globally as a significant challenge for public institutions, democracy, and public policy (Denniss and Lindberg, 2025; Morse and Pratt, 2025; Ručinská et al., 2025). According to Flash Eurobarometer 522 Democracy data, exposure to disinformation and fake news among respondents in the EU 27 is notable with 13% reporting they are very often exposed, 22% often, and 33% sometimes, and contrarily, only 16% declare they are rarely exposed, and only 7% report never being affected (European Commission, 2023). In Slovakia specifically, 17% of respondents consider their exposure to disinformation and fake news as very frequent, while 22% consider it frequent, placing Slovakia ninth worst among EU countries in this regard (European Commission, 2023). The spread of disinformation, hate speech, and fake news indeed highlights the need for developing complex response policies.

We categorise the approaches used to respond to disinformation, based on our previous research (Ručinská, 2022), as targeted activities rather than random actions. In this context, we differentiate between two types of responses: soft approach and hard approach. Soft response activities and tools involve preventive measures aimed at enhancing the skills of recipients, thereby preparing them for potential disinformation threats. In contrast, hard response activities and tools are reactive in nature. It is usually manifested by blocking, limiting, legally regulating, sanctioning, banning, or deleting.

As digital transformation increasingly shapes the information environment, researchers are intensifying their studies of these topics, uncovering important theoretical insights, while policymakers are confronting the need to deal with the effects of information disorder on public policy and democratic systems (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Bennett and Livingston, 2021; Tandoc, 2019; Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). As a result, response policies have become a crucial focus for governments worldwide. The complex nature of disinformation, fake news, and hate speech necessitates a multi-response approach to effectively confront and mitigate their negative effects.

The study aims to answer the research question: What is the viability of hard response activities and tools in responding to hate speech, fake news and disinformation? Existing empirical evidence was used to outline

dimensions of disinformation, hate speech, and fake news, highlighting the growing pressures that have led to a need for a multi-response approach to these issues. The theoretical section of this study focuses on the concepts of information overload and information disorder, particularly in the context of disinformation, fake news, and hate speech in the digital age. It emphasises the need for a multi-response approach, highlighting the practical application of hard response strategies and tools. The findings reveal the extent of disinformation, particularly concerning fake news and hate speech, and evaluate the effectiveness of hard response strategies as perceived by local politicians in Slovakia, based on a survey conducted in 2023. The discussion integrates contemporary knowledge and practices with the survey results, demonstrating the varying effectiveness of hard response activities and tools in combating disinformation, hate speech, and fake news. The findings from this examination contribute to understanding how such techniques can be effectively implemented in confronting these prevailing challenges.

1 INACCURATE INFORMATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The expressions of hate speech, fake news, and disinformation are numerous and complex. Following nearly a decade of intensive research into these extents of information disorder, a significant number of studies and analyses have been published (Broda, Strömbäck, 2024; Salaverría, Cardoso, 2023; Jerónimo et al., 2023). While there is an opportunity for growth, universally accepted definitions of these terms are still developing (French et al., 2024; Aïmeur et al., 2023; Pérez-Escobar et al., 2023). Exploring the interrelationships of these topics, such as their similarities and differences, could significantly enhance our understanding and provide a more comprehensive framework for discussion and response policies. For this study, the term “disinformation” will be utilised as a comprehensive concept, which reflects any type of information created and shared with the intention to harm and with false content (Hameleers, 2023; Simion, 2023; Ručinská et al., 2022). Theoretical analysis and empirical research will primarily concentrate on hate speech and fake news.

Hate speech and fake news appear not to be new issues because similar forms of human behaviour have been present in our civilisations from ancient times (UN, 2025; Posetti & Matthews, 2018). In recent decades, there has been a notable increase in interest in both scholarly analysis and boosted attention from policymakers (Hoes et al., 2025; Liu, 2025;

Prike and Ecker, 2023). This growing focus reflects a critical recognition of the complexities surrounding issues such as hate speech, fake news, and disinformation within the contemporary information overload (Pleios and Tastsoglou, 2025; Senft and Greenfield, 2023).

1.1 Hate speech, fake news and disinformation

As new media continue to shape the digital information space, the occurrence of disinformation, hate speech, and fake news is evolving rapidly. In this regard, disinformation, hate speech, and fake news can be observed in various forms.

Hate speech has been examined in academic circles since the last decade of the 20th century (Paz, 2020; McConnell, 1992). Hate speech is the most common form of destructive content on social media, and it can come in the form of text, photographs, or video (Saleh et al., 2023; Palani et al., 2022). The most complex view of hate speech encompasses the following characteristics: it provokes violence or hate, it attacks or diminishes, it targets specific groups, and it can also be connected with humour (Fortuna et al., 2018; Gagliardone et al., 2015). The most widely accepted idea in the context of hate speech is that this form is essentially tied to an emotion of hate (Marques, 2022). Hate speech must also be discussed in the context of factors that influence different users' perceptions, such as personal characteristics, presentation form, and content-related characteristics (Schmid et al., 2022). These characteristics only confirm that hate speech shall not be perceived as a sort of expression that the right to freedom of expression has to protect (Howard, 2019; Waldron, 2012). In this sense, hate speech refers to any form of communication that threatens or offends with aggression based on racial, ethnic, gender, religious, or other characteristics, thereby questioning human dignity (Tontodimamma, 2021; Charitidis et al., 2020; Geschke et al., 2019).

Hate speech is focused not only on traditional topics like religion or human rights, but also aims to harm individuals or groups in the light of new societal problems, such as gender questions, terrorism or emotions (Tontodimamma et al., 2021). Put differently, hate speech refers to the use of offensive language and wording, focused on a specific group of people with the same characteristics (Anderson and Barnes, 2022; Castaño-Pulgarín et al., 2021). Hate speech attacks the group's identity and belongings of members in a group and also belonging to society (Kovács et al., 2021; Gibert et al., 2018). As a consequence, hate speech is often increasingly concerned with

racism (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021; Lamerichs et al, 2018). Language used in hate speech can be perceived as unethical, particularly due to its destructive content and consequences (Gorenc, 2022; Hietanen & Eddebo, 2022).

The most common negative impacts of hate speech include prejudice, violence, or, in the worst case scenario, even genocide (Gandhi et al., 2024; Vasist et al., 2024). Hate speech affects communities and public discourse (Hangartner et al., 2021). Hate speech establishes, confirms and also underlines social hierarchies based on inequality and domination (Paz, 2020).

Fake news, similar to hate speech, often utilises multimedia information or content to mislead readers, thereby spreading and expanding its influence, as well as causing severe social panic (Comito et al., 2023; Xue et al., 2021). There is a universal acceptance that fake news influences our societies and the decisions of individuals, particularly following the 2016 US presidential election, Brexit, or the COVID-19 pandemic (Mihálik et al., 2022; Brashier et al., 2021; Xue et al., 2021). These events can be perceived as a catalyst for governments worldwide to pay attention to policy initiatives (Cipers et al., 2023). Digital transformation and technology can be perceived as an accelerator of fake news (Grimes & Gorski, 2025; Pherson et al., 2021).

The gradual questioning of the truth or falsity of information, along with its ever-increasing volume, contributed to the deliberate spread of fake news. Fake news can be defined as false, inaccurate or misleading information created, published and disseminated for intentionally or unintentionally causing damage in society, or for gaining some advantage (Tandoc and Seet, 2024; Bader and Bender, 2022). Fake news may refer to the manipulation of information that can be carried out through the production of false information or the distortion of accurate information (Amri et al., 2023). Fake news attempts to distort the truth with diverse linguistic styles while simultaneously parodying trustworthy news (Shu, 2022). Fake news can also be considered a new form of information poverty, where individuals fail to seek truthful information (Cooke, 2021).

Fake news must also be discussed in the context of factors that influence different users' perceptions, dissemination processes, spreading channel features, outcomes, fabricated legitimacy, and attitudes (Di Domenico et al., 2021). Together with emotionally evocative content, other psychological factors, personality, literacy, cognitive factors, and a combination of internal and external sociological factors can influence the tendency to believe fake news (Beauvais, 2022).

Fake news stands in contrast to real news and information published for a long time by verified sources, whose socially beneficial task was to separate fact from falsehood (Gradoń et al., 2021; Tandoc et al., 2021). Fake news naturally provides supplemental stories to a large number of stories included in mainstream media discussions (Galletta Horner et al., 2023). A similar phenomenon, evident in the last few years, is deepfake. Deepfakes, created using deep learning techniques, are artificially generated audio-visual interpretations that can be used, for example, to damage an individual's reputation, disseminate disinformation or hate speech, or simply spread chaos in society (Salman et al., 2023).

A key characteristic of fake news is its tendency to be emotionally evocative to the general public or a specific group of individuals (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). Fake news can determine how governments, organisations, and people respond to everyday events in society (Olan et al., 2024). The ability of fake news to influence public policy discourse and politics is increasing in our democracies (Lewandowsky & Van Der Linden, 2021). In this regard, fake news can pollute the public sphere, damage democracy, and compromise democratic processes and public welfare (D'Andrea et al., 2025; Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Fake news is shared to make a profit or influence the behaviour of individuals or groups in our society (Bastick, 2021; Szczepański et al., 2021). In the digital age, fake news and hate speech are disseminated at a rapid pace in an almost unrestricted environment (Di Domenico et al., 2021; Mathew et al., 2020).

Disinformation is a concept that refers to false, inaccurate or misleading information created, presented and disseminated intentionally to cause harm in the public space, or to gain profit (Kapantai et al., 2020; Colomina et al., 2021). Disinformation is problematic since its goal is not to provide valuable information to the receiver, because it inherently creates ignorance. Therefore, in this sense, we can wonder whether disinformation is information in the true meaning of the word at all (Simion, 2023). Disinformation is the intentional dissemination of falsehoods or distortions, often spread as news, to achieve goals such as discrediting opponents, disrupting policy debates, influencing voters, inflaming existing social conflicts, or creating a general backdrop of confusion and informational paralysis (Bennett and Livingston, 2021; Marwick and Lewis, 2017).

Disinformation, as well as hate speech and fake news, have evolved into the unwanted but stable part of our digital society. Based on the current state of knowledge mentioned, it is worth noting that disinformation affects our society, democracies, governments, businesses, and individuals differently.

These differences reflect the life cycle of disinformation, which consists of creation, dissemination, impact, and response to disinformation (Ručinská et al., 2025).

To understand the essence of the examined phenomena, we have primarily focused on the phase related to creation, or just before it. Therefore, in the next section, we will mainly focus on responding to disinformation. The study focuses on the reaction to disinformation because, in contemporary democracies, there is a growing demand for solutions aimed at creating complex response policies.

1.2 Responding to disinformation

The complexity of disinformation, hate speech, and fake news leads to the assumption that a comprehensive solution is necessary and there is no one, or no simple and easy solution. It is necessary to establish clarity regarding the terminology associated with reactions and solutions to disinformation, hate speech, and fake news. Various authors use differing terminologies, which results in a lack of consensus regarding the most accurate or appropriate term to use. One prevalent term is “tackling,” which represents efforts to deal with the mentioned issues (Sádaba and Salaverría, 2023; Nenadić, 2019). At the same time, “combating” is primarily associated with strategies aimed at reducing or preventing the dissemination of harmful content (Rød et al., 2025; Chen, 2024). The term “countering” is predominantly utilised in contexts that involve specific actions taken against some instances of disinformation, hate speech, or fake news (McBride et al., 2023; Gradoń et al., 2021). Considering these distinctions, the term “response” can be regarded as a more comprehensive concept. It signifies a targeted, systematic, and sophisticated response and solutions that encompass a variety of activities and tools utilised to address and mitigate the challenges caused by disinformation, hate speech, and fake news (Tandoc & Seet, 2024; Ručinská et al., 2022; Vafeiadis et al., 2022). The complexity of the problem necessitates multi-response activities and tools (Cho et al., 2024; Gradoń et al., 2021; de Cock Buning, 2018; European Union, 2018).

The multi-response approach is examined from various angles, depending on whether the focus is on policy areas, the scope of responses, or the types of responses. In contemporary democracies, responses shall integrate a wide range of policy fields related to civil security in both the public and private spheres, including legal and regulatory, educational, political and

governance, psychological and social psychological, and technological domains (Rød et al., 2025). Responding can be applied from different perspectives and approaches, such as the planning approach, truth theory, systems thinking, and military approach (Dowse & Bachmann, 2022). As part of a multi-response approach, interactions among government actions, private sector involvement, and citizen engagement are necessary (D'Andrea et al., 2025).

Multi-response approach by governments is growing, focusing mainly on fact-checking and monitoring responses, investigative responses, countercampaigns, election-specific responses, curational responses, technical and algorithmic responses, demonetising and economic responses, ethical and normative responses, educational responses, empowerment responses and COVID-19-specific responses (Cipers et al., 2023; Bontcheva et al., 2020). Response strategies are imposed by the government or created by the private sector, and both initiatives may include content-focused solutions or user-focused solutions (Pherson et al., 2021).

As shown in Table 1, the Disinformation response activities and tools reveal two main types of response activities. We have specified a classification of approaches used to effectively respond to disinformation, emphasizing that these actions are intentional and strategically formulated rather than occurring randomly (Ručinská et al., 2022). This crucial classification highlights the need for a structured framework that guides the implementation of responses to disinformation. By differentiating responses based on their nature and objectives, we can better understand how to respond disinformation effectively in various contexts and meanings. This targeted approach allows for more tailored interventions that align with the specific types of the disinformation encountered.

Table 1: *Disinformation response activities and tools*

SOFT		
Open data	Open government	Critical thinking
Soft skills for the digital age	Ethical codex for social networks	Digital ethical code
Opinion plurality	Influence of public authorities	Policies of technological companies
HARD		
Regulation	National legislation acts	EU binding norms
Sanctions	Technical regulation	Deleting posts
Banning accounts	Demonetising accounts	Web search restrictions

Source: Ručinská et al., 2022

The table summarises hard and soft responses to disinformation, which we perceive as a typology rather than a specific, exhaustive list of all possible response activities and tools. We see hard activities and tools as reactive solutions to disinformation, primarily aimed at limiting, prohibiting and blocking. Soft activities and tools can also be preventive, aiming to upskill recipients and prepare them for potential disinformation targeting. Hard solutions can, on the contrary, be seen as reactive measures, which primarily target the source of disinformation or the creator of a particular piece of disinformation. Consequently, we view the highlighted response activities as complementary to one another. By utilising a variety of strategies, such as public awareness campaigns, fact-checking efforts, and initiatives aimed at improving media literacy, alongside website blocking, social media filters, and identifying creators, democracies can more effectively respond to disinformation. Each strategy targets different aspects of the issue, thereby enhancing overall ability to manage and mitigate the impact of information disorder in our society.

Key hard response tools and activities are primarily understood as legal norms, legislation, and regulations established at the national level. While legal frameworks at the national level are essential, it is important to recognise that such laws may, in certain instances, restrict freedom of expression and democratic principles. Therefore, the implementation of

these regulations and sanctions must be approached carefully (Nagasako, 2020; Claussen, 2018). National legal issues and challenges regarding normative responses to disinformation, hate speech, and fake news should be considered within the framework of international law. Regulations often target both local and foreign groups, making it more challenging to respond effectively. Therefore, governments need to find a balance between addressing disinformation and respecting international standards (Vese, 2021; Tenove, 2020). In this regard, the responsibilities of states from the perspective of international human rights law lie in taking necessary and appropriate measures that, at the same time, protect freedom of expression and prevent the spread of disinformation, hate news, and fake news (Balcerzak, Kapelańska-Pręgowska, 2023).

This legislative framework is notably shaped by the directives and tendencies articulated by the European Union. The formulation and implementation of standard European response policies is gradually becoming, along with traditional economic and political goals, an essential part of strategies within the European Union (Guedes et al., 2025; Bayer, 2024). However, member states of the European Union continue to adopt varying regulations and platforms, demonstrating that they reflect the general legal framework established by the European Union (Caruso, 2024; Cavaliere, 2022).

Hard response activities and tools derive from this legal basis and may encompass a range of technological regulations or sanctions. These interventions are often aimed at mapping and regulating the functioning of social networks (Tan, 2022; Nagasako, 2020) and websites (Sokol, Bachňáková Rózenfeldová, 2025; Ververis et al., 2024), potentially involving measures such as demonetisation of content, removal of posts, website blocking or restrictions on internet searches. Public service media are regulated from a normative perspective through media policy intervention (Horowitz et al., 2022). The establishment of special governmental bodies and special working groups can also be perceived as part of countermeasures policies (Hanzelka & Pavlíková, 2021).

2 METHODOLOGY

A comprehensive European research project, endorsed by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, brought together a diverse group of European academic institutions to investigate the significant impact of hate speech, dis- and misinformation on local and

regional governance structures. This initiative launched with the distribution of a detailed questionnaire to congress delegates, aiming to capture a wide array of insights. The project explored the trends and harm of fake news and hate speech, and also the way they affect the local political decisions (Chlapák, 2021). The results were evaluated as important to ensure a meaningful and democratic political life to serve the needs of all citizens, by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Kiefer, 2022). To further deepen the research, the team conducted in-depth surveys of politicians and local administrators across Germany, Austria, Italy, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, and Slovakia, seeking to understand their perspectives and first-hand experiences in addressing the challenges posed by the disinformation, fake news and hate speech. The surveys were carried out during the second and third quarters of 2023. Partial results from surveys conducted in seven EU countries were published by colleagues from the Eurac Research Institute for Public Management in Italy (Maffei and Moscon, 2024). In a pilot study, the results were also published for German local and regional politicians and administrative leaders (Bagnato et al., 2024). The empirical research presented in this article is a partial result of the abovementioned initiative undertaken by a consortium of European research institutions. At the same time, we are building on and continuing our research, which conceptually and schematically describes the life cycle of disinformation and the necessity for a multi-response approach at all its stages and classification system for soft and hard response activities (Ručinská et al., 2025; Ručinská et al., 2022).

The study aims to answer the research question: What is the viability of hard response activities and tools in responding to disinformation, hate speech and fake news among local politicians and communal practitioners in Slovakia? The findings from this investigation contribute to understanding how such methods can be effectively implemented in confronting Information disorder.

The survey design has been developed primarily to analyse the extent and responses related to hate speech and fake news, particularly in their associations with disinformation. This effort is grounded in the collaborative expertise of collaborating European academic institutions and previous collective research. The survey questions permitted respondents to indicate their preferences using a three-point scale (hardly ever, at times, frequently). Additionally, the respondents had the opportunity to express their agreement or disagreement with various statements through a different set of questions.

The research sample was intentionally chosen to focus on municipalities and cities located in the Košice and Prešov regions of Slovakia, reflecting the fragmentation of local self-government in these areas. A total of 1,103 municipalities and cities were invited to participate in the survey, which was distributed through the Evasys survey and examination software. The survey generated a response rate of 12.06%, as detailed in Table 2. Data were collected between July 2023 and October 2023, with two reminder notifications sent during this period.

Table 2: Municipalities and cities outline

Respondent position	
local politician	3
mayor	59
member of the administration	69
Not stated	2
Cities and municipalities' size categories	
0-200	7
201 - 500	25
500 - 1000	30
1001 - 2000	30
2001 - 5000	12
5001 - 20 000	9
20 001 - 50 000	11
50 000 - 500 000	0
Not stated	9
Age category	
under 30 years of age	1
between 30 and 50 years of age	71
over 50 years of age	60
Not stated	1

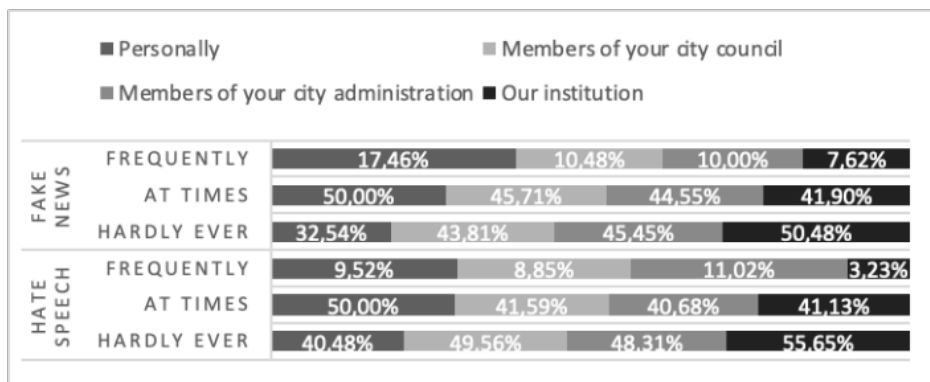
Source: authors

3 RESULTS

Focusing on the occurrence rate of fake news and hate speech, respondents were asked if they had experienced hate speech or fake news. Only 9.52% of respondents in the case of hate speech and 17.46% of respondents in the case of fake news often experienced the examined terms in person. The respondents identified that they most often encounter fake news personally. On the other hand, according to the respondents (11.02%), the term 'hate speech' is most often encountered by employees of administrative city offices. Respondents state that, regardless of the target, they experience fake news more often than hate speech.

Considering fake news and hate speech, the least frequently targeted entity perceived by respondents is the organisation of the municipality or city as a whole. Respondents perceive that the target of fake news and hate speech is themselves rather than other members of the council or other members of the administration of the office in the city or municipality. In this context, the results indicate that both fake news and hate speech are primarily perceived concerning the respondents themselves (Graph 1).

Graph 1: *Perceived occurrence of fake news and hate speech*



Source: authors

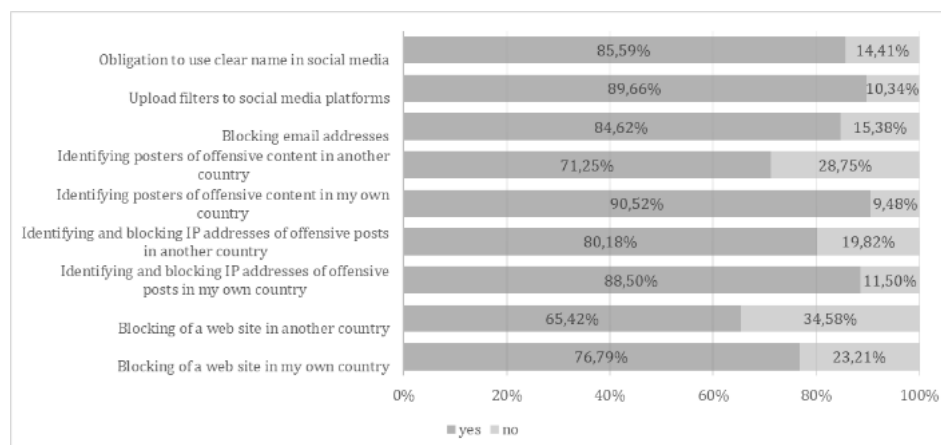
The extent of hate speech faced by respondents differs. Respondents were hardly ever confronted with hate speech associated with physical violence against the respondent's family (85 respondents) or physical violence against the respondent's person (83 respondents). Respondents least often

described the extent of hate speech as rare in the case of slander in real life, personal insults in real life, personal insults in the media and slander in the media. Subsequently, the extent of hate speech was perceived by respondents as frequent in the case of slander in real life (42 respondents), personal insults in real life (15), slander in the media (13) and personal insults in the media (7).

While respondents identified the issue of hate speech in the shown contexts, they encountered fake news hardly ever and at times more frequently. Respondents encountered fake news hardly ever in connection with influencing the decision-making process in a municipality or city (56 respondents) and as part of hate speech (58 respondents). On the other hand, respondents most often identified fake news in the context of influencing municipal elections, specifically in 22% of responses, and also in the context of controlling the decision-making process in a municipality or city, as noted in 14 responses.

Respondents were also asked which measures they would consider a technically and legally viable option against fake news and hate speech, with a total of 9 options to choose from (Graph 2).

Graph 1: *Legal and technical viability of selected hard response activities and tools*



Source: authors

More than two-thirds of respondents agree that the measures are technically and legally viable. Respondents expressed the least agreement

with the viability of the measure blocking a website in another country (65.42%) and the measure identifying posters of offensive content in another country (71.25%). In other words, these measures are considered difficult in terms of their successful implementation. The measures that are technically and legally most feasible from the respondents' point of view are identifying posters of offensive content in their own country, with 89.66% of respondents agreeing with this tool. Respondents also consider uploading filters to social media platforms and identifying and blocking IP addresses of offensive posts in their own country to be feasible, as only slightly more than 10% of respondents perceive these as difficulties. Measures that can be considered moderately difficult to implement, based on the respondents' answers, include the obligation to use a clear name in social media (101 respondents) and blocking email addresses (99 respondents). Based on the respondents' answers, it can be said that they perceive measures in their own country as technically and legally more viable. Respondents consider measures that should be implemented in a country other than their home country to be more challenging to implement.

4 DISCUSSION

The results suggest that both fake news and hate speech are primarily perceived by the respondents themselves, rather than by an institution. In this regard, research confirms the trend that disinformation is mainly targeted at individuals rather than organisations, cities or governments (Brashier, 2024; CISA, 2022; Woolley, 2022).

Respondents state also, regardless of the target, they experience fake news more often than hate speech. The extent of perceived hate speech and fake news also reflects some key trends. Within the context of hate speech, the most common contexts are slander and personal insults, both in real life and in the media. Fake news was identified by respondents primarily in connection with influencing the results of the electoral process. This part of democratic processes is most often associated with the targeted provision of false information.

Respondents from our research were hardly ever confronted with physical violence against the respondent's family or physical violence against the respondent's person. This result is slightly different from cases in other states, where physical violence is also being discussed before electoral campaigns. Cases when politicians were attacked while they were performing political agitation and political campaign in Germany

(Tagesschau, 2025; Neubert, 2024; Stroud, 2024), in Slovakia (Mihalková, 2023), in Czechia (Karban, 2021) or Great Britain (BBC, 2016). Violence is also linked to the activities of politicians during their terms of office in Denmark (Henley, 2024) and France (Gijs, 2022).

In our theoretical research, we focused on three areas based on desk research: hate speech, fake news and disinformation. Subsequently, our empirical research focused on hate speech and fake news. Based on theoretical discourse and empirical results, we present general findings on the applicability of robust responses to disinformation, hate speech and fake news. In various forms and to varying extents, disinformation and related terms are being increasingly perceived as an unwanted aspect of political life (Nai et al., 2025; Berntzen et al., 2024). Given the extent and negative impact of disinformation confirmed by theory and empirical research, it is necessary to discuss the need for a response. Disinformation theory emphasises the importance of a multi-faceted response approach. From a legal implementation and technical readiness perspective, the research confirmed the importance of measures taken within social networks to identify individuals sharing offensive content, as well as blocking IP addresses. Research confirmed the need for a multi-response approach, especially in the context of a single trajectory. Empirical results confirmed that respondents perceive hard response activities and tools as viable. Respondents agreed that specific hard tools and activities are technically and legally feasible in practice.

In response to the tools, respondents identified activities and tools that should be implemented abroad as more challenging to implement. Respondents, knowing the legal environment, are aware of the limits of cross-border interventions in website providers, and rationally perceive these tools and activities as difficult. Despite intensive research and discussions, there is no unified framework to manage response policies concerning disinformation. Although theoretical discourse advocates for a multi-response approach, implementing such a strategy necessitates careful formulation by governmental entities and accountable public institutions to ensure its effectiveness. A practical framework aimed at strengthening societal resilience against disinformation should thoroughly address multiple dimensions, including legal and regulatory measures, educational initiatives, political and governance structures, psychological factors and technological components (Rød et al., 2025). A multi-response framework must focus on effective prevention, resilience building, observation, disclosure, evaluation, and impact management (Sommarberg et al., 2024).

International experiences, especially from globally engaged organisations, provide a robust foundation for understanding the multi-response approach to combat disinformation effectively. In the European Union context, the Code of Conduct on Disinformation was integrated into the framework of the Digital Service Act (European Union, 2025a). The Code of Conduct on Disinformation consolidates the content of the multi-response policies into six key areas: demonetisation, transparent political advertising, reducing manipulative behaviour, user empowerment, fact-checking coverage throughout the EU, and data access for research (European Union, 2025b). Considering the worldwide context, states should protect, respect and promote freedom of expression and ensure access to information, avoid regulating based on vague definitions, refrain from internet shutdowns, provide accurate information sharing, hold public officials accountable, and involve civil society in the design of response policies (United Nations, 2022). Under the OECD initiatives, a framework for response policies should include communication strategies, plans, and coordination mechanisms, as well as identifying and debunking disinformation, regulatory and legal measures, and civic and media initiatives (Matasick et al., 2020).

Based on our research, the order of feasibility and success of individual hard responses differs in general for disinformation, as well as for fake news and hate speech. In examining the effectiveness of hard responses to disinformation, hate speech and fake news, it is evident that there are no fundamental differences among certain types. For instance, blocking email addresses is widely considered by both respondents and theoretical frameworks as very challenging to execute, often delivering minimal impact. This difficulty is also reflected in the context of implementing hard responses, such as working groups, the significance of national legislation and the requirement to use a clear name in social media interactions. Resulting from the literature review and empirical research, we have identified the viability of hard responses (Table 3).

Table 3: *Viability of hard responses and activities*

	Disinformation	Hate speech	Fake news	
h i g h	Blocking email addresses	Blocking email addresses	Blocking email addresses	l o w
	Working groups	Blocking of a website	Working groups	
	Obligation to use a clear name on social media	Working groups	Obligation to use a clear name on social media	
V i a b i l i t y	National legislation	Obligation to use a clear name on social media	National legislation	V i a b i l i t y
	Identifying and blocking IP addresses	National legislation	Identifying posters of offensive content	
	Filters on social media platforms	Identifying and blocking IP addresses	Identifying and blocking IP addresses	
	Blocking of a website	Filters on social media platforms	Filters on social media platforms	
	Identifying posters of offensive content	Identifying posters of offensive content	Blocking of a website	

Source: authors

Responses considered to have a higher degree of viability, such as filters on social media platforms and identifying and blocking IP addresses, are assessed to be generally similar in their level of effectiveness. Considering the complexity of the information environment in the digital age, implementing these measures often struggles to achieve the desired outcomes.

Our research indicates that the viability of blocking websites as a hard response tool varies significantly depending on the context. When it comes to hate speech, this approach is often considered ineffective due to the immediate and dynamic nature of such content. In contrast, blocking websites proves to be a much more effective response to fake news. Since these websites serve as the primary platforms for disseminating misleading information, their removal can significantly decrease the spread of false narratives and disinformation.

The process of identifying posters of offensive content, while having a high applicability in addressing both hate speech and disinformation, raises a key challenge when responding to fake news. In the case of fake news, linking the spread of fake news back to its original creators is particularly complex. This difficulty arises from the often anonymous or pseudonymous environments in which fake news increases.

CONCLUSION

A systematic approach to disinformation knowledge, supported and verified by empirical data in this study, contributes to the scientific and policy discourse. The study supports the current discussion on the multi-response approach, highlighting the importance of hard response activities and tools based on theoretical desk research and empirical research. The survey revealed that respondents perceive mainly hard response activities and tools as technically and legally viable. Respondents are also aware of the limits associated with the need to implement response activities and tools outside the borders of their home country. In this regard, the response policies of the European Union shall be perceived as necessary. We have discussed our research within the current trends related to disinformation, hate speech, and fake news in European countries. We underlined hard responses and tools as being a feasible part of the comprehensive strategies that effectively address disinformation challenges.

The research does show certain limitations, primarily concerning the empirical findings, which are based solely on the conditions of a single country with a relatively limited sample size. The evolving topic of hard responses to disinformation also poses a limitation to this research. As legislative frameworks shift and the sophistication of response tools and policies progresses, the effectiveness and challenges associated with these responses can change dramatically over time. Nevertheless, it is essential to interpret these limitations considering the broader context in which these results will be presented in the future, precisely as part of a comprehensive initiative undertaken by European academic institutions from seven European countries. Although the findings may reflect a degree of partiality, they nonetheless contribute meaningfully to the overall understanding of the issues being examined and offer valuable insights when contextualised within the larger research framework.

When considering future research trajectories, the study confirms present perspectives and introduces new questions within the disinformation.

Further examination into the perception of examined concepts across various demographic groups, particularly among young individuals, senior citizens, policymakers, and public servants, remains a crucial need. It is essential for research efforts to focus on developing practical response activities and tools that will function as complementary components within a multi-response approach to addressing disinformation. Such initiatives are essential for navigating the complexities of the contemporary information overload and information disorder.

To foster informed decision-making, individuals should actively cultivate an awareness of misleading and potentially harmful content. Individuals should critically evaluate the authenticity of information, especially in the face of information overload, to enhance their understanding and make more informed choices. Fundamental prerequisites include the knowledge and literacy required to identify various forms of disinformation and the sophistication of responses to it.

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RUSSIAN SOFT POWER IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to examine the various components of soft power employed by the Russian Federation in shaping inter-state relations with the Republic of Kazakhstan. This article explores methodologies for constructing state rankings through the soft power index, including the criteria underlying the formation of this index. Utilizing statistical data from the USC Center on Public Diplomacy reports from the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Central Asia Initiative, and Brand Finance's Global Soft Power data, the study assesses Kazakhstan's and Russia's standings in the overall ranking and compares the two countries based on key indicators of the soft power index. Evidence for this is provided by Russia's significant visibility score, which is partly attributed to its inheritance of the Soviet Union's legacy, whereas other post-Soviet states have lost such an opportunity. It is noted that despite the apparent effectiveness of Russian soft power policy in Kazakhstan—evident in the legislative requirement for Russian language education and its use in state and local government bodies—the legislative formulations can be characterized as a form of soft resistance to soft power.

Keywords: Central Asia; Cooperation programs; Cultural diplomacy; Foreign policy; Geopolitics

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INTRODUCTION

Soft power is a distinctive approach to shaping inter-state relations, based on achieving foreign policy objectives through fostering cooperation and exploring alternative ways to resolve conflicts. This approach relies on the development of trust and the recognition of the positive attributes of the actor in international politics by the counterpart state (Gallarotti, 2022). Therefore, achieving political goals through the application of soft power is grounded in the voluntary desire of the opposing side to build relations while considering the perspective of the other state. This facilitates the creation of mutually beneficial relationships, whereas a hard power approach often results in either failure or extreme instability. Influencing the behavior of foreign states through soft management techniques and coordinated actions is feasible, effective, and efficient in the vast majority of cases, as the personal interests of the using side are perceived by partners as their own. These advantages of soft power explain its utilization even by the most influential players in international politics, including the United States (Nye, 1990). At the same time, the dichotomy between soft power and hard power necessitates further analysis of soft power itself, as it can be characterized as either benign or malevolent, resulting from manipulation and deception (Marlin-Bennett, 2022). In the latter case, while soft power remains preferable to hard power in terms of avoiding open conflict, an insufficiently objective evaluation of it poses a significant threat to the national security of the state to which it is applied. Conversely, a rational combination of hard power tools and benign soft power is described as smart power, capable of achieving political goals in the most favorable context, with a preference for soft power (Baniya, 2021). It should also be noted that soft power is a tool not only for building bilateral relations but also for influencing regional politics, reflecting the understanding by more powerful regional political actors of their role and responsibility for the situation in the region (Ahmed, Karin, 2024).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted neighboring countries to increase their influence in Central Asian states. While Russia relies on its long historical relationship within the Soviet framework, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran base their cultural diplomacy on shared aspects of mentality, lifestyle, and certain religious beliefs (Dehshiri et al., 2021). The first quarter of the 21st century has been marked by critical global destabilization, numerous regional conflicts, and severe threats that could potentially lead to a global catastrophe. In these complex conditions,

Kazakhstan continues to adhere to the core principles of the United Nations Charter, as well as the principles of multi-vectorism and pragmatism in its foreign policy (REN, 2022). One of Kazakhstan's foreign policy priorities is the Russian Federation, with which it maintains a strategic partnership and cooperation across a broad spectrum of areas (Akorda, 2020b). This approach is driven in part by geopolitical conditions, the necessity of considering security factors in relations with Russia, which shares the world's longest land border with Kazakhstan. Additionally, there are objective factors that significantly influence the bilateral relationship, such as the substantial Russian-speaking ethnic population in border regions and the interconnected economies of the two countries in the oil transit sector (Girma, 2023). At the same time, Kazakhstan harbors its own international ambitions, aiming for a leading position in the region, which necessitates a multi-vector policy (Hudson, 2022). Consequently, the principle of peaceful coexistence with Russia and an understanding of its soft power techniques in building relationships with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries are crucial for ensuring equitable and balanced relations between the two states and protecting Kazakhstan's national interests. In this context, the dominant principle in relations with Russia, as with any other state, is pragmatism. Thus, alongside political, trade, economic, military, informational, and other areas of cooperation, key components of these relations include traditional areas of soft power, such as cultural, humanitarian, and educational spheres (EL, 2023; Karpuntsov, Veresha, 2023).

In the context of escalating regional crises and the search for peaceful methods of constructing international relations, the study of soft power policies employed by Russia holds both scientific and practical significance. Accordingly, relevant research directions include evaluating the role of soft power tools as the foundation for shaping Russia's foreign policy strategy and enhancing its image abroad. The objective of this study is to examine the soft political influence tools used by Russia in relation to the Republic of Kazakhstan during the first quarter of the 21st century. Specifically, this evaluation is based on existing bilateral investment and educational, cultural, scientific, and other humanitarian projects through which Russia aims to strengthen its influence in Kazakhstan and the Central Asian region more broadly.

Without claiming to provide a comprehensive review of soft power policies or to revise its traditional understanding, this article focuses on the regional application of soft power, its characteristics, and future prospects, considering that Russian soft power in Kazakhstan can be characterized as having significant reach.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

The concepts of soft and hard power represent two fundamental approaches in the examination of power dynamics within the context of international politics. Their application is not strictly separated but rather constitutes a unified interaction framework, where soft power serves as an additional tool. Gaining particular relevance following the events of the 1990s, soft power has acquired a new developmental trajectory in the 2020s due to shifts in the global political structure and changes in the roles of specific regions (Shahriar, 2022). Concurrently, there is a process aimed at the restoration of reputation by major global political actors, particularly the United States, as they seek to reassert themselves as key players utilizing soft power strategies (Ohnesorge, 2023).

Soft power can manifest in various forms, characterized by its complex structure and reliance on cultural, diplomatic, educational, and other activities. The application of soft power necessitates a balanced strategic approach, which requires continuous monitoring and adjustment in response to the evolving political landscape (Saaïda, 2023; Tokareva et al., 2024). Diplomacy likely holds a leading role within soft power politics, often serving as a means to advance other forms of soft power. A shift from soft power to hard power is typically seen as a scenario where diplomatic efforts have failed. In all other instances, the activities of diplomatic missions, beyond resolving contentious issues, involve assessing the situation and understanding the needs of the host country, which can subsequently be used as a foundation for promoting relevant cooperation programs within the framework of soft power (Buruah, 2024).

A recognized tool of soft power is educational cooperation, whose significance continues to grow. This trend aligns with the characteristics of post-industrial societies, where intellectual capital plays a predominant role and becomes a new arena for competition. Consequently, a party capable of providing such resources has the potential to enhance its own ranking. Simultaneously, participation in exchange educational programs facilitates the use of soft power tools such as cultural influence and closer acquaintance with the host country (Gauttam et al., 2024). Additionally, language intervention, as an integral component of cultural influence, represents another form of soft power application. The prevalence of a language and the capacity to exert soft power are directly correlated with the creation of a favorable global image of the state (Akbar, 2023). Educational policy is a recognized instrument of soft power, aimed at expanding international

cooperation in this domain. This approach can be viewed as a soft power tool for both parties involved, as educational projects provide an opportunity for each side to influence the other's perceptions of their country, culture, and mentality (Amirbek, Ydyrys, 2014).

In the contemporary world, soft power is no longer confined to intangible means of influence. The processes of economic globalization and, consequently, the increasing interdependence impart a material dimension to soft power, although it remains distinct from the potential for overt aggression. The enhancement of the soft power concept is also a result of the development of democratic processes, the establishment and operation of supranational institutions, and the growing awareness of the limited effectiveness of military confrontations given the advancement of modern military technologies (Gallarotti, 2022).

Simultaneously, it is proposed to augment the concept of soft power, and consequently, the soft power index, with a contrasting concept provisionally termed Negative Watch. This concept reflects reputational and other national branding losses and is also measured based on relevant criteria, ultimately forming an index of such losses. Thus, the theoretical framework of soft power is expanded by evaluating both positive and negative shifts in foreign policy (Durrani, 2023).

The concurrent use of hard methods is assessed as a discrepancy between the declared soft power policy and actual practices, leading to a significant reduction in political ratings even in countries where hard power has not been employed. It must be noted that, in modern conditions, even with substantial resources for hard influence, achieving objectives without cooperation with other political actors is ephemeral. An example of this is the task of combating terrorism, whose success largely relies on international collaboration (Nye, 2023).

Kazakhstan's response to attempts by Russia to increase regional influence, which began in the mid-1990s, was initially based on maintaining a balance through the use of soft political methods. Thus, while seeking to establish close cooperation with Russia, Kazakhstan simultaneously aimed to counterbalance the growing Russian influence (Nurgaliyeva, 2015). Additionally, Kazakhstan is pursuing the expansion of regional cooperation while striving to preserve and enhance its independent status in the Asian region. This is notably reflected in its participation in initiatives led by influential regional powers such as China (Pieter, 2021).

Contemporary academic literature addresses a broad range of issues related to the theoretical aspects of soft power and its application by leading

global nations. At the same time, due to international events from 2022 to 2024, the application of soft power policies in the post-Soviet space has gained particular relevance. It is important to note, however, that despite significant historical similarities, the political situations in post-Soviet countries are evolving according to different scenarios. In this context, Central Asian countries in general, and Kazakhstan in particular, have their own specific characteristics, the study of which constitutes a crucial area of contemporary political research.

1.1 Problem statement

The early 2020s have marked a period of destabilization in the global international environment. The actively implemented and proclaimed policy of soft power is increasingly accompanied by the frequent use of hard power, involving a growing number of countries in this process. In this context, the Republic of Kazakhstan remains committed to soft power policies and makes every effort to maintain peace and stability in the Central Asian region. Simultaneously, Kazakhstan itself is a focal point of political interest from both its immediate and regional neighbors. With an extensive border with the Russian Federation and established bilateral ties, Kazakhstan seeks to build its relationship with Russia while considering Russia's interests. This approach results from both Kazakhstan's own political decisions and the application of Russian soft power strategies towards Kazakhstan.

At the same time, Kazakhstan strives to preserve its independence to the maximum extent, adhere to a multi-vector foreign policy, and maintain control over the stability of both the country and the region. Achieving these goals necessitates continuous monitoring and analysis of the methods of soft power employed by Russia to safeguard Kazakhstan's national interests and security. The objective of this study is to analyze the current impact of Russian soft power on the foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

To achieve this objective, the following tasks were set:

-To provide a general characterization of soft power policy and to describe the current application of soft power by the Republic of Kazakhstan and Russia, within the context of its global application and in a comparative analysis of the two countries.

- To analyze how Russia's application of soft power towards Kazakhstan is reflected in bilateral agreements, as well as in the legislative and regulatory frameworks of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

– Combine quantitative data from international indicators with analyses of the content of national legislation and actual manifestations of soft power influence.

– Based on the obtained data, to characterize the Republic of Kazakhstan's response to the application of soft power methods by Russia and to identify issues requiring special attention to maintain peace and stability in Kazakhstan.

2 METHODS AND MATERIALS

The first stage of the research involved a general characterization of soft power policy and an assessment of Kazakhstan and Russia's positions in the global ranking of its application. Soft power policy is not a static phenomenon. To demonstrate the dynamics in the ranking of countries employing soft power among the top thirty nations from 2015 to 2019, statistical data from the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019) were utilized. This comparison is based on the "soft power index," which is calculated using evaluations across six domains: production, culture, informatization, relevant government activities, engagement in cooperation (including diplomatic activity), and education. This data also facilitates an assessment of the Russian Federation's application of soft power.

To evaluate Kazakhstan's response to the events of 2022 reports from the Foreign Policy Research Institute under the Central Asia Initiative project (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2024) were used. The findings indicated that there was no categorical response from Kazakhstan to Russia's actions. However, Kazakhstan's firm stance on maintaining a multi-vector foreign policy and its negative attitude towards the use of hard power were noted. The assessment of soft power rankings for Kazakhstan and Russia among the 193 UN member states as of 2024 was based on the Brand Finance report (Brand Finance, 2024), which examines soft power policy as a basis for national branding. The comparison of the 2024 soft power index data showed that differences in overall rankings do not necessarily reflect significant gaps across all criteria.

The second part of the research focused on identifying indicators of Russia's application of soft power and the results of such application through the analysis of bilateral intergovernmental agreements in traditionally soft power domains (cultural, educational), as well as national program documents and legislative acts. Specifically, the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Akorda, 1995), the Law of

the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education (Law of Republic of Kazakhstan 2007), and the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (Akorda, 2020a) were analyzed. Additionally, issues related to the internationalization of higher education in Kazakhstan and the use of educational domains for soft power application were examined based on the OECD report “Higher Education in Kazakhstan” for 2017 (OECD, 2017) and data from the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation regarding the number of Kazakhstani students studying in Russian universities (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2024).

The third stage of the research consisted of qualitative analysis using the method of thematic coding. At this stage, the documents and data considered in the previous stages were categorised into the following categories: language, education, culture, media and diplomacy. For each category, wording was identified (content analysis was conducted) indicating the use of soft power in relation to that category.

2.1 Methodological limitations

The data from the USC Center on Public Diplomacy for the years (USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2019) and the Brand Finance report (Brand Finance, 2024) are not directly comparable, as they utilize different sets of criteria in the formation of their soft power indices. However, they demonstrate that, despite these methodological differences, countries that maintain a consistent approach to using soft power as a primary tool of political influence will exhibit a similar overall trend.

2.2 Ethical issues

This study does not address issues related to interethnic relations within each country.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Soft power policy as a tool for shaping national branding

Soft power policy represents a significant tool in contemporary international relations. However, despite its importance, it does not directly translate into quantitative metrics, making it difficult to assess. Nevertheless,

periodic attempts by various institutions to develop methodologies for such assessments provide a generalized understanding of the role that soft power plays in the foreign policy of individual countries. Below are the data derived from the examination of the reports “The Soft Power 30” for the years 2015–2019, prepared by the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (Table 1).

Table 1: Dynamics of the Soft Power Index for the Top 30 Leading Countries from 2015 to 2019

Country/Year	Soft power index				
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
United Kingdom	75.61	75.97	75.72	80.55	79.47
Germany	73.89	72.60	73.67	78.87	78.62
United States	73.68	77.96	75.02	77.80	77.40
France	73.64	72.14	75.75	80.14	80.28
Canada	71.71	72.53	72.90	75.70	75.89
Australia	68.92	69.29	70.15	72.91	73.16
Switzerland	76.52	67.65	70.45	74.96	77.04
Japan	66.86	67.78	71.66	76.22	75.71
Sweden	66.49	66.97	69.32	74.77	77.41
Netherlands	65.21	64.14	67.89	73.79	72.03
Denmark	63.20	62.57	65.48	70.70	68.86
Italy	63.09	63.79	64.70	70.40	71.58
Austria	62.00	60.99	63.75	67.23	67.98
Spain	61.70	63.47	63.57	69.11	71.05
Finland	60.19	62.13	62.37	67.71	68.35
New Zealand	60.00	61.51	61.96	66.68	67.45
Belgium	58.85	59.70	62.80	67.25	67.17
Norway	57.96	61.64	65.20	69.60	71.07
Ireland	55.61	57.02	60.62	62.78	63.00
Korea, Rep.	54.32	51.44	58.40	62.75	63.00
Singapore	52.50	58.09	58.55	62.44	61.51
Portugal	48.97	51.79	54.43	57.98	59.28
Brazil	46.63	47.69	47.41	50.69	51.34
Poland	46.50	48.07	51.27	54.14	55.16
Greece	45.73	46.98	52.17	54.63	53.74
Israel	44.51	-	-	-	-
Czechia	43.26	44.43	48.73	52.64	54.35
Turkey	42.55	-	45.35	-	49.70
Mexico	42.52	-	-	-	-
China	40.85	45.04	50.50	51.85	51.25
Hungary	-	46.96	48.16	53.49	50.39
Russia	-	46.58	49.60	51.10	48.64
Argentina	-	44.17	-	48.89	-

Source: Authors' development based on Data from USC Center on Public Diplomacy (2019).

In this case, the assessment was based on criteria defined as indicators of soft power. These indicators included aspects related to production activities, cultural exchange, the use of modern technologies to expand influence, relevant state policies, involvement in international cooperation (including diplomatic activities), and educational programs. The data presented in Table 1 illustrate that the soft power index, influenced by a range of objective conditions, causes countries to fluctuate within the overall ranking. When evaluating the data, it is important to consider both the dynamic progression of a country in the ranking based on changes in the soft power index and the presence or absence of personal progress. Movement in the overall ranking is directly related to the dynamics of other countries, whereas personal ranking reflects the success of national soft power policies. For example, statistics on the use of soft power show that, having first entered the top thirty leaders in 2016, the Russian Federation did not make significant progress in this area over the following three years, moving from 27th to 30th place. However, it should be noted that from 2016 to 2018, the country made progress in soft power based on individual indicators, although in 2019 there was a decline in Russia's soft power index.

The events of 2022 necessitated a reassessment of the approaches to interstate relations between Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation. Based on reports dedicated to this situation from the Foreign Policy Research Institute, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn regarding the state of soft power in the relationship between the two countries. It is evident that the desire to maintain relations within a specific framework resulted in a cautious and restrained reaction to the escalation of Russian-Ukrainian relations from both Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. No direct criticism of Russia's actions was voiced. This reaction is largely attributed to the importance of Russia not only in the realms of economic relations and security but also as a labor market and provider of access to healthcare institutions (Pannier, 2022a). Concurrently, Kazakh authorities advised citizens to exercise restraint in posting and commenting on social media and to avoid using these platforms to provoke interethnic conflicts (Pannier, 2022b). A distinctive signal of "soft protest" was Kazakhstan's decision to cancel the traditional post-Soviet celebration of Victory Day. Diplomatic signals were also marked by restraint, as reflected in Kazakhstan's voting on resolutions concerning Russia's actions in Ukraine within the United Nations (Hess, 2022a). Thus, experts from the Foreign Policy Research Institute reasonably conclude that Russia's influence in the Central Asian region, and specifically in Kazakhstan, has somewhat diminished. The January

2022 crisis, during which Russia demonstrated its capacity for hard power, and subsequent attempts at economic pressure, did not enable it to retain its influence, while Kazakhstan continues to confidently pursue a multi-vector policy (Hess, 2022b). Thus, Russia's policy post-2022 exemplifies how meticulously cultivated influence based on soft power can be swiftly undermined.

A broader range of criteria for constructing the soft power index and more comprehensive statistics covering all UN member states is offered by the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index methodology, which includes 55 indicators (Brand Finance, 2024). Analysis of the provided data reveals a clear negative impact of any use of hard power on a country's position in this ranking. This is exemplified by the continuing decline in Russia's ranking, which dropped by three positions over the past year, moving from 13th to 16th place. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, holds the 80th position in this ranking, having also lost one position compared to 2023. Despite the significant differences in the rankings of each country, a comparison of the core indicators used to determine the overall score demonstrates that such disparities are often due to objective factors (Table 2).

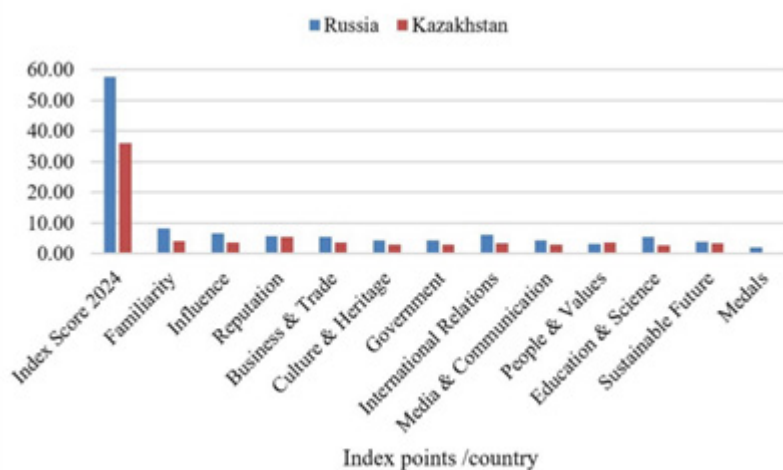
Table 2: *Comparison of Specific Indicators Underpinning the Soft Power Index for Kazakhstan and Russia*

Index points /country	Russia	Kazakhstan	Difference (%)
Index Score 2024	57.7	35.9	37.7
Familiarity	8.3	4.1	50.6
Influence	6.5	3.5	46.15
Business & Trade	5.5	3.5	36.36
Culture & Heritage	4.2	3.0	28.5
Government	4.3	2.9	32.5
International Relations	6.1	3.3	45.9
Media & Communication	4.2	3.0	28.5
People & Values	3.1	3.6	13.8
Education & Science	5.4	2.7	50
Sustainable Future	3.9	3.3	15.38
Medals	2	-	100

Source: Authors' development based on Brand Finance (2024).

For example, there is a significant gap (50.6%) in the indicator of global familiarity (Familiarity), which appears justified given that Russia, following the dissolution of the USSR, positioned itself as the successor state of an already well-known “brand.” There is also a notable disparity in the indicator of global influence (Influence) – 46.15% – and participation in international relations (45.9%). These discrepancies are closely tied to the widely recognized global brand. Conversely, the indicator of reputation (Reputation) shows no substantial differences (3.57%), and Kazakhstan surpasses Russia by 13.8% in the measure of human resources and values (People & Values). The gap in the indicator of sustainable future (Sustainable Future) is also not significant – 15.38%. Thus, substantial differences are observed in 5 out of 12 indicators (including the Medals indicator), three of which are attributed to historical factors. A more visual representation of the soft power index indicators for Russia and Kazakhstan is provided in the diagram (Figure1).

Figure 1: *Criteria Underlying the Formation of the Soft Power Index for Kazakhstan and Russia*



Source: Authors' development based on Brand Finance (2024).

Thus, when evaluating a state's soft power policy, it is crucial to assess the available indicators not only in quantitative terms but also to consider historical factors that may have influenced the formation of the soft power index and the specific ranking position.

3.2 Reflection of Russia's soft power policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan

The specificity of international relations is also reflected in the formalization of agreements through the signing of relevant international (intergovernmental) accords.

A second indicator of the effectiveness of one party's soft power policy in international relations is the direct or indirect reflection of such policy results in domestic legal and regulatory acts (Karpuntsov, Veresha, 2022). When examining the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan from the perspective of the influence of Russian soft power, attention should first be directed to Article 7 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The first part of this article establishes the status of the Kazakh language as the state language; however, the second part effectively mitigates the Kazakh language's status as the state language by requiring government bodies and local authorities to ensure the simultaneous official use of the Russian language (Akorda, 1995). This provision has been further developed in sectoral legislation.

In this context, it is important to consider the field of education, which is particularly susceptible to the impact of soft power policies. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education includes Article 9, which defines requirements for the language used in the educational process. Parts 2 and 4 of this article, while emphasizing the state status of the Kazakh language, also stipulate the mandatory study of the Russian language (Law of Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007). Therefore, it can be argued that Russian soft power policy has been successful in the linguistic sphere, as Russian, although not legally recognized as a state language, effectively functions as such in practice. Conversely, this situation can be viewed as a form of soft resistance to Russian influence, as the mere mention of the mandatory use of Russian does not equate to granting it the status of a state language.

It is also important to note that this approach to the study of the Russian language can be seen in the context of expanding educational opportunities for Kazakh students. According to data from the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, Kazakh students constitute the largest group of foreign students in Russian higher education institutions, numbering approximately 67,000 in the 2022/2023 academic year, with nearly half studying on a budget basis. There is a growing trend among Kazakh students to choose educational programs offered by Russian institutions that align with the needs of Kazakhstan's national economy. In

turn, diplomatic and consular institutions of Kazakhstan make efforts to maintain constant contact with the Kazakh student community, not only to provide assistance but also to offer current information about life and political events in Kazakhstan, including through updates on the official websites of these institutions (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2024). This alternative source of information also serves as a tool of soft power, as remaining well-informed about the situation in Kazakhstan helps Kazakh students become less susceptible to other targeted influences and also allows them to serve as sources of accurate information. Thus, the education of Kazakh students in Russian higher education institutions is bilateral. On one hand, Kazakh students are subjects of soft power influence; on the other hand, they are also agents of this influence, carrying elements of their national culture and gaining essential connections and understanding of another country's realities.

Furthermore, the attainment of independence marked the beginning of the process of internationalizing higher education in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Key aspects of this process include joining the Bologna Process and revising national curricula in line with international standards (OECD, 2017). This approach also serves as an indirect tool of soft power, as it both facilitates opportunities for Kazakh students to study abroad and enhances the attractiveness of the national higher education system. Importantly, this approach benefits not only students but also the academic community as a whole. Efforts to internationalize Kazakhstan's higher education system can also be viewed as an expression of a multi-vector policy that is not solely focused on cooperation with the Russian Federation.

In discussing the reflection of Russia's soft power policy in Kazakhstan, it is also important to consider the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (Akorda, 2020a). This document explicitly outlines the intention to further develop cooperation with Russia (sections 2.9, 4.2). However, it is crucial to note that while emphasizing the significance of relations with Russia, the Concept also articulates a range of provisions aimed at enhancing Kazakhstan's position on the international stage through the application of soft power tools. Furthermore, it reiterates that the country's policy remains multi-vector in nature.

3.3 Content-analytical assessment of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan's response to it

A comprehensive approach to assessing Russia's use of soft power and Kazakhstan's response to it requires combining the quantitative data of international indicators discussed above with an analysis of the content of national legislation and actual manifestations of soft power (where such an assessment is possible). For the practical implementation of this task, five categories were defined: language, education, culture, media and diplomacy (Table 3).

Table 3: *Content-analytical assessment of Russian soft power in Kazakhstan and Kazakhstan's reaction to it*

Analysis category	Act	Citation / data	Code	Interpretation as a soft-power instrument
Language	Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Education"	State bodies and local self-government bodies are obliged to use Russian language along with Kazakh Education is conducted in the state language, Russian, as well as, if necessary, in other languages	Language-institutionalisation The obligation of Russian language	Formal consolidation of the Russian language as a mandatory language in public administration is an instrument of Russia's influence. Russian language as a mandatory element of the education system.
Education	Report of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Russia	Approximately 67,000 Kazakh students study at Russian universities	Academic migration	Students become both objects of Russian influence and agents of „reverse“ influence.
	OECD Report	Inclusion of Kazakhstan in the Bologna process	Diversification of education	Demonstration of the desire for multi-vectorality and reduction of dependence on the Russian Federation.

Culture	Kazakhstan-Russia Plan of Cooperation in the field of culture	Festivals, days of culture, theatre tours	Bilateral projects in the culture sphere	Formation of a positive image of the Russian Federation through cultural exchanges.
	Brand Finance Index "Culture & Heritage" Section	Russia - 4.2, Kazakhstan- 3.0	Comparative attractiveness of Russian and Kazakh culture	Russia's higher rating reflects its stable cultural presence.
Media	FPRI Report	Authorities of Kazakhstan calls to avoid provocations in social networks	Soft resistance in the media sphere	Kazakhstan restricts the space for excessive Russian influence in the information field.
	Brand Finance Index "Media & Communication" Section	Russia - 4.2, Kazakhstan- 3.0	Comparative power of Russian and Kazakh media	The Russian Federation has a significantly greater recognition and communication coverage.
Diplomacy	External Policy Conception of Kazakhstan	The Republic of Kazakhstan intends to develop cooperation with the Russian Federation (p. 2.9; 4.2)	Strategic partnership	Confirmation of the stability of relations and recognition of the role of the Russian Federation.
	Kazakhstan UN voting results on resolutions on the Russian Federation aggression in Ukraine	No direct criticism of Russian politics	Restrained protest	Kazakhstan demonstrates distancing without open confrontation.

Source: developed by the author on the basis of the data of Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Akorda, 1995), the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Education (Law of Republic of Kazakhstan, 2007), report of the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation regarding the number of Kazakhstani students studying in Russian universities (Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Russian Federation, 2024); OECD report "Higher Education in Kazakhstan" for 2017 (OECD, 2017); Kazakhstan-Russia Plan of Cooperation in the field of culture (EmbassyLife, 2024); Brand Finance report (Brand Finance, 2024); Foreign Policy Research Institute under the Central Asia Initiative project (Foreign Policy Research

Institute, 2024); the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2030 (Akorda, 2020a); Kazakhstan’s voting on resolutions concerning Russia’s actions in Ukraine within the United Nations (Hess, 2022a).

Thus, the combination of quantitative indices with qualitative analysis of national legislation and international documents allows us to say that Russia’s soft power in Kazakhstan is especially manifested in the language and educational sphere. At the same time, Kazakhstan is forming a “soft resistance”, which is manifested in a restrained diplomatic response, which allows it to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy.

4 DISCUSSION

A critical aspect addressed in academic research is the notable failure of Russia’s soft power policy in certain regions, particularly Ukraine and Georgia, which has led to a damaging shift towards armed aggression, undermining its political image (Rutland, Kazantsev, 2016). This suggests that soft power is not a fundamental principle of Russian foreign policy but rather often a tool for political manipulation. This necessitates a critical evaluation of the stability of relations with Russia based on soft power tools, recognizing that significant deviations from this approach may occur in response to attempts by counterpart states to alter their political course. Rashidi also highlights significant discrepancies between the proclaimed soft power and the actual policies pursued by Russia in international relations (Rashidi, 2019). This was notably evidenced by Russia’s actions in Kazakhstan in January 2022. Despite the support of Kazakhstan’s official authorities, Russia’s actions demonstrate a readiness to resort to coercive methods to maintain its influence, which should be considered when forecasting Kazakhstan’s foreign policy in relation to Russia. This understanding is reflected in the work of Kazakh scholars, who suggest that Russia’s application of soft power should be viewed more as an exception rather than the norm (Paizova et al., 2021). Conversely, the increasing role of soft power globally and its significance for Kazakh-Russian relations, particularly in higher education cooperation, is emphasized (Ospanova et al., 2024).

One aspect not explored in this study, but which must be considered in light of Russia’s declining scores in soft power rankings, is the issue of competition in the application of soft power. Specifically, the political ambitions of China, which has consistently promoted its own soft power policy, cannot be overlooked. China is evaluated as a sufficiently influential

actor in international politics (Tanzim, Juhra, 2021). The need to consider this factor is significantly driven by Kazakhstan's orientation towards a multi-vector foreign policy, as highlighted in this study.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that despite efforts to develop methodologies for evaluating soft power and standardizing it through indices such as the soft power index, it remains an ancillary tool to hard power. The tools and methods for measuring hard power are mathematically precise (Henne, 2022). This approach is justified to some extent because the promotion of soft power methods often relies on a foundation of hard power. Conversely, as demonstrated by the example of Kazakh students studying at Russian universities, it is frequently challenging to determine who exactly utilizes the soft power tool. Since the effectiveness of soft power promotion is often influenced by human factors, it is difficult to predict which students will become the object and which will become the subject of influence, and consequently, which side will advance its objectives.

CONCLUSIONS

Soft power is a crucial instrument of political influence, enabling not only the achievement of desired outcomes in foreign relations but also the establishment of a country's image as a reliable and secure partner. Scholarly institutions propose various approaches to constructing soft power indices. Although these indices often rely on different criteria, countries with a consistent tendency to base their national policies on soft power generally exhibit stable high performance in such rankings.

A comparison between Kazakhstan and Russia on the key indicators underlying the soft power index reveals that discrepancies in rankings may be attributed to objective factors, including historical ones. However, the ability to compare specific national soft power indicators with those of global leaders in the field highlights areas that require increased attention. Such assessments can serve as a basis for developing relevant national programs and plans. In 2024, a significant gap is observed between Kazakhstan and Russia in terms of soft power application, with the latter demonstrating higher results. Nevertheless, a comparison of specific criteria used to form the soft power index shows that the substantial gap in the effectiveness of soft power is partly due to historical factors. For example, Russia's succession from the USSR endowed it with a politically influential international brand, thereby significantly enhancing the effectiveness of other soft power tools. Conversely, Kazakhstan surpasses Russia by 13.8% in the People & Values

indicator, and differences in other indicators (reputation, sustainable future, media and communications, culture) are less than 30%.

Analysis of Kazakhstan's national legislation indicates the ongoing influence of Russia on the country's language policy. At the same time, the constitutional status of the Russian language as mandatory but non-official can be seen as a form of soft resistance to this influence. When considered alongside the use of the education sector as a tool of soft power, it is evident that this approach to the Russian language not only expands educational opportunities for Kazakh students but also transforms them into both objects and subjects of Russian influence. Studying in Russian universities allows the next generation of leaders to gain essential experience, connections, and understanding of the specifics of the counterpart country.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The practical significance of this research lies in its potential applications for planning future relations with Russia, as well as for developing relevant bilateral agreements and cooperation programs. Future research directions could include the development of strategies for advancing Kazakhstan's soft power policy, informed by the study and consideration of the experiences of leading countries worldwide with respect to specific criteria of the soft power index. Another avenue for further investigation could be the continued exploration of the concept of a three-vector structure of soft power: influence – decline – soft resistance.

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