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Contents

Volume 25, No. 2, 2025

Scientific Articles

SJPS | Slovak Journal of Political Sciences
Scientific article
sjps.fsvucm.sk I ISSN 1335-9096 (online)
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BEYOND BORDERS AND DIFFERENCE: HIGHLY SKILLED SLOVAK MIGRATION TO CZECHIA

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Abstract
This paper investigates the migration of highly skilled slovak professionals to czechia, an understudied form of intra-regional mobility within central europe. In contrast to migration research that prioritises long-distance or global movements, this study examines mobility between two culturally, linguistically, and historically proximate societies. Situating slovak mobility within a post-czechoslovak and central european context, the analysis draws on demographic and educational data as well as semi-structured interviews with highly skilled slovaks living and working in czechia. The findings demonstrate that this migration flow is shaped by both proximity and persistent boundaries. Shared language and cultural familiarity significantly ease mobility, integration, and labour market entry. Yet slovak identity continues to function as a marker of symbolic difference, producing moments of perceived foreignness in professional and social interactions. While many slovaks do not self-identify as migrants, subtle forms of czech centrism and hierarchical representations contribute to differentiated experiences of belonging. By foregrounding an intra-regional mobility often presumed to be socially and politically neutral, the paper challenges dominant assumptions in migration studies and political science. It shows how processes of migratisation operate even within highly similar societies and argues that identity, symbolic hierarchies, and centre–periphery dynamics remain salient in shaping mobility and belonging in the czech–slovak context.

Keywords: *Czechia, Slovak Migration, Intra-Regional Mobility, Identity, Belonging, Symbolic Boundaries*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the mobility of highly skilled professionals has become an increasingly important subject of migration studies (Bailey and Mulder, 2017; Czaika, 2018; Koser and Salt, 1997). While much attention has been devoted usually to global flows of people across distant borders, regional and intra-national migration within culturally and linguistically close contexts remains less explored. One of these examples is the case of Slovak migrants in Czechia. Despite the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the two countries continue to share deep historical ties, geographical proximity, and cultural similarities. Language is another point of similarity. Slovak and Czech, as mutually intelligible languages, create a context in which language does not function as a traditional obstacle to settlement or professional advancement. Instead, the linguistic proximity can serve as a facilitating factor in many aspects of the migrant experience, including access to employment, integration into society, and, more broadly, the sense of being "at home" in the host environment. Most Slovaks in Czechia do not consider themselves "migrants," but some of them admit being "foreigners." However, speaking the Slovak language in public settings in Czechia can also serve as a marker of difference.

Migration between Czechia and Slovakia must be understood against the backdrop of their shared statehood within Czechoslovakia (1918–1992). From its foundation in 1918 until its peaceful dissolution on January 1, 1993, except for five years during the Second World War, movement across the internal Czech–Slovak border was free and frequent. From a historical perspective, it can be stated that the Czech lands were more industrialized and urbanized, while Slovakia remained predominantly agrarian. This structural imbalance generated significant flows of Slovaks into Czech regions for employment and education, while a smaller but also a notable flow of Czech migrants, especially teachers, engineers, and doctors, moved to Slovakia (Drbohlav 1994; Halás 2014). After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, these movements formally became labelled as "international migration," yet reciprocal agreements preserved the right of citizens of both states to live, work, and study in the other country without restriction. The important threshold is the entrance of Slovakia and the Czech Republic to the European Union (2004) and subsequently to the Schengen zone (2007), which enables free movement of people across borders. Although mobility has always been two-directional, the intensity and scale have been markedly asymmetrical: Slovak migration to Czechia has consistently outweighed Czech migration to Slovakia.

Migration from Slovakia to Czechia can be interpreted in different ways. Following the neoclassical economic theory (Harris and Todaro, 1970), Slovaks migrate to Czechia in order to maximize their incomes and opportunities. However, from the structuralist perspective, this migration can strip Slovakia of its talent, and it can lead to the loss of human capital (Docquier and Rapoport, 2012). In the ideal scenario, highly skilled Slovaks can be transnational actors (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Faist, 2013) who contribute to both sending and receiving societies.

This asymmetry in the movement is usually related to international student migration and economic migration, but it can also point to the phenomenon of brain drain as migration from Slovakia often involves young and highly educated Slovaks seeking better career opportunities (Bahna, 2013) or students (Fischer and Lipovská, 2015). Looking at it through the lens of postcoloniality, we would like to inquire about Czech-centrism (cf. Polish-centrism by Balogun, 2020) in this bidirectional migration flow and its specifics. In the wake of postcolonial scholarship about Central and Eastern Europe (Pickels, 2005; Varkočková, 2025), this paper attempts to critically inquire about the migration of highly skilled workers from Slovakia into Czechia. While being treated unproblematically and almost as a silent spot in the Central and Eastern European migration scholarship, we would like to point to its salience and show that even this least problematic migration can become "migratised" (Tudor, 2023), and there can be difficulties encountered by the Slovak migrants in Czechia. The central research question asks how highly skilled Slovak migrants in Czechia understand and articulate their sense of belonging and identity vis-à-vis the Czechs. The close contact between the nations during the Czechoslovak period can lend some support to the contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) and why Slovaks are perceived most favourably among foreign nationals by the Czechs (CVVM, 2025). Similarly, the dichotomy of "insiders" and "outsiders" (Bannerji, 2000; Carling, Erdal, and Ezzati, 2024) does not necessarily apply to Slovaks as they can be seen as an extended in-group.

This article begins by outlining the background and specific features of Slovak migration to Czechia. Although data on highly skilled Slovak workers are not available, we provide an overview of overall migration statistics and the number of Slovak students enrolled at Czech universities. These figures establish the broader context for the main argument of the paper. The article then introduces semi-structured interviews as the primary research method, followed by an analysis of findings concerning perceived cultural similarities and differences, as well as the role of language. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections synthesize the key insights of this study.

1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Czech and Slovak nations experienced distinct historical development, and only in 1918 they created a common state, Czechoslovakia. From 1918 to 1939, both nations lived together in one state, however, the demand for autonomy in Slovakia became strong, and Slovaks declared independence in 1939. The separation lasted for the whole period of the Second World War (1939-1945). In 1945, after the victory of Allied Forces in Europe, the Czech and Slovak nations reunited and restored a common state. In 1948, Czechoslovakia came under the rule of the Communist Party, which lasted until 1989. Under the Communist era, the Czech and Slovak borders could be crossed without any restrictions, and Czechs and Slovaks could freely move from one region to another. During that period, many Slovaks arrived in the Czech borderland to fill the population gap after the expelled Germans, and many others arrived in the Ostrava region to work in a developing industrial sector. Therefore, historically, mainly Slovaks migrated to the Czech territory and migration in the opposite direction was much less common.

On the whole, Czechoslovakia was a country of emigration (Seidlová, 2018). New arrivals to the country usually came under bilateral agreements, and due to unrest or unstable situations in their countries. Migrants leaving Czechoslovakia were typically intellectuals or simply citizens who disagreed with the Communist rule and were typically perceived as political refugees (Honusková et al., 2016). When Czechoslovakia split into two countries in 1993—Czechia and Slovakia—both countries had to develop their own approaches towards migration policy. Czechia was compelled to develop a migration policy as it became a destination for migrants, primarily from post-Soviet states (Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia) as well as from Slovakia. Unlike these countries (with the exception of Slovakia), Czechia successfully transitioned from a state-controlled to a market-oriented economy, largely thanks to its geographic proximity to Germany and other Western European countries. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, many Slovaks returned to Slovakia and at the same time, students and workers from Slovakia came to Czechia. Slovaks living in the territory of Czechia were granted a new status instead of Czechoslovak citizenship. If they did not accept Czech citizenship, they were not seen as citizens of the country but became a national minority. The Czech laws did not allow dual citizenship at that time, but after the amendment to the citizenship law in 2014, Slovaks were allowed to have Czech as well as Slovak citizenship (Rychlík, 2015). At the time of dissolution, most Slovaks living in Czechia opted for Czech citizenship (Šrajerová, 1999).

The establishment of borders between Czechia and Slovakia also meant that Slovaks needed a passport to arrive in Slovakia, which some of them bore with great difficulty (Šrajerová, 2001). The bilateral agreement between the Czechs and Slovaks allows the employability of citizens without official permissions (Rychlík, 2015).

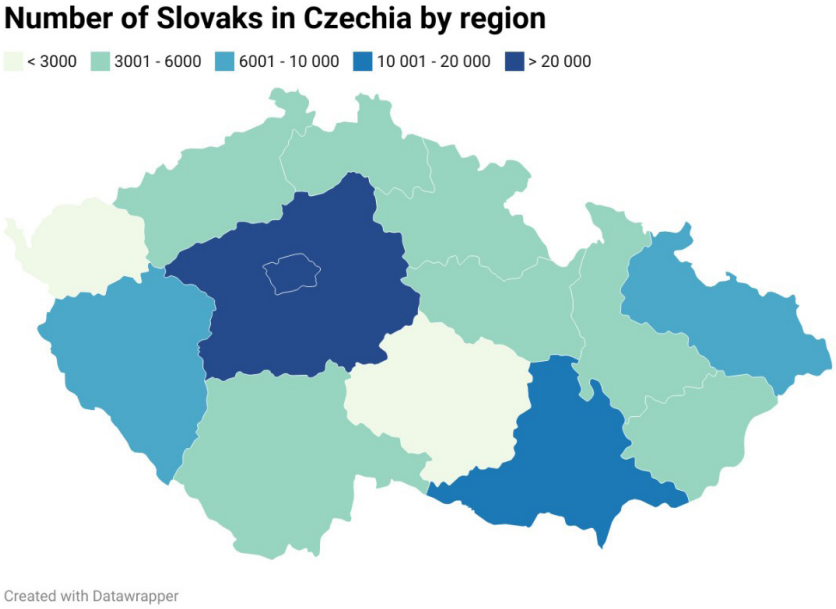
In 1991, Czechia was home to 314,877 Czech citizens of Slovak nationality and 166,363 Slovak citizens. By 2001, these numbers had declined to 193,190 Czech citizens of Slovak nationality and 24,201 Slovak citizens with permanent residence (ČSÚ, 2021a). From 1993 to 1999, migration policy in Czechia was marked by the absence of substantial state intervention. Scholars frequently characterize this stage as a "laissez-faire" period, in which governmental influence on migration processes was minimal, migrants retained considerable personal autonomy (Barša and Baršová, 2005; Drbohlav et al., 2008), and systematic incentive mechanisms were lacking (Drbohlav et al., 2010). One of the most evident consequences of this hands-off approach was the non-existence of a coherent visa regime combined with highly permeable borders (Barša and Baršová, 2005). Within this relatively unregulated environment, migration flows were dominated by Ukrainians, who gradually established themselves as the largest ethnic minority in the country. Finally, in 1999, Czechia introduced an "Act on the Residence of Foreign Nationals" (number 326/1999 Collection of laws) due to the necessary harmonization of the Czech policy with the legal norms of the European Union (Čermák and Lupták, 2015). After joining the European Union in 2004, Czechia became a more attractive country for foreign migrants.

According to data from the Czech Statistical Office, the entry of both countries into the European Union (Slovakia entered the European Union the same year as Czechia) triggered an annual increase of immigration of Slovaks to Czechia until 2020. The only exception was the impact of the 2008 economic crisis, which resulted in a decrease of Slovak immigration in 2009 (ČSÚ, 2020) and the year which is associated with the COVID-19 epidemic. In 2022, most Slovakian citizens lived in Prague (24,145), in the Central Bohemian Region (18,318), and in the South Moravian Region (12,698) (ČSÚ, 2021a). However, due to open borders between Slovakia and Czechia, it is difficult to analyse the number and conditions of the Slovak community due to dispersion and small cultural distance (Uherek, 2010).

Slovaks living in Czechia are diversified and they are represented by manual workers working in manufacturing industry, the wholesale trade, retail, construction sites, transport, and warehouses, but they are also

doctors, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, students, or administrative workers (ČSÚ, 2021b). Slovaks often work in permanent roles and seasonal work is not prevalent (Ezzedine and Pažejová, 2006). The reason might be associated with searching for better jobs as the differences in salaries between Czechia and Slovakia are rather low and this affects the kinds of employment Slovaks are likely to migrate for (Bahna, 2011). Furthermore, the majority of Slovaks live in Prague, where the salaries are generally higher. According to the Czech Statistical Office (ČSÚ, 2025a), as of 31 December 2023, there were 119,182 Slovaks living in Czechia. Their regional distribution (Figure 1) shows that Slovaks mainly live in Prague, Central Bohemia, and South Moravia, together accounting for almost 60% of all Slovaks residing in the country.

Figure 1: Number of Slovaks in Czechia by region (as of 31 December 2023)



Source: Data retrieved from ČSÚ (2025a), created by authors via Datawrapper

Owing to the close cultural and linguistic ties between Slovaks and Czechs, mixed marriages between the two groups are relatively common (Šrajerová, 2012). Slovaks are able to communicate with Czechs by using their own native language, making the relations between both nations exceptional (Vranovský, 1999) and allowing for easier interactions (Graf et

al., 2015). The possible misunderstandings are mainly caused by the younger generation of Czechs, who are sometimes not able to understand the Slovak language. This is because the Czech language has a stronger presence in Slovak media and culture than the Slovak language does in Czechia (Graf et al., 2015). Graf et al. (2015) discuss cultural closeness and show how respondents referred to differences between both nationalities, which is usually the case in relations between majority and minority, but they mainly focused on what they have in common. Some respondents even mentioned the sense of brotherhood and others refused the category of "foreigners" (Graf et al., 2015). To summarize, Slovaks are not seen as exceptional from the perspective of migration policy, but their exceptional position is due to cultural closeness, language, and acceptance in public. In that regard, Slovaks are not publicly seen as migrants who threaten the Czech nation.

Slovak students represent an important category as many of them decide to stay in Czechia after finishing their studies. Their numbers have been increasing steadily since 1998, when an agreement about the common conditions for Slovak and Czech students was signed. As of 2024, Slovak students in Czechia accounted for 7.2% out of 17.8% foreign students studying in Czechia. Their relative share in comparison to Czech students is relatively stable, slightly increasing from 5.0% in 2005 to their current percentage of 7.2%. However, their relative share among foreign students is dropping significantly. While in 2005 there were only 7.2% foreign students in total (out of which Slovaks accounted for 5.0%), the share of foreign students increased to 17.8% in 2024, but the proportion of Slovak students remained almost the same (7.2%). In 2024, there were 314,850 students enrolled in study programs at Czech universities, out of which 55,996 were foreign students, including 22,699 Slovaks. In other words, there were approximately 18% foreign students in Czechia and Slovaks accounted for approximately 40% of all foreign students (ČSÚ, 2025b).

Notably, the enrolment of Slovak students at Czech universities shows considerable variation, with the majority concentrated in Brno and Prague. For example, at Masaryk University in Brno, 6,278 Slovak students are enrolled, accounting for roughly 19.6% of the total student population of 32,000, and a similar share (~18.5%) study at Brno University of Technology. On the contrary, there are fewer than 5% of Slovak students enrolled in JE Purkyně University in Ústí nad Labem, in České Budějovice, or in Liberec. There are approximately 10,000 Slovak students studying in Brno, and 8,000 students studying in Prague. However, Slovak students account for approximately. 19.2 % in Brno, in Prague it is only 6.3 % due to a very high

number of foreign students from other countries. Other important cities are Ostrava, Olomouc, Hradec Králové, Pardubice, and Plzeň, where the share oscillates between 6.0 and 6.7% (ČSÚ, 2025b; MŠMT, 2025). To sum up, the highest number of Slovaks study in Brno and Prague, but their share is more than three times higher in Brno, making Brno the most attractive city to study abroad.

2 METHODS

This paper is part of a broader study focused on highly skilled migrants' experiences in Czechia. The research was conducted between April and September 2024. For this study, we conducted 73 interviews with highly skilled foreigners in Czechia. The selection criteria were tertiary education, either gained abroad or in the Czech Republic, and living in Czechia for at least a year at the time of the interview. For the purposes of this paper, we use eight interviews conducted with highly skilled Slovaks living in Czechia, out of which there were four with women and four with men. Among them professionals working in business, as doctors, researchers, or IT specialists. Their individual characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

Recruitment of participants took place in multiple stages. Initially, an online survey exploring the experiences of foreigners in Czechia was distributed through our professional networks and relevant Facebook groups. In the second stage, participants who expressed interest in a follow-up interview and left their emails in the survey were subsequently contacted directly via email. Additional interviewees were recruited through the personal networks and snowball sampling. The majority of interviews were conducted in person in multiple Czech cities and two took place online. The specific localities for interviews were chosen according to participants' own wishes, usually in a calm environment well-known to participants.

The applied methodology was qualitative, and the method used was a semi-structured interview. This method enabled us to focus on deep insights into the research topic due to the subjective experience of participants. This fitted the purpose of our research to elaborate on the subjective perception of (non-)acceptance in Czech society. The method also enabled flexibility as it allowed for preparing a specific list of questions in advance and asking additional questions in the context of the interviews. The semi-structured interview was composed of 20 main questions related to discrimination, migration, and life in Czechia. We used the same list of questions for each participant, and the average interview lasted around 45 minutes. All interviews with Slovak participants were conducted in Czech or Slovak.

Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of participants, transcribed verbatim, and saved in the authors' personal archives. The data was analysed using Atlas.ti software. We conducted a thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for and reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. An inductive approach was adopted, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data rather than from predefined theoretical categories.

Regarding the authors' positionalities, all are affiliated with academia. They hold positions as assistant professors, while one is a doctoral student. These roles are considered highly skilled, providing insight into how participants in similarly skilled positions may navigate their roles and the challenges they may encounter. Furthermore, authors used their social networks to find participants for the research, which might have been easier given their social position. Informed consent was obtained from all study participants, securing their confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, they could withdraw from the research at any time, and no data were given to third parties. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Science, Palacky University Olomouc (reference number 23-07).

Table 1: Participants' characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Field of Work	Place of Residence
P1	male	39	Business	Karviná
P2	female	40	Business	Havlíčkův Brod
P3	female	28	Business	Olomouc
P4	male	25	Medicine	Brno
P5	male	32	Business	Prague
P6	female	39	Research	Prague
P7	female	38	Medicine	Ostrava
P8	male	39	IT	Ostrava

Source: authors

3 RESULTS

3.1 Cultural familiarity and difference

For much of the 20th century, both nations coexisted within one shared state – Czechoslovakia (during periods 1918-1939 and 1945-1989). The official nationality was "Czechoslovak", rooted in the ideological concept of Czechoslovakism, which presented Czechs and Slovaks as "two branches of the same nation" (Henderson, 2002). The peaceful dissolution of the state in 1993 marked the beginning of two independent republics, yet the legacy of shared government, language development, and cultural exchange continues to shape mutual perceptions and interactions. Today, relations between the two nations are exceptionally close. This familiarity was reflected in the interviews, where participants emphasized that they do not feel like "foreigners" in the Czech Republic. As one participant shared: "I do not feel as a foreigner in the Czech Republic. There is still such a strong bond among us and many times I had the feeling that we did not split up. I never perceived that I should be from abroad." (P4, M, 25, Slovakia). This is in line with the findings of Sylvia Graf and her colleagues (2015). Such sentiment suggests that shared history and cultural proximity reduce the likelihood of "othering", allowing Slovaks to integrate more seamlessly into Czech society. Nevertheless, some participants did encounter subtle forms of stereotyping or reminders on their non-Czech status. Some infrequent acts of microaggression (Sue & Spanierman, 2020) emerged in public spaces.

For example, one participant recalled: "I was travelling by metro in Prague, I had to speak in Slovak language and I heard some voices that we are taking the jobs to the people in the Czech Republic. But that is all." (P2, F, 40, Slovakia). Another participant described: "It happened once in a pub. I was in the bathroom, and the waiter said to my mother: 'We're in the Czech Republic, we speak Czech here.' So I think it's because of how I come across – people wouldn't dare say something like that to me, but it happened to my mom." (P5, M, 32, Slovakia). Other respondents noted that even though they did not perceive open discrimination, subtle comments or questions occasionally made them feel othered. As one participant explained:

Sometimes people ask: 'Why are you here if you are from Slovakia, why don't you go back home?' I'm not even sure whether it's meant in a discriminatory way, but such questions do appear. I would call it minor unpleasantness rather than discrimination in the true sense of the word (P6, F, 39, Slovakia). Similarly, another participant reflected: "I've encountered

some negative reactions to the fact that I'm studying in the Czech Republic – comments like that I study on the money of Czech taxpayers. But otherwise, I don't feel anyone has discriminated against me because I'm from another country." (P7, F, 38, Slovakia).

While Slovaks generally perceive Czechs as culturally similar, participants still noted differences in what they labelled as mentality and behaviour. These differences were often framed in terms of emotionality versus rationality, spontaneity versus precision, and regional variation within Czechia itself. One participant observed: "Czech and Slovaks are similar. It is hard to find some cultural difference. But in Prague, Czechs are sometimes somewhat perfectionists. It depends how you look at it. It is something inherited from Germans, being precise, to calculate everything, to plan everything. Maybe just individuals, but they are more present in population than in Slovakia, where it is more unrestrained and emotional. This is a slight difference, which might be considered an advantage or disadvantage. In Slovakia, the nation is more unrestrained and less rational." (P1, M, 39, Slovakia). Another participant expressed this contrast more vividly: "Czechs are… dry rusks. In meaning that you are pulled a lot to Germany: Ordnung (Order), Richter (Direction)… you are very, very serious usually. Slovaks are more unrestrained." (P2, F, 40, Slovakia). These interesting observations can be seen in the perceptions of Europeanness from the most rational (Western) countries to the less rational and 'backward' Eastern nations (Kalmar, 2022).

The emotional-rational divide was a recurring theme. Several Slovaks described Czech society as emotionally reserved, having a stronger attachment to money, and somehow influenced by the "German nature". They find these aspects challenging in everyday interactions. One participant, who had lived in Czechia for thirteen years, explained:

I do not like that Czechs are so cold. If I compare them with Slovaks, and I have lived here for thirteen years, it is cold. The difference in emotions. Slovaks are more emotional, which might bring its own problems, but it is closer to me. So this cold, that people have problems greeting you, to smile, to start some basic communication. This one thing I do not like it here and it is connected with the second issue – emotion vs. racio. Czechs are much more rational and Slovaks are more emotional" (P5, M, 32, Slovakia).

This contrast was also evident in attitudes toward money and social behaviour. The same participant elaborated:

"In Slovakia, I have never solved money like here. The attitude towards money is different. Here, people rely very on exact calculations, correct cash

back, and paying bills separately. I think that here people are much more attached to the many and are not letting the motion flow. This might be a native characteristic, but this is what I like about the Czechs. Slovaks are joking about it, that the Czechs are going for a holiday and they bring with them schnitzel in bread and are fully packed. This is what Slovaks don't like. But I see that the Czechs are going for two or three holidays per year and all fulfilling these things, reaching much more, while the Slovak is paying all inclusive. To sum up, I like that the Czechs are more ramblers and nature-minded. I like the idea of packing schnitzel and gaining more abroad. But I have significantly noticed the difference between Moravians and Prague people. I have lived [in Prague] for ten years and I have no friends from Prague. All my friends in Prague are from Moravia – from Ostrava, from Olomouc. People from Ostrava are very close to Slovaks. I see almost no difference there. So, the rationality and cold mind… sometimes it is a pro, but it is also the biggest difference that bothers me." (P5, M, 32, Slovakia)."

These perceptions of Czech rationality, precision, and material focus were consistently mentioned across interviews and can be interpreted through several theoretical lenses. These will be mentioned in the discussion.

3.2 The role of language

Slovaks occupy a unique position within the Czech linguistic landscape, primarily due to the close proximity of the Slovak and Czech language and the mutual understanding between them. Many Czechs understand Slovak well and vice versa. Despite this linguistic closeness, specific challenges arise in everyday communication, particularly in relation to generational differences and the use of Slovak language in the dominantly Czech environment.

One of the most prominent issues is the generational shift in language comprehension. Younger Czechs, born after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, understand Slovak less fluently than older generations. This shift therefore influences how Slovaks choose to communicate in Czech society. The role of generation is highlighted by one participant: "It depends with whom I communicate. If I communicate with young people, who are more than twenty years old, then I use Czech and when it is someone older, then I use Slovak" (P2, F, 40, Slovakia). Another participant also confirms the role of generation as he points out:

I can communicate in Czech when it's necessary, but it's more useful with younger people who don't understand Slovak. With the older generation, you can easily communicate in both Czech and Slovak. Even when I write emails, I usually write without diacritics. I'm still old school, from the MS-DOS days, and there I wrote in Czech without diacritics…. because Slovak without diacritics, well, nobody would be able to read that. So, in some work communication, I probably send messages with grammar mistakes and in Czech. But so far, everyone seems to tolerate it, since our work is about numbers. It's not really a barrier. (P1, M, 39, Slovakia). It seems that some Slovaks are adapting their choice of language depending on the generation of their communication partners.

The nature of one's profession also plays a significant role in determining language use. Certain jobs require a high level of proficiency of Czech language, while others allow for greater freedom: "Mainly, there are some practical things. For example, I could not be a moderator on the TV, as the Czech language is required. Slovak language is somewhat accepted, but I already delivered a lecture in Czech" (P1, M, 39, Slovakia). In medical settings, Slovak may be used predominantly, but Czech is sometimes necessary depending on the patient's needs. One participant working as a doctor in Czechia noted:

"In 95% of cases, I can manage to use Slovak, but in my position of doctor, the Czech language is merely a voluntary thing. But I have used it in hospital in some cases. For example, when we had a patient with a stroke or a child of small age, who might have problems with Slovak language. I have used Czech, but normally I am not using it and I use Slovak language on a daily basis. I have no problem with that. When I used Czech, it was from my own initiative (P4, M, 25, Slovakia)."

In other professional environments, the use of Czech may be more appropriate than necessity:

"I never needed it or my boss never required me to speak Czech. Maybe I, myself, sometimes felt that within education it was more appropriate to use Czech language, to make education more friendly to students. Or sometimes in the communication with my customers, I sometimes switched to Czech, because I was working for a Czech company. But it was not mandatory or required (P3, F, 28, Slovakia)."

While Czech may be preferred or expected in certain contexts, Slovaks often retain the freedom to use their language, especially when mutual understanding is not compromised. Unlike other immigrant groups, for Slovaks, geography (such as living in central versus peripheral regions) plays a relatively minor role in language use. The key factor remains generational understanding and situational appropriateness. However, regional differences do exist. One participant stated:

"Moravian-Silesian Region is somewhat a crossroad in between Czechia, Slovakia and Poland. Everyone here understands Slovaks. So far, I met nobody who does not understand, so I try to keep my Slovak and speak Slovak almost all the time. The majority of people who live here have somebody from Slovakia in the family. So far I listen to people here, this person has Slovak mother, that person Slovak father, someone else a grandma from Slovakia, someone else a husband or wife. I dare to say that half of the population here are half Slovaks. Historically, many Slovaks and Poles came here to work in coal mines, and they stayed here. In Prague, the situation is slightly different (P8, M, 39, Slovakia)."

Familiarity with Slovak language and culture therefore facilitates its continued use, particularly in areas with larger Slovak populations. Despite the linguistic closeness between Czech and Slovak, adapting to the host country's language is not always straightforward or even necessary. In some cases, attempting to speak the other language may feel unnatural or counterproductive:

"I do not think that in the Czech and Slovak case it is necessary that the immigrant knows the language of the country where he lives. And sometimes, it might be counterproductive in some cases. But if we talk about different languages and different migrants without this language proximity, it is absolutely necessary (P5, M, 32, Slovakia)."

Adapting to the host country's language is not always essential. In some situations, trying to speak the local language may even work against effective communication. This sentiment is also echoed by one of the authors, a Czech national who lived in Slovakia for seven years. In certain situations, a Czech person speaking Slovak, or a Slovak speaking Czech, may come across as awkward or forced. Nevertheless, despite this unique linguistic closeness, specific communication patterns between the Czechs and Slovaks persist.

It is to say that Slovak participants rarely described their personal experiences in Czechia as discriminatory. This apparent absence of perceived discrimination can be attributed to the deep cultural, historical, and linguistic proximity between Czechs and Slovaks. The participants remarked on how geographical distinctions between Silesia, Moravia, and Bohemia, together with the linguistic situation, shape regional perceptions within Czechia. Participants also differentiated between the generations with the older Czechs allegedly being more accustomed to hearing the Slovak language. The participants also mentioned possible cultural differences with some comparing Czechs leaning more towards Germans in some cultural aspects, reflecting longstanding historical influences. Taken together, these factors provide a framework for understanding the ways in which Slovaks can perceive Czechs but are not a definite guide or typology.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on recent critical migration scholarship, it has been suggested that scholars need to become more attentive to their own predispositions and positionalities (Minca, 2003). While being Czech and researching Slovak migration to Czechia, we must be mindful of how our national and cultural background might affect our analytical distance and interpretation. We understand the experience of Slovaks in Czechia as unique based on the shared historical experience of two nations under one country for the majority of the 20th century and hence, it represents a unique case study. However, given this proximity, there has been little research on Slovak migration to Czechia, and this migration is often seen as unproblematic. There are many highly skilled individuals among the Slovak migrants to Czechia, which can lead to wider structural inequalities and human capital flight from Slovakia. Highly educated and professionally accomplished individuals are seen as mobile, cosmopolitan actors whose transnational careers afford them privileged positions within the social hierarchy (Faist, 2013). In this sense, our participants were privileged compared to other migrants living in Czechia, first, because of their education and working positions, and second, because of the cultural capital (Sullivan, 2008) that was associated with being familiar with the Czech culture and language.

There are various theories which show how the findings of our study can be framed in the wider field of social sciences. Social identity theory (see, for example, Tajfel, 1970, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1978) interprets these characteristics as culturally endorsed values within Czech national identity,

while intergroup contact theory (see, for example, Kenworthy et al., 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006, 2013a, 2013b) sees them as outcome of repeated social interaction, often with positive connections. With increased contact, there is the likelihood of fostering more positive relationships and reducing prejudice (Allport, 1954). Importantly, the perception of Czech-Slovak differences has evolved over time. In 1990, Slovaks stereotyped Czechs with traits such as cunningness, snobbery, dominance, laziness, materialism, volubility, great talkativeness, egoism, or greed (Frič, Bútorová & Rokosová, 1992: 54-55).

On the other hand, Dumetz and Gáboríková (2017) find that Czechs tend to see Slovaks as more relationship-oriented and more openly expressive of emotions in both professional and private settings. Conversely, Slovaks perceive their Czech colleagues as more rule-focused, task-oriented, and emotionally restrained. We have found similar perceptions among the participants but not exclusively. While the participants did not often emphasize differences, there were still perceptions of Czechs as more "rational" and "less emotional". Broadly speaking, Slovaks are often associated with the more emotional, collectivist, and patriarchal East, whereas Czechs are linked to the more rational, individualistic, and egalitarian West (Pospěch, 2021). However, these geographies can be interpreted as reflecting different positions and aspirations toward greater "Westernness" among Central and Eastern European countries, as conceptualized by Kalmar (2022). Some participants also encountered subtle forms of microaggression, e.g. insisting on speaking Czech or asking why they were living or studying in Czechia.

During the communist era, Czechs were often seen as "older brothers," associated with rationality, while Slovaks were viewed as "younger brothers" with emotional reactions (Holý, 2010: 11). This paternalistic view does not seem to prevail. Today the negative views described by Frič, Bútorová and Rokosová (1992) have softened considerably, reflecting a more respectful relationship. Although certain stereotypes persist, the boundaries of "otherness" have become increasingly blurred. The relationship between Czechs and Slovaks is arguably strong, marked by mutual respect and high levels of positive perception (Jaworsky et al., 2023; Rapoš Božič et al., 2023). Slovaks have been consistently ranked by the Czechs as the most preferred nationality (CVVM, 2025). These suggest that cultural familiarity not only facilitates integration but also fosters a sense of shared identity that transcends.

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WHO HOLDS THE NARRATIVE? FACEBOOK DISCOURSE AND POLITICAL MESSAGING AFTER THE FICO ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT[1]

Tomáš Dvorský[2] and Peter Dubóczi[3]

Abstract
The attempted assassination of Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico on 15 May 2024 represented a turning point in the country's political and media landscape. As an extraordinary act of political violence, it not only disrupted the domestic political agenda but also sparked an intense wave of public communication and discursive framing. This study examines the political communication on Facebook in the weeks following the attack, with a particular focus on the narratives that political actors used to interpret the event, shape public opinion, and mobilize their supporters. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative methods, the research identifies sixteen recurring narratives, analyses their frequency and communication effectiveness, and maps their use across the political spectrum. The findings show that emotionally charged and polarizing narratives – particularly those invoking ideological antagonism, cultural conflict, and blame attribution – were not only the most frequent but also the most engaging for audiences. Coalition-affiliated actors, especially from the SMER-SD party, dominated both in narrative intensity and communicative reach. The study argues that in the Slovak context, political violence becomes a powerful symbolic event, rapidly transformed into a discursive battleground for legitimacy, identity, and influence. The research contributes to the broader understanding of political communication in moments of crisis, especially in fragile and polarized democracies.

Keywords: *Dassassination attempt, Discourse, Facebook, Fico, Narratives, Slovakia.*

INTRODUCTION

The attempted assassination of Prime Minister Robert Fico on May 15, 2024, marked a significant moment that captured widespread public

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attention across Europe. It represented a rare attack on a high-ranking politician, something not seen in the European Union for decades. The attack was a significant moment that influenced political developments in Slovakia. However, the significance of the event can also be understood within a broader international context, as it occurred during a period of intense social polarization — a challenge not only for the Slovak Republic but for many countries around the world. Just two months later, on July 13, 2024, the world was shaken by an assassination attempt on Donald Trump during a presidential campaign rally, an incident that profoundly influenced both the tone and trajectory of the US presidential campaign.

Similarly, the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico strongly resonated in Slovak society and media environment. The relevance of this topic has contributed to the creation of various conspiracy theories, as reported by the Focus agency survey for medium 360tka, which highlighted the different views of voters from selected political parties on this topic (360ka, 2025).

The country has long ranked above average in terms of its vulnerability to disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hybrid and foreign influence (Sýkora, 2022, Chlebcová, Smith, 2023, Klobucký, 2024). A wide range of political and non-political actors began using the assassination attempt to strengthen their influence and power by promoting their own narratives about the reasons and motives behind the attack. This article examines how the most influential political figures on social media interpreted the event in its immediate aftermath, each employing narratives to shape public perception.

Within the social media in Slovakia, the dominant position is held by the social network Facebook, which also in 2024 held the status of the most used social network in Slovak population. According to a survey conducted by the Go4insight agency, up to 70% of the Slovak population uses social networks on a daily basis, of which Facebook is used by 60% of the Slovak population, and even almost 80% of Slovaks in general (Go4insight, 2024). Facebook is thus an effective tool for political communication and political marketing. However, many studies point out that Facebook is also a tool for spreading harmful disinformation content (Allcott, Gentzkow, 2018; Limbu, Nastain, 2024) with the possibility of using private user data, as was the case in the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Isaak, Hanna, 2018). Facebook itself has thus become the subject of relevant research on political communication (Klapal, 2016; Ceccobelli, 2018; Garaj, 2018; Garaj, Bardovič, 2020; Mihálik et al., 2022; Šárovec, 2024).

The aim of the research is to identify the pivotal narratives present in political communication after the assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, reflect on their significance in the process of framing public debate, and identify the most active political actors in the online information environment. Regarding the structure of the paper, it continues with introducing the theoretical framework. This is followed by an introduction of the research design and the methodological approach, including the research objectives and research questions. As a part of section, the process of data collection and categorization is introduced. The paper structure continues with the results, where the specific narratives identified are summarized, processed and interpreted. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion of key findings. Research works with interpretive critical methods (Drulák, Beneš, 2020).

Focusing on the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico, the article provides an analysis of political communication dynamics and the impact of narrative amplification on social media within the context of Slovakian politics. In the problem of Slovakia's vulnerability to disinformation and conspiracy theories that contribute to social and political polarisation, this article makes a valuable contribution to this field of empirical research.

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

Language is a central instrument of politics and a key resource for constructing both conflict and collective identity. Research on language and politics has shown that political actors use linguistic and symbolic resources to create social divisions as well as to build a sense of commonality and consensus (Höhn, 2024; Štefančík, 2016). Political discourse can therefore be understood as a patterned use of language and symbols through which actors produce meaning, define problems and shape citizens' perceptions of political reality (Dahlgren, 2009; Lippmann, 2015; Štefančík, Dulebová, 2017). In this perspective, influencing the addressee becomes the core function of political communication, as political elites seek to stabilise a dominant interpretation of contested events.

A key mechanism in this process is framing. Frames select certain aspects of perceived reality, make them more salient and organise them into coherent interpretations that suggest particular problem definitions, causal attributions and moral evaluations (Entman, 1993). Framing is closely linked to the emotional dimension of political communication, as different ways of presenting the same issue can evoke distinct affective responses (Kahneman,

2019). In the context of populist and polarising rhetoric, fear has been identified as a particularly powerful resource: it is mobilised through the construction of real or imagined threats and the identification of scapegoats held responsible for endangering the community (Wodak, 2016). When applied to episodes of political violence, framing thus becomes a crucial tool for deciding whether such events are interpreted as isolated acts, symptoms of deeper societal conflict or evidence of a broader conspiracy.

This study builds on an understanding of narratives as a specific form of framing. Narratives provide story-like structures that connect disparate events into meaningful sequences and thereby offer audiences a way to "story the world" and make sense of complex political realities (Mishler, 1995; White, 1980). In political science, narratives have been conceptualised as cognitive and cultural devices through which individuals and groups interpret political events, locate themselves within them and justify particular courses of action (Patterson, Monroe, 1998). They do not emerge in a cultural vacuum: their effectiveness depends on resonance with existing values, interests and prejudices in the target audience (Krebs, 2015; Wilkinson, Gow, 2017).

Within this broader perspective, several authors distinguish specifically political and strategic narratives. Political narratives may arise from formal arenas such as parliaments, cabinets or party meetings, or be produced by political actors and public officials in the course of their duties, as long as they address themes such as power relations, collective decision-making or compromise (Shenhav, 2006). Strategic narratives, in turn, are deliberately crafted storylines designed by political actors with the explicit intention of shaping how audiences understand the past, interpret the present and anticipate the future (Schmitt, 2018). In this sense, narratives are not only descriptive but also prescriptive: they define villains and victims, delimit acceptable responses and legitimise particular policy choices. The present study adopts this view and examines the strategic use of narratives by political actors in the aftermath of an assassination attempt.

The evolution of political discourse has been profoundly shaped by social media, which offer new channels for citizens, activists and politicians to communicate, mobilise and contest interpretations of events (Puri, 2025). Platforms such as Facebook have enabled increased political engagement and visibility for underrepresented voices, but they have also become powerful tools for manipulation, where language can be used to subtly steer perceptions, beliefs and actions (Brown, Molete, 2024). Research on political communication in digital environments points to the importance

of platform-specific affordances and linguistic practices – including indirect or illocutionary speech acts, humour and satire – in shaping emotional and cultural dynamics of engagement (Brown, Molete, 2024; Suryaningsih, 2025; Suwarni, Aliah, Natsir, 2025). Facebook in particular has been criticised for its central role in the dissemination of disinformation and conspiratorial content, as well as for its opaque algorithmic logic that rewards emotionally charged and polarising messages.

In the Slovak context, a growing body of scholarship has examined the relationship between language, discourse and politics. The volume Language and Politics from the series On the Borderline of Linguistics and Political Science provides a comprehensive overview of how political concepts are transformed into emotionally loaded symbols that can be strategically manipulated (Štefančík, 2024). Within this framework, Borisová shows how scientific definitions in Slovak political discourse are often reduced to tools of polarisation and misinterpretation, while Krajčovičová demonstrates the manipulative function of metaphorical language in gaining political advantage (Borisova, 2024; Krajčovičová, 2024). Other studies have traced specific narrative patterns in Slovak political communication, including illiberal narratives (Sekerák, 2020), conspiracy narratives about the European Union (Ižák, 2020), anti-Soros narratives in parliamentary discourse (Zvada, 2022), far-right narratives (Tökölyová, Orosz, 2024) and Facebook communication of party leaders prior to the assassination attempt (Brix et al., 2024). This article builds on these contributions by focusing specifically on how political actors on Facebook constructed and deployed narratives in response to an act of political violence, and how these narratives contributed to the polarisation and politicisation of the event.

Focusing on the assassination attempt on Prime Minister Fico, the article provides an analysis of political communication dynamics and the impact of narrative amplification on social media within the context of Slovak politics.

2 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research focuses on monitoring, analysing and subsequently describing political communication on Facebook with regard to the failed assassination attempt on Slovak PM Robert Fico on 15 May 2024 in Handlová. The authors of the study focus on the events and subsequent developments in the communication trends of political actors because they believe that this is a crucial moment in Slovak political reality with the potential to influence the future quality and character of the political system of the Slovak Republic.

The authors concentrate primarily on clarifying the formation of public and political discourse. At the same time, they perceive the issue as a subject for interdisciplinary and interthematic research that can find application not only in political science, but also in sociology, psychology, security studies and other fields.

The research can be divided into qualitative and quantitative level. In terms of qualitative level, the research concentrates on content analysis and description of political communication. At the quantitative level, the research focuses primarily on two parameters: communication activity (understood as the number of posts published) and communication effectiveness (understood as the number of interactions generated by the published posts). Interactions are the sum of reactions, comments and shares. The rationale and limitations of the approach, with an emphasis on existing standards for similar research, are outlined in more detail below. The research focuses on communication on Facebook, based on the assumption that similar communication tools are key for 21st-century politicians to inform the public and influence its opinion in terms of political activity. The focus is on this particular social media platform because Facebook is still the most widely used platform in Slovakia (according to a 2025 report by the Reuters Institute, 43% of Slovaks use Facebook to obtain information) and has long faced criticism for its inadequate regulation of information dissemination and communication (Chlebcová Hečková, Smith, 2025).

The aim of the research is to identify the pivotal narratives present in political communication after the assassination attempt on Slovak PM Robert Fico, to reflect on their significance in the process of framing public debate, and to identify the most active political actors in the online information environment. The partial levels of the author‘s efforts reflect the following complex research questions, which the research attempts to answer:

- What narratives were used in the political communication of the monitored actors to interpret the event of the assassination attempt on Robert Fico?
- Which narratives were the most frequent and effective in terms of audience engagement?
- Which political actors were the most active and effective in shaping discourse during the monitored period?

The research was conducted in several phases. Initially, the authors focused on collecting data, which was then analysed. The data set was obtained using the CrowdTangle monitoring tool (made available by Meta until 14 August 2024), which is designed to monitor social networks,

recognise sentiment in communication (communicated content) and visualise data. Data collection took place on 14 August 2024. The monitoring focused on the period between 15 May 2024 and 31 July 2024. The period under review covers a total of 75 days – from the day of the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Robert Fico to the end of the two-and-a-half-month period, which correlates with the period according to which the list of actors was selected. The scope of the period under study was also limited by the termination of access to the CrowdTangle monitoring tool. Consequently, in addition to the time criterion, two other conditions were applied during data collection. The monitoring focused on a pre-specified list of actors. This list was based on a report by Filip Struhárik, a journalist at Denník N, who compiled a list of political representatives based on interactions achieved during the relevant time period (Struhárik, 2024). These are political actors whose social media statistics were analyzed by Denník N 75 days before and 75 days after the assassination attempt on Robert Fico. The list reflects the communication activity of actors who were the most successful in terms of generating interactions in the Slovak information environment, that is, who generated the most interactions. In addition to these actors, the official Facebook pages of parliamentary parties were also included in the research. In total, the research focused on 30 actors, whose list is provided in the table below (Table 1). The above division into pages of individual politicians and party pages is also reflected in the visualisation of the data in the research. Last but not least, another criterion for data collection was that the monitored and subsequently analysed content was searched for on the basis of a list of keywords or a specific search query, which was as follows: atentát OR atentáte OR atentátu OR Fico OR Fica OR Ficovi OR Ficom OR 'predseda vlády' OR 'predsedovi vlády' OR 'predsedu vlády' OR premiér OR premiéra OR premiérovi. OR (or) expresses a logical function that allows content to be searched based on a logical union relationship.

The data obtained were then manually annotated by both authors. Only posts that were text-based or contained images with text were subject to content analysis. In other words, videos or other forms of content were not analyzed. In the subsequent analysis, the authors categorized the posts based on two criteria: thematic relevance and content type. The division of data prior to data analysis and interpretative research was intended to limit the shortcomings/limitations of the research, which we describe below. The authors divided the collected data into three categories (see data below):

1. Relevant posts – content and theme focused on the assassination attempt on Robert Fico, content was in text form.

2. Irrelevant posts – either the content did not focus on the assassination attempt on Robert Fico or was in a form other than text.
3. Posts without narrative – content and theme related to the assassination attempt on Robert Fico, content in text form. However, they only touched on the monitored topic marginally/secondarily or presented it in a news format (neutral and without narrative).

Based on their initial orientation in the data set and their mapping, the authors outlined categories of narratives. Specific narratives are described in Table 1. The authors formed individual categories based on a gradual analysis of the data set. If a specific narrative appeared multiple times (at least three times) in different content units, it was assigned a category.

The narrative category helps to create a framework for analyzing the content parameters of the political communication under examination. In other words, narratives enable the creation of a system for the qualitative delimitation and quantitative visualization of stories or messages through which the assassination attempt on Robert Fico was explained by the political actors under study. A total of 16 categories of narratives were formulated in this database, which are listed together with their description in the table below (Table 2). If a message fitting the narrative appeared more than once in a post, it was still counted as one case in the research.

Table 1: Monitored narratives and their descriptions.

Narrative	Narrative description
Denial of elections	Frames the assassination attempt as a consequence of the liberal opposition's and civil society's refusal to accept the 2023 election results, portraying the government as a legitimate victim of continuous delegitimization.
Spreading hatred	Attributes the attack to a long-term polarised and "toxic" public discourse, in which opposition actors, activists and liberal media are depicted as primary sources of hatred towards government representatives.
Upbringing/ radicalization of the assassin	Presents the perpetrator as a product of sustained ideological and media influences, shifting responsibility from individual action to a broader hostile environment allegedly shaped by opposition and liberal media.
Witch hunt (different opinion as a reason)	Portrays Fico as a long-term target of persecution for holding non-mainstream or sovereigntist views, embedding the attack into a wider culture war against conservative positions.

Martyrdom	Constructs Robert Fico as a leader suffering for the nation, sovereignty and "truth", turning the attack into a source of moral capital and emotional mobilisation for his supporters.
Political instrumentalization of the assassination attempt	Claims that government actors strategically exploit the attack to consolidate power, restrict opponents and push controversial measures, thus reframing the event as a tool of statecraft.
Progressivism and liberalism	Depicts liberalism and progressivism as intolerant and radical ideologies that cultivate hatred towards conservatives (traditional values) and are indirectly responsible for the attack.
Protest organization	Links pre-attack protests to an escalation of tensions, framing demonstrations as morally or politically responsible for creating a "pressure cooker" atmosphere.
Calls for peace	Uses the language of reconciliation and de-escalation, calling for unity and moderation in public discourse, sometimes in ways that can also neutralise criticism
Searching for similarities with the assassination attempt on Donald Trump	Connects the attack on Fico with the attempt on Donald Trump, suggesting a broader pattern of global hostility towards conservative leaders.
Conspiracy theory about an elimination plan	Interprets the attack as part of a coordinated plot to remove Fico as a political obstacle, often invoking alleged involvement of foreign or "Western" actors.
Connection to the war in Ukraine	Explains the attack through the government's foreign-policy stance, especially its position on the war in Ukraine and relations with Russia and the West.
Investigation and accountability	Emphasises demands for a thorough and transparent investigation, extending responsibility beyond the perpetrator to wider political or social actors.
Lex Assassination	Supports legal and regulatory measures adopted in response to the attack, particularly in the fields of security, online communication and freedom of expression.
(Punishment for) approving an assassination	Frames public approval or trivialisation of the attack as socially unacceptable and deserving of sanctions, raising questions about the limits of free speech.
Condemnation of the assassination attempt	Expresses basic normative rejection of political violence as incompatible with democratic norms, often functioning as a minimal cross-party consensus.

Source: Authors' work.

The authors also emphasise that the aim of the research is not to evaluate the factuality of the analysed content, but to map its incidence (in terms of the frequency of narratives in relation to the total amount of communication

captured). The research focuses primarily on two parameters at the quantitative level: communication activity (understood as the number of posts published) and communication effectiveness (understood as the number of interactions generated by the published posts). The authors acknowledge the inherent limitations that arose during its course and which must be considered when interpreting the results. In terms of political communication, as a process of exchanging information, opinions and symbols in a political context, social media is understood as a fundamental tool for direct communication between political actors and voters. More interactions generated in this context then means greater effectiveness in efforts to persuade and mobilise, shape public opinion or legitimise decisions (as part of political communication) from the underlying assumption that a high number of interactions may mean that the content has reached a large audience, either organically or through algorithms. This approach stems from the fact that in studies of political communication on social media, engagement-based indicators such as reactions, comments, and shares are commonly used as proxy measures of communication effectiveness, particularly in contexts where access to precise reach or impression data is unavailable.

The study relies on Facebook interactions – understood as the sum of reactions, comments and shares – as a proxy for communication effectiveness, because the platform does not provide research-grade data on reach, impressions or the precise algorithmic distribution of content. Interactions, as the most robust publicly available indicator, are comparable across actors, and directly linked to active audience response. Research therefore focuses on engagement rather than normative impact assessment, which is consistent with, for example, the view of engagement-driven political communication (Vaccari, Valeriani, 2021) or the logic of social media and visibility (Klinger, Svensson, 2015). Conceptually, it can of course also be seen as a vital part of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017).

The literature also consistently points to the limitations of engagement metrics, including their inability to distinguish between supportive and critical reactions, their tendency to reward emotionally charged or polarizing content, and their imperfect reflection of actual influence on public opinion. This includes, for example, the so-called negativity bias described by Theocharis et al. (2020), who point out that controversial and polarizing content generates higher engagement, or emotionalism and personalisation as factors in political communication enhancing interactions, as pointed out by Enli and Skogerbø (2013). Although such metrics do not directly

capture persuasion or attitudinal change, existing research highlights their usefulness for assessing the relative resonance and visibility of political messages. Ernst et al. (2017) approach interactions as a basic source for measuring the success and resonance of political communication, while Vaccari and Valeriani (2021) distinguish between engagement, reach, and real political influence. They perceive engagement (or what we refer to as interactions) as a behavioural indicator of attention and emotional resonance, not an indicator of persuasion or attitudinal change. They emphasize that engagement is visible and measurable, a product of social media logic, favouring emotional, conflictual, and polarizing messages. Reach means how many people potentially saw the content (impressions, unique users). Therefore, it is passive exposure, not active response. Engagement is not reach, but high engagement often correlates with higher reach because algorithms favour interacted content.

To determine the effectiveness of the monitored communication, a benchmark was calculated based on the analysed data, resulting from the ratio of the total number of posts to the total number of interactions in the dataset (defined in more precise terms later in the text). Although the use of similar benchmarks is a simplified indicator of the effectiveness of communication on social media, it is a commonly used approach in cases where accurate data on reach and impressions are not available. In studies of political communication on social networks, interactions (likes/reactions, comments, shares) are very often used as a proxy indicator of engagement, an indirect indicator of potential reach, and a measure of the relative effectiveness of content. The average number of interactions per post is a tool that allows for the comparison of actors with different levels of activity and prevents distortion caused by the sheer volume of published posts. In the literature, a similar approach appears, for example, in the form of engagement as an indicator of the success of populist communication (Ernst et al., 2017), average interactions per post as a tool for comparing actors (Bene, 2017), engagement metrics in political communication (Kalsnes et al., 2018), or interactions as a proxy for content visibility and resonance (Stier et al., 2018). Similarly, manual annotation – while allowing for contextual and narrative-sensitive analysis – remains exposed to subjective interpretation, a limitation acknowledged across qualitative and mixed-methods research (Krippendorff, 2018). Despite the fact it is not possible to completely rule out individual differences in annotators‘ assessments, the authors have endeavoured to use clear categorizations and to ensure consistency through multiple cross-checking and transparent description

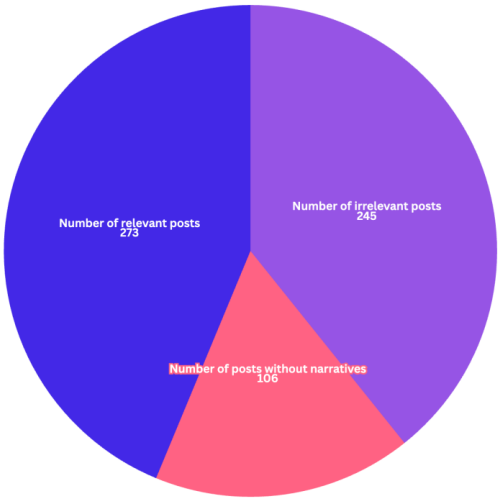
of the procedure. Although automated content analysis techniques offer partial solutions, their applicability is constrained in multilingual and context-dependent environments such as the Slovak political discourse (especially given that they have problems with irony, context, language, and often fail when it comes to politically sensitive narratives.). Grimmer and Stewart (2013), for example, also address this issue. In this regard, the methodological choices adopted in this study reflect a trade-off widely recognized in the literature between analytical depth, data accessibility, and methodological transparency.

It should also be noted that not all relevant posts may have been identified. This shortcoming may be due to limitations of search queries, which, despite careful configuration, may not capture all variants of the topics under investigation, and to limitations of the monitoring tool itself. Technical restrictions, such as data availability, content indexing methods, and algorithmic filters, may have affected the scope and representativeness of the analysed sample. Despite these limitations, the study provides a framework that can be further developed and refined in future research.

3 PARAMETERS OF THE DATASET AND GENERAL OVERVIEW OF ACTORS

This section provides an overview of the fundamental parameters of the analysed dataset and outlines the communicative activity of the monitored political actors during the observed period. It first presents the scope and structure of the collected data, including the volume of relevant posts and generated interactions, and subsequently examines differences in activity and engagement among individual actors and political entities. By mapping who communicated about the assassination attempt, how frequently, and with what level of audience response, this section establishes the empirical context for the subsequent analysis of narratives and their effectiveness.

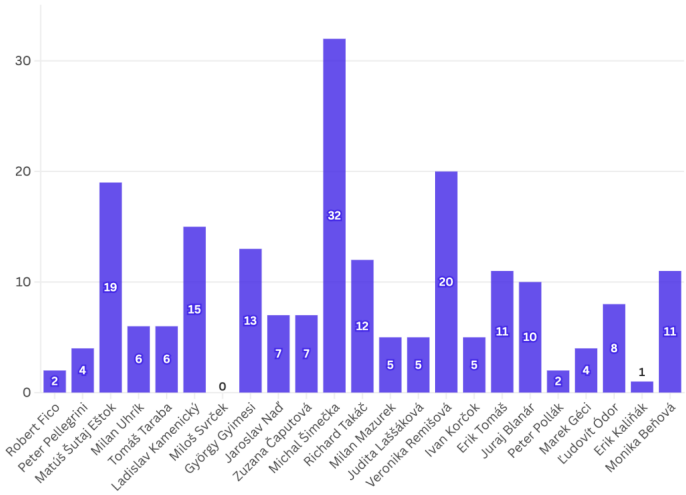
Graph 1: Number of posts in research.



Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle.

Based on the search using the above parameters, the authors obtained a data set containing a total of 624 posts. Owing to the subsequent distillation of text content relevant to the research, the final data set that was then analysed consisted of 379 posts. In this set of posts, 106 posts were subsequently identified that did not contain narratives relevant to the research. Most of this content was related to the assassination attempt on Robert Fico, but did not link it to politically charged communication. The remaining [A21.1]273 posts, which we consider relevant, generated 853,598 interactions. This equates to an average of 3,126.73 interactions per post. This figure is key to the research because it sets a benchmark for political communication – content with narratives that generated more interactions can be considered successful in terms of communication effectiveness. [A22.1][A22.2]The opposite is true for content that received fewer interactions. The 273 posts mentioned above contained 828 cases where a narrative was found. In other words, one post could contain several narratives. After rounding, one post contained an average of 3.03 narratives. The number of cases in the text refers to the number of posts in which a particular narrative appears, and these designations are understood to be interchangeable within the framework of the research.

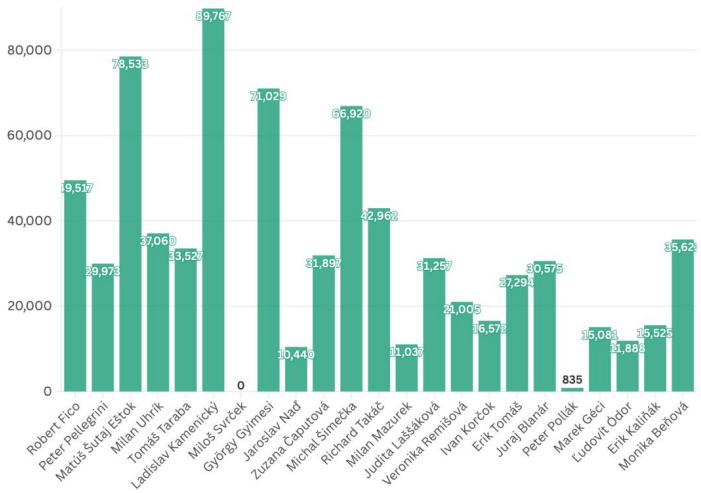
Graph 2: Number of posts (relevant posts including those without narratives) by actors.



Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

In terms of activity, the actors are divided into two groups for the purposes of data visualisation: specific political representatives (individual politicians) and political parties (visualised below). Political representatives published a total of 205 relevant posts. Graph 2 The most active were the chairman of Progresívne Slovensko, Michal Šimečka (32 posts), MP for the Slovensko movement, Veronika Remišová (20 posts), and Minister of the Interior from the Hlas-SD party, Matúš Šutaj Eštok (19 posts). They were followed mainly by a small group of coalition representatives, particularly from SMER-SD and Hlas-SD, generated a significant share of posts, while many opposition politicians were only marginally active.

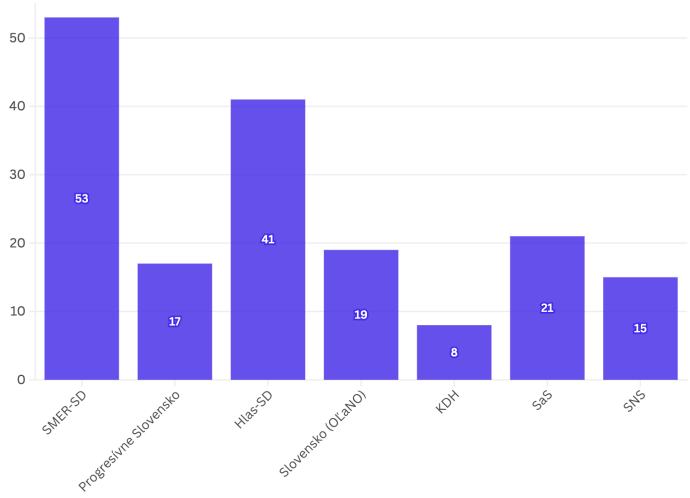
Graph 3: Number of posts (relevant posts including those without narratives) by actors.



Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle.

Political representatives generated a total of 758,317 interactions through their posts. The content posted by Minister of Finance Ladislav Kamenický received the most interactions. The results show a strong concentration of engagement around a few coalition-affiliated actors, who accumulated several hundred thousand interactions, while most other politicians attracted considerably lower audience response. The leader of the Progresívne Slovensko party, Michal Šimečka, who published the most posts, ranked fourth with almost 67,000 interactions. It is worth noting that Robert Fico generated 49,517 interactions through two posts. As for the other monitored actors, Ladislav Kamenický received an average of 5,984.47 interactions per post, Matúš Šutaj Eštok received 4,133.32 interactions, and György Gyimesi received 5,463.77 interactions per post. President Peter Pellegrini was also successful in communication, generating 7,493.25 interactions per post in average. Political representatives of opposition parties lagged significantly behind in terms of communication effectiveness. Michal Šimečka received an average of 2,091.25 interactions per post, while Veronika Remišová received 1,050.25 interactions.

Graph 4 : Number of posts (relevant posts including those without narratives) by political entities.

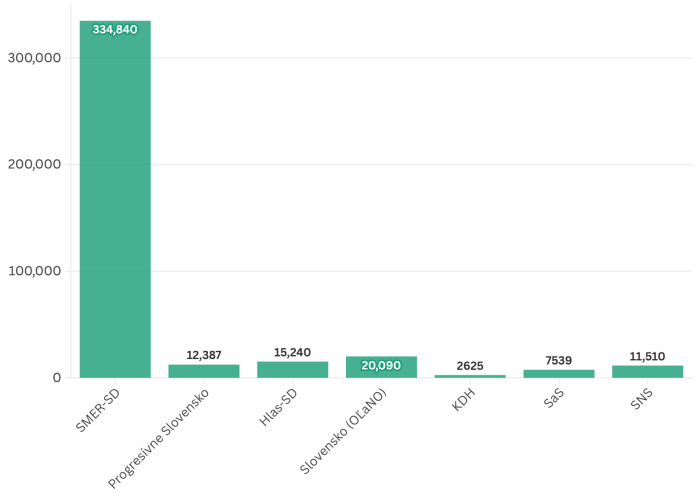


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

In the case of the second monitored group of actors – official pages of political parties – the governing coalition parties clearly dominated the communication. SMER-SD, Hlas-SD and SNS published a total of 109 posts. Opposition parties published a total of 65 posts. All monitored parties followed the trend of reposting content from their prominent political representatives[4]. The most active was the official page of the SMER-SD party, which published 13.98% of the content. Only five posts did not contain any of the monitored narratives. The second most active party was Hlas-SD (10.82% of the content). Several opposition parties contributed only a limited number of posts. The monitored parties published a total of 174 posts.

[4] In the case of SMER-SD, this also included content from a MEP (Ľuboš Blaha) whose Facebook account was deleted in 2022 due to repeated violations of the social network's rules (relating to hate speech, bullying and harassment, incitement to violence, as well as disinformation and harm regarding Covid-19) (Hodás, 2022).

Graph 5: Number of interactions (relevant posts including those without narratives) by political entities.



Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

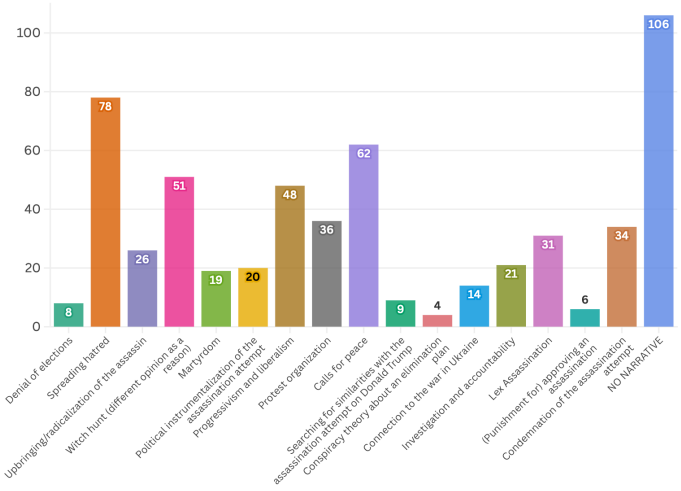
Pertaining to the number of interactions generated in the case of the political entities monitored, Graph 5 shows a significant disproportion at first glance. The SMER-SD party received more than 330,000 interactions. In comparison, other parties together received only 69,491 interactions through 121 posts. The opposition parties generated only 42,741 interactions (from 65 posts), which equals 657.55 interactions per post. By comparison, the coalition as a whole generated 361,590 interactions, which equates to 3,443.71 interactions per post. In the case of SMER-SD, this figure is even higher, at 6,317.74 interactions per post. The results clearly show that the governing coalition (and SMER-SD in particular) was significantly more effective than the opposition in communicating on the topic under review.

4 NARRATIVES OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT ON ROBERT FICO

The attempted assassination of Slovak PM Robert Fico on 15 May 2024 triggered an unprecedented wave of public, political, and media reactions that rapidly shaped the national discourse. In the aftermath of the attack,

political actors across the spectrum actively engaged in framing the event, attributing blame, and mobilizing support through narrative strategies. This part of the research focuses on the quantitative mapping and analysis of dominant narratives employed in political communication in the immediate days and weeks following the attack. By identifying prevailing frames, themes, and rhetorical patterns disseminated through official statements, social media posts, and media appearances, this section seeks to assess how political communication contributed to shaping the contours of public discourse and potentially influenced polarization, mobilization, or delegitimization dynamics in Slovak society.

Graph 6: Number of cases of detected narratives in relevant posts and posts without narratives (total).

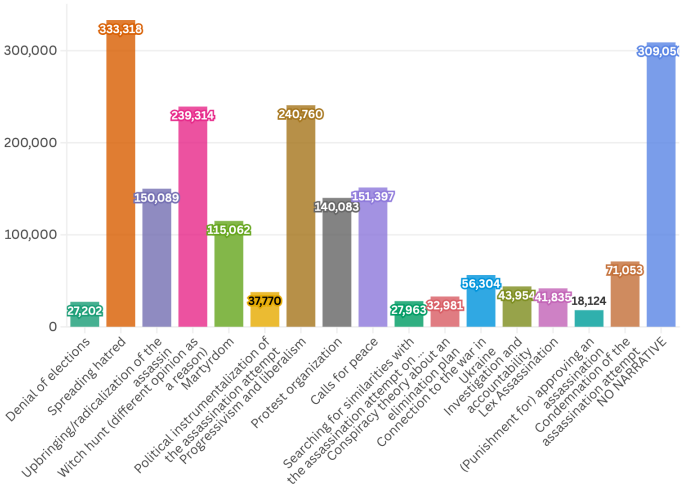


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

The findings show that only a subset of narratives was used extensively, while others appeared only sporadically. Narratives emphasising the spreading of hatred (in 28.57% of the posts), calls for peace (22.71%) and condemnation of the assassination attempt (12.45%) belonged to the most frequent frames, reflecting an immediate need to situate the event within broader discussions about the tone of public discourse and the normative rejection of political violence. At the same time, a considerable number

of posts employed narratives portraying Fico as a persecuted figure / victim of a witch hunt (18.68%) or linking the attack to progressivism and liberalism (17.58%), thereby embedding the event into ongoing culture-war conflicts. Less frequent, but still present in the coalition's communications, were narratives focusing on protest organisation, the investigation and accountability, legislative responses, or comparisons with the attack on Donald Trump. On the contrary, condemnation of the assassination attempt and lex assassination narratives were communicated mainly by opposition politicians. Simultaneously, the opposition worked more extensively with a narrative accusing the ruling coalition of exploiting the assassination attempt for political purposes (e.g., mobilizing voters before the European Parliament elections). Conspiracy-oriented interpretations and explicit references to the war in Ukraine appeared only in a limited number of cases, yet they played a visible role in connecting the assassination attempt to external actors and geopolitical tensions.

Graph 7: Number of interactions by cases of detected narrative (total).



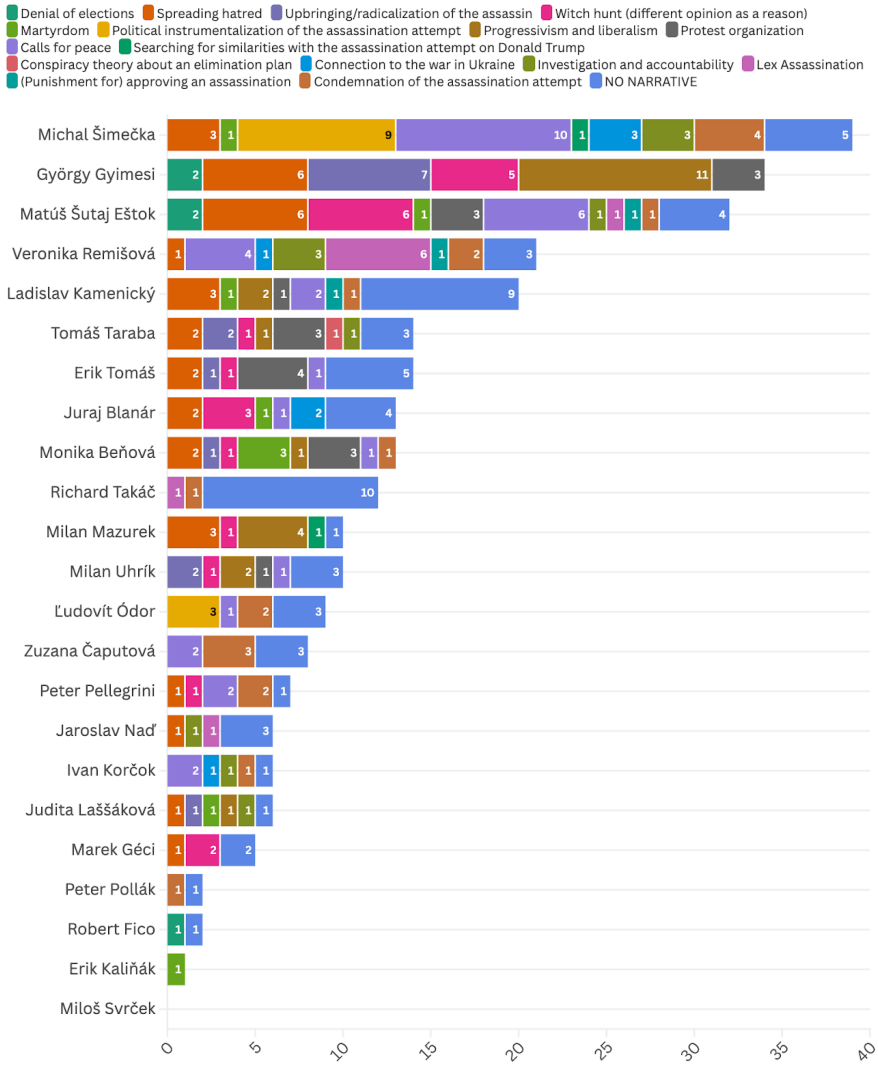
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

When examining narrative effectiveness, measured by average interactions per post, a different picture emerges. Narratives that were relatively rare in terms of frequency, such as conspiracy claims about an elimination plan

(8,245.25 interactions per post) or strong martyrdom frames (6,055.89 interactions per post), generated some of the highest engagement levels. Similarly, narratives depicting progressivism and liberalism as a threat proved highly effective in mobilising audiences, despite their more limited occurrence compared to mainstream (or with a more opposition-oriented stance) frames like calls for peace or condemnation of the attack.

Conversely, narratives centred on institutional responses – such as demands for investigation, legal changes or sanctions against approving the assassination – tended to attract more modest engagement. By comparison, posts that contained a narrative about spreading hatred received an average of 4,273.31 interactions per post, where posts calling for calm generated only 2,441.89 interactions per post. This pattern suggests that emotional intensity, clear friend–enemy distinctions and identity-based mobilisation mattered more for audience response than the sheer number of posts employing a given narrative.

Graph 8: Number of cases of detected narratives in relevant posts and posts without narratives in the communication of monitored actors.

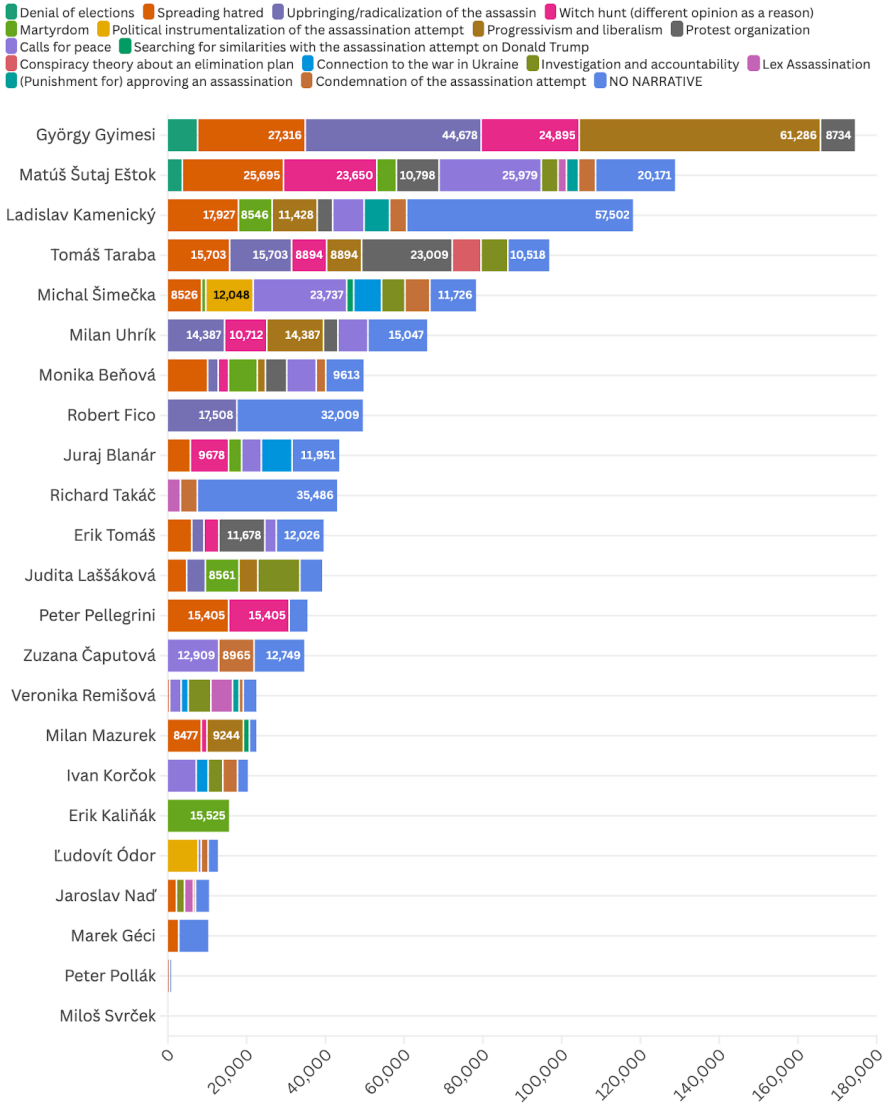


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

Graph 8 shows how often individual narratives appeared in the posts of monitored politicians. The data indicate that narratives about spreading

hatred, calls for peace and condemnation of the assassination attempt were among the most frequently used, while conspiracy-oriented and geopolitically framed narratives remained comparatively rare. Opposition politicians mainly focused on communicating narratives criticising the then-draft legislation, called for calm or accused the governing coalition of politically exploiting the assassination attempt to mobilize its own voters. The narratives used to accuse specific entities (the media, the opposition or the ruling coalition) of spreading hatred appeared to a greater extent in the case of coalition politicians, or politicians who do not hide their nationalist tendencies (this narrative accounted for 15.77% of the identified cases of narratives in the monitored communication of politicians). In the case of G. Gyimesi and Milan Uhrík, there was also instrumentalization of the narrative about the deliberate radicalization of the assassin by the opposition or the media. In the context of politicians from governing parties, narratives that also identified the organization of opposition protests as the cause of the assassination attempt appeared to a greater extent (in 8.11% of the identified cases of narratives). These were organised in early 2024 in response to the negative reaction to the amendment to the Criminal Code. (Tomečková, 2024) Minister Šutaj Eštok and György Gyimesi even linked these narratives to claims accusing the opposition and the media of not respecting the results of the 2023 parliamentary elections. Narratives that used labels such as progressivism or liberalism appeared relatively frequently in the case of some government actors. These served to portray the presence of ideologies that are supposed to be a threat to Slovakia's national interests and security, and, according to claims, also led to the assassination attempt on the PM (this narrative accounted for 9.91% of the identified cases of narratives in the case of the monitored politicians).

Graph 9: Number of interactions of monitored actors according to detected narrative cases.

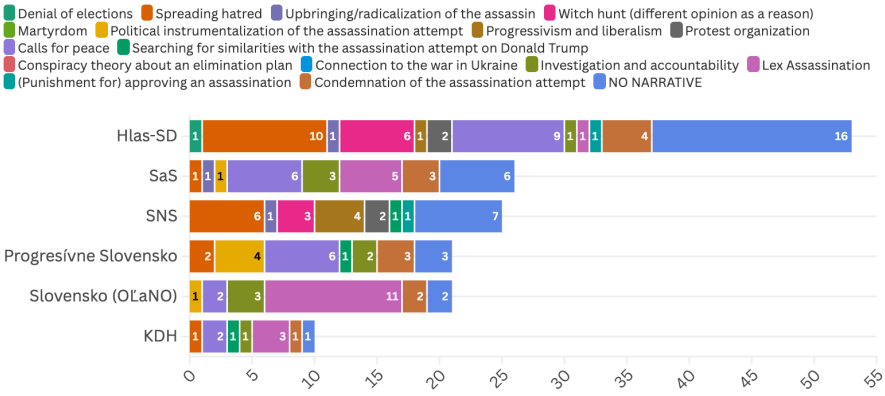


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

The graph tracking the number of interactions generated shows that

narratives containing negative emotions or accusations against political (or media) opponents of sparking conditions for an assassination attempt on Robert Fico were the most effective in the communication of the politicians monitored. As outlined above, György Gyimesi published a total of 13 relevant posts, which generated a total of more than 71,000 interactions. When broken down into individual narratives, the data show that the most effective communication was achieved by content claiming that the assassin had been deliberately educated or radicalised by the opposition or the media (6,382.57 interactions on average per case). The use of the narrative about the presence of so-called harmful ideologies of progressivism and liberalism was also key to Gyimesi's communication. He used this narrative in 11 of the total 13 relevant posts and received an average of 5,571.45 interactions per post. The effectiveness of this narrative was also evident in the case of other actors monitored: Ladislav Kamenický (5,714 interactions per post), Tomáš Taraba (8,894 interactions per post), Milan Uhrík (7,193.5 interactions per post) and his colleague from the Republika movement, Milan Mazurek (2,311 interactions per post). Other narratives containing accusations of spreading hatred and witch hunts generated 4,552.67 interactions, or 4,979 interactions per post. A similar situation occurred in the case of Matúš Šutaj Eštok, who generated over 78,000 interactions. In terms of interactions, the most effective posts within his communication were those containing narratives about spreading hatred (4,282.5 interactions per post) and calls for calm (4,329.83 interactions per post). Claims that Robert Fico was the target of an assassination attempt because of his different opinions were also used by President Peter Pellegrini and Minister of Foreign Affairs Juraj Blanár. Some of the actors monitored, especially Robert Fico's party colleagues, were also linked by their shared use of a narrative portraying the PM as a martyr suffering for his opinions or geopolitical thinking. Similarly, some actors were linked by a narrative about protests, which, according to the monitored content, were organised by the opposition and were supposed to lead to the polarisation of society and the radicalisation of the assassin.

Graph 10: Number of cases of detected narratives in relevant posts and posts without narratives in the communication of monitored political entities (parties and movements).

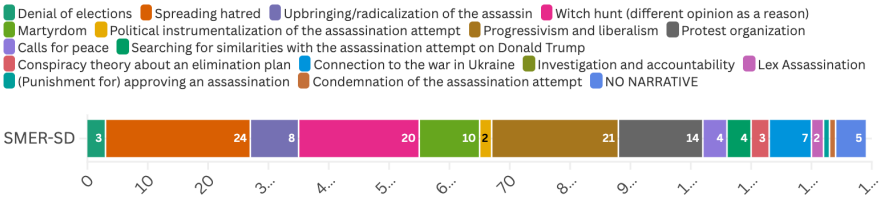


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

TAs regards the political parties and movements monitored, the SMER-SD party clearly dominated in terms of the number of narratives found. Given the significant disproportion in the number of posts, the statistics for the SMER-SD party are presented and described in the graph below (Graph 11). Besides, most cases of narratives were otherwise identified in the content of the Hlas-SD party. It published 25 relevant posts on its official page, in which we found 37 cases of narratives. This equates to an average of 1.48 narratives per post. Twenty cases of narratives were identified in SaS communications (1.33 narratives per post), 19 narratives in the case of Hnutie Slovensko, and 18 cases each in the communications of Progresívne Slovensko (1.29 narratives per post) and SNS (2.25 narratives per post). The lowest number of narratives was found in the case of KDH, which used narratives in nine out of seven posts (1.29 narratives per post). In the case of the coalition parties, narratives were identified that spoke of spreading hatred and witch hunts, or condemning the organisation of protests in early 2024. If we added the data for the SMER-SD party, which we describe in more detail below, the ratio for the narratives used by coalition parties would be as follows. 22.34% of the total number of narratives in the case of hate speech, 16.2% of the total number of narratives in the case of witch hunts, and 13.97% of the total number of narratives condemning the organisation

of protests. Findings suggest that coalition parties employed a broader repertoire of narratives and more often resorted to frames portraying Fico as a persecuted or martyr-like figure, while opposition parties relied more on narratives emphasising political instrumentalization, investigation and institutional accountability. Nevertheless, narratives condemning the attack and calling for peace appeared across the political spectrum, albeit with different emphases.

Graph 11: Number of cases of detected narratives in relevant posts and posts without narratives in the communication of monitored political entities (parties and movements).

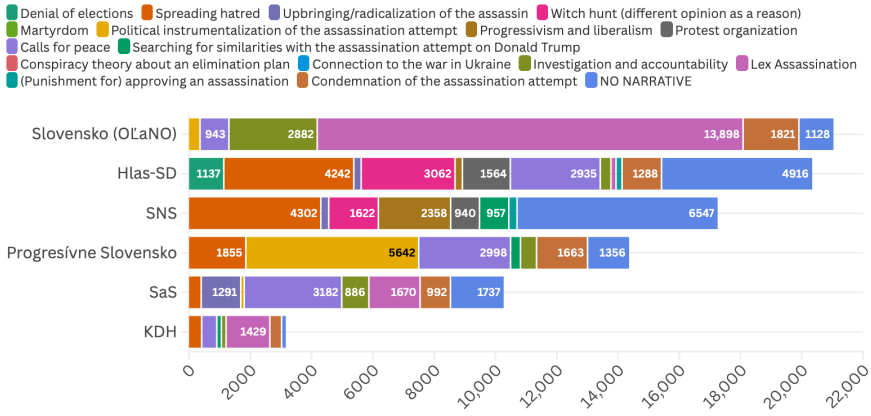


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

SMER-SD used a markedly more diverse set of narratives than other monitored parties. Forty-eight relevant posts contained 124 narrative instances, i.e. an average of 2.58 narratives per post, compared to 121 instances and 1.41 narratives per post among the remaining parliamentary parties. In most cases, the official party page reposted content originally published by affiliated politicians, primarily its own members.

Overall, SMER-SD employed all 16 monitored narratives. The most frequent were spreading hatred and persecution of Robert Fico for his different opinions, which together represented over a third of the party's narrative use. In addition, SMER-SD placed particular emphasis on harmful ideologies of progressivism and liberalism (16.94% of the total number of narratives identified), the martyrdom of the prime minister and criticism of protests organisation (11.29%), which further reinforced a strongly polarising and mobilisation-oriented framing of the attack.

Graph 12: Number of interactions of monitored political entities according to detected narrative cases.

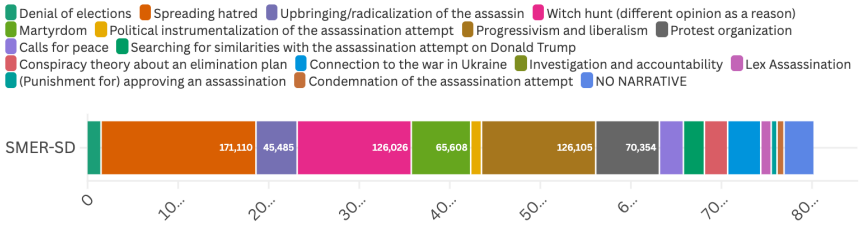


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

In terms of interactions, SMER-SD markedly outperformed all other parliamentary parties, as illustrated in the Graph 13. Other party pages achieved relatively modest engagement, which confirms that individual politicians generally attract attention more effectively than party organisations on Facebook (at least in Slovakia).

Among opposition and non-SMER coalition parties, narrative-specific interaction levels were broadly comparable, with Slovakia movement, Hlas-SD, SaS and Progressive Slovakia each registering only a few narratives with above-average engagement. Overall, parliamentary parties (with the partial exception of KDH, which communicated less) were relatively balanced in their interaction levels, and the main differences in effectiveness appeared at the level of individual politicians rather than party pages.

Graph 13: Number of SMER-SD interactions according to detected narrative cases.



Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

SMER-SD generated over 769,000 interactions across 124 narrative instances, which means an average of more than 6,200 interactions per narrative – several times more than other parliamentary parties. The most effective frames were spreading hatred, persecution of different opinions and the harmfulness of progressivism and liberalism, each attracting around 6,000–7,000 interactions per post. Strong engagement was also linked to narratives about deliberate radicalisation of the assassin, Fico's martyrdom and the role of protests, and SMER-SD was the main party that repeatedly connected the attack to the war in Ukraine.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to identify the pivotal narratives present in political communication after the assassination attempt on Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, reflect on their significance in the process of framing public debate, and identify the most active political actors in the online information environment. The research focused on three interconnected research questions: (1) What narratives were used in the political communication of the monitored actors to interpret the event of the assassination attempt on Robert Fico? (2) Which narratives were the most frequent and effective in terms of audience engagement? (3) Which political actors were the most active and effective in shaping discourse during the monitored period?

In relation to the first research question – the identification of dominant narratives – the findings show that the communication surrounding the assassination attempt was characterized by a relatively limited number of recurrent interpretative frames. Through the analysis of 379 Facebook posts published by selected political actors and parties between 15 May and 31

July 2024, the research identified 828 occurrences of narratives across 273 posts. Political actors repeatedly combined frames that personalised the attack, attributed responsibility to political opponents, media or external actors, and embedded the event into broader conflicts over liberalism, sovereignty and the legitimacy of protests. In addition, more consensual narratives – such as condemnation of political violence or calls for peace – coexisted with highly polarising frames, but played a less central role in structuring the overall discourse.

Addressing the second research question – in terms of narratives' communication effectiveness, measured by average interactions generated per post – the findings indicate that narrative frequency and narrative effectiveness did not always overlap. While some narratives appeared more frequently across the dataset, audience engagement was disproportionately concentrated around narratives characterised by strong emotional appeal, polarisation, and conflictual framing. Narratives that personalised the event, constructed clear antagonistic divisions, or framed the assassination attempt as evidence of broader political or societal decay generated significantly higher levels of interaction. This suggests that narrative resonance on social media is driven less by frequency and more by emotional and conflictual intensity.

In response to the third research question – identifying the activity and effectiveness of communication among selected actors – the analysis reveals notable asymmetries between government and opposition communication. Coalition-affiliated politicians, especially from SMER-SD and its allies, not only used a wider repertoire of narratives but also generated substantially higher engagement across almost all narrative categories. Opposition actors, by contrast, relied more on institutional and accountability-oriented frames, which struggled to compete with emotionally mobilising narratives in terms of visibility and resonance.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the attempted assassination of Robert Fico was rapidly transformed from an isolated act of violence into a highly contested symbolic event. Facebook served as a key arena in which political actors competed to impose their preferred interpretations, turning the attack into a discursive resource for legitimising their positions and delegitimising their opponents. In this process, narratives reinforcing polarisation and identity conflict clearly outweighed those emphasising institutional trust, accountability or democratic norms. The study shows engagement concentrated among those political actors who most effectively aligned their communication with the logic of social media.

These dynamics raise broader questions about the vulnerability of fragile and polarised democracies to the narrative exploitation of political violence. While the present analysis is limited to one platform, a specific set of actors and engagement-based indicators, it points to structural incentives that reward emotionally confrontational communication. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how political crises are narratively constructed and contested in digital environments and underline the relevance of narrative analysis for studying contemporary political communication in highly polarised contexts. Future research could therefore extend the scope to other platforms and media environments, combine engagement data with audience research, and explore how different narrative strategies affect citizens' perceptions of political legitimacy and the acceptability of violence.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Table of monitored actors, their positions and political affiliation (Source: Authors' work.).

Actor	Position	Political affiliation	Actor	Position	Political affiliation
Robert Fico	Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic	chairman of SMER-SD	Erik Tomáš	Minister of Labour of the Slovak Republic	Acmember of Hlas-SD
Peter Pellegrini	President of the Slovak Republic	former chairman of Hlas-SD	Juraj Blanár	Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic	member of SMER-SD
Matúš Šutaj Eštok	Minister of the Interior of the Slovak Republic	chairman of Hlas-SD	Peter Pollák	MP	member of Hnutie Slovensko
Milan Uhrík	MEP	chairman of Republika	Marek Géci	-	Amember of Republika
Tomáš Taraba	Minister of the Environment of the Slovak Republic	member of SNS	Ľudovít Ódor	MEP and former Prime Minister of Slovak Republic	member of Progresívne Slovensko
Ladislav Kamenický	Minister of Finance of the Slovak Republic	member of SMER-SD	Erik Kaliňák	MEP	member of SMER-SD
Miloš Svrček	former MP	member of SME RODINA	Monika Beňová	MEP	member of SMER-SD
György Gyimesi	former MP	member of Magyar Szövetség – Maďarská aliancia			

Jaroslav Naď	former Minister of Defense of the Slovak Republic	chairman of Demokrati	**PARTIES**	**COALITION / OPOSITION**
Zuzana Čaputová	former President of the Slovak Republic	former member of Progresívne Slovensko	SMER-SD	coalition
Michal Šimečka	MP	chairman of Progresívne Slovensko	Progresívne Slovensko	opposition
Richard Takáč	Minister of Agriculture of the Slovak Republic	member of SMER-SD	Hlas-SD	coalition
Milan Mazurek	MEP	member of Republika	Slovensko movement	opposition
Judita Laššáková	MEP	member of SMER-SD	KDH (Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie)	coalition
Veronika Remišová	MP	member of Hnutia Slovensko (OĽaNO)	SaS (Sloboda a solidarita)	opposition
Ivan Korčok	former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic	later member of Progresívne Slovensko (Progressive Slovakia)	SNS (Slovenská národná strana)	coalition

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DEMOCRATIC STATES DO NOT WAGE WAR AGAINST EACH OTHER. IS IT TRUE?

Martin Solik[1] and Martin Můčka[2]

Abstract
This article critically re-examines the Democratic Peace Theory (DPT), a long-standing tenet of liberal thought in international relations, which posits that democratic states are less likely to wage war against one another. While DPT has informed both scholarly discourse and policy-making, this study challenges its theoretical assumptions, empirical foundations, and normative implications through a multi-theoretical and methodologically reflective lens. The paper systematically proceeds in three analytical stages: 1.) a conceptual critique of DPT's definitional coherence and causal claims, 2.) an empirical assessment using historically documented cases of inter-democratic conflict and aggressive interventions by democracies, and 3.) a theoretical juxtaposition of liberal, realist, and constructivist interpretations of peace and conflict. Particular attention is paid to methodological limitations such as selection bias, endogeneity, and Eurocentric framing. By dissecting both mainstream support and prominent critiques, the article highlights how alternative variables may offer more robust explanations for observed patterns of peace. In its conclusion, the study argues that the deterministic logic of DPT is inadequate for explaining the complex dynamics of contemporary international relations and may even reinforce problematic normative hierarchies that justify interventionism.

Keywords: *Democracy, War, Liberalism, Realism, International Relations*

INTRODUCTION

The theory of democratic peace (DPT) is a cornerstone of liberal thought in International Relations (IR), asserting that democracies are less likely to engage in wars with one another. This theory, rooted in Immanuel Kant's ideas in Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch (1795). In Kant's view, three primary conditions of perpetual peace of perpetual peace of a republican government in every country are based on a civil constitution, establishment

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of a federation of free states, and cosmopolitan right of individuals as world citizens. The foundations of republican system, i.e. freedom for all members of the society as human beings, belonging of each individual to a public code of law as subject, and equality before law as a citizen, are important in Kant's political philosophy (Mahmoudi, 2008). The same position as Kant was also held by the liberal-minded American president Woodrow Wilson after the horrors of the First World War. He said in his speech in 1917: "A steadfast concert for peace can never be maintained except by a partnership of democratic nations. No autocratic government could be trusted to keep faith within it or observe its covenants. It must be a league of honour, a partnership of opinion" (Wilson cited in National Archives, n.d.).

This concept was later developed by scholars such as Michael W. Doyle and Bruce Russett, has significantly influenced both academic discourse and policy-making. It claims that democratic states, bound by norms, institutional constraints, and economic interdependence, create a more peaceful international system. Proponents argue that this theory provides a compelling explanation for the absence of wars between democracies, particularly in the post-World War II period. However, this optimistic perspective is not without its criticisms. So[SM1.1], the main research question of this article is: To what extent can Democratic Peace Theory adequately explain the absence of war between democratic states, and what alternative factors provide a more convincing explanation of this phenomenon?

Although DPT has gained broad acceptance in liberal circles (i.e., in the policies of countries belonging to the "Euro-Atlantic civilization," as Samuel Huntington would put it), it also faces significant criticism due to its theoretical assumptions, methodological shortcomings, and resulting empirical inconsistencies. Critics argue that the theory is overly idealistic and relies on West-centric definitions of democracy and peace (Waltz, 1962). Moreover, it often fails to account for historical anomalies, such as wars involving democracies or their aggressive behaviour toward non-democratic states (despite the fact that the next section of this article presents several examples where a democracy waged war against another democracy). These criticisms raise important questions about the universality and applicability of DPT in explaining peace within the international system.

The theoretical foundation of DPT is rooted in liberalism, which emphasizes shared values and institutional mechanisms that purportedly prevent democracies from engaging in conflicts with one another. This perspective assumes that democracies operate based on mutual trust

and peaceful dispute resolution. However, realist scholars counter this by arguing that the anarchic nature of the international system means that power politics and self-interest often prevail over normative considerations. Constructivist perspectives further challenge the assumption that democratic norms are universally applicable, asserting that cultural and historical contexts significantly influence state behaviour (Wendt, 1999).

Empirical evidence supporting DPT is also contentious. Proponents highlight examples such as the peaceful relations among Western democracies during the Cold War (although the very nature of a bipolar world already suggests the non-universality of DPT's claims), while critics point to cases like the conflict between Finland and the United Kingdom during World War II, which undermine the core premise of the theory (Elman, 2001). Many further argue that the true drivers of peace are economic interdependence and rigidly organized international institutions (those with enforceable sanction mechanisms – such as the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), rather than BRICS[3] or the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) rather than the democratic idea itself. Methodological issues, including selection bias and the problem of endogenous idealist assumptions, further complicate the credibility and validity of DPT's claims. The theory's focus on a narrow set of democratic states and its tendency to overlook non-traditional forms of democracies (which, from a political science perspective, are still democracies) raise doubts about its contemporary relevance.

Beyond theoretical and empirical critiques, DPT is also challenged on normative grounds. Its West-centric framework is often used to justify foreign interventions "in the name of democracy" (Iraq, Afghanistan). Postcolonial scholars argue that this approach imposes a Euro-Atlantic-centric governance model on often more diverse communities while overlooking alternative paths to peace (Pourmokhtari, 2013). Furthermore, the assumption that democracies inherently promote peace while simultaneously fostering aggressive tendencies toward "non-democracies" only perpetuates global inequalities among states.

This article works with a relevant critical stance (considerably unpopular in the Central European environment) and analytically supports arguments demonstrating why peace among democracies also has alternative explanations. The paper exposes the theory's reliance on Western-centric definitions of democracy and peace, its selective historical interpretations,

[3] BRICS as an intergovernmental organization consisting of ten countries — Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Egypt, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates.

and its failure to account for instances of democratic states waging war against each other. The study (critical analysis, historical sociology and discourse of the academic debate) argues that alternative factors, such as geopolitical balance of power, economic interdependence, and the strategic influence of hegemonic actors, offer more compelling explanations for observed patterns of peace. Additionally, it scrutinizes the normative implications of DPT, contending that its ideological underpinnings have frequently been instrumentalized to justify foreign interventions under the guise of democracy promotion.

The article aims to contribute to the academic debate by advocating for a pluralist, context-sensitive approach to theorizing peace, which resists reductionist binaries and reflects the multipolar realities of 21st-century global politics. It also makes three main contributions to the academic debate on Democratic Peace Theory. First, it provides a systematic multi-level critique of DPT by combining conceptual, empirical, and methodological perspectives, highlighting its internal inconsistencies and limitations. Second, it advances a pluralist explanatory framework, arguing that peace cannot be attributed to regime type alone, but rather emerges from the interaction of multiple factors such as power distribution, economic interdependence, and institutional constraints. Third, the article contributes to the metatheoretical debate by questioning universalist claims in international relations theory and proposing a context-sensitive approach that recognizes the conditional and limited validity of DPT.

1 THE DISCOURSE OF ACADEMIC DEBAT

In 1964, Dean Voris Babst published one of the first articles that had a significant influence on the later development of DPT. In this paper called Elective Governments: A force for peace this scholar argues that between 1789 to 1941, “no wars had been fought between independent nations with elective governments” (Babst, 1964, p. 10). Babst’s work aimed to demonstrate that democratic states do not wage war against each other and that this stability results from internal political structures that create transparent and accountable governance. His argument was that democracies tend to pursue peaceful foreign policies because they are governed by public opinion, which in most cases opposes war. In other words, Babst also showed that democracies regularly fought against autocracies, and engaged in colonial wars. Babst concluded that diplomatic efforts to increase the number of democracies could increase the chances of

maintaining peace (Babst, 1964, p. 14). This perspective laid the foundation for further research in the field of democratic peace and inspired theorists such as Bruce Russett to continue writing on this phenomenon.

Russett, in his book Causes of Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations, 1885–1992 (2003), along with John R. Oneal and Michael L. Berbaum, argues that not only democracy but also mutual cooperation through international organizations and trade relations ensures stability and peace among these states. Russett, John R. Oneal and Michael L. Berbaum demonstrate that democracies are more interdependent and tend to avoid conflicts because they share common values and interests, leading to peaceful agreements and behavioral patterns (Oneal, Russet, Berbaum, 2003).

Kantian principles, which supported the idea of perpetual peace among democratic states, were further developed in their modern form by Michael W. Doyle (arguably the most iconic figure associated with DPT) in his article Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs (1983). This article establishes continuity between the Kantian project and modern liberal thought in IR; in particular, Doyle finds his democratic peace thesis – the fact that liberal democracies do not wage war against one another – to be consistent with Kant's three Definitive Articles for perpetual peace. Following Kant, Doyle expands on the thesis that liberal democratic states inherently tend to create peaceful international relations. Doyle argues that democracies are not aggressive in international relations because their internal structure is based on respect for the law, making them inclined to resolve conflicts through diplomatic means rather than military action. Furthermore, he elaborates on the idea that democratic states share certain norms and values, which explains why they rarely go to war with each other (Doyle, 1983). Democratic peace, in short, refers to a theoretical constellation of political space that is filled with states with a democratic polity and conflict-free potential.

In later years, critical voices emerged, questioning DPT. Joanna Gowa, associated with the neorealist school, in her book Ballots and Bullets: The Elusive Democratic Peace (1999), argues that there is not as much peace among democratic states as DPT claims. Gowa points out that most empirical studies supporting DPT ignore historical examples where democratic states have waged war against each other or have engaged in wars with non-democratic states. She focuses on empirical evidence showing that the patterns of peace among democratic states lack clear consistency and that other factors, such as geopolitical and economic interests, may be crucial in explaining international conflicts (Gowa, 1999).

It should be noted, that supporters of realism are some of the greatest critics of DPT. They generally argue that it is not democracy or the absence of, but considerations and evaluations of power, that cause peace or war. Layne (1994), Spiro (1994), Oren (1995), Farber and Gowa (1996) and the already mentioned Gowa (1999) jointly conclude that the relationship between democracy and peace is coincidental and, therefore, they argue against the democratic peace proposition (Antić, Vlahovec, 2013).

This criticism is also supported by other theorists, such as Christopher Layne. In his crucial contribution Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace (1994) Layne selects four crises2 in

which democracies came close to war. His review of the historical record concludes that in those cases democracies avoided war, but there is no evidence that they did so because they shared democratic norms. The indicators that should have been present were absent. Instead, the democracies behaved in a manner predicted by realism: they acted on the basis of calculations of national interest and used threats when vital interests were at stake. Layne also argues that looking at cases where war was possible is a better way to test DPT (Antić, Vlahovec, 2013).

According Layne, DPT is therefore based on false assumptions. He demonstrates that even democratic states may wage wars to spread democracy or protect their strategic interests, which challenges the core premise of DPT. According to Layne, DPT is too one-sided and fails to account for the complex reality of international relations, where decisions about war depend on many different factors, not just the political regime (Layne 1994).

Another critic of DPT is social constructivist Oren Barak, who, in his work The Failure of the Israeli–Palestinian Peace Process, 1993-2000 (2005), points out that the theory ignores external factors and geopolitical circumstances that may play a key role in decisions about war. Barak argues that even democratic states can be motivated to go to war based on external threats or a desire for dominance (in this case, Israel), making DPT insufficient for explaining the complexity of international relations (Barak, 2005).

David A. Lake, who focused on Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War (1992), is a liberal scholar who nonetheless questions the idea that democratic states are inherently peaceful. Lake argues that DPT fails to properly explain why some democratic states engage in wars and that the theory does not sufficiently account for factors such as economic interdependence or regional security structures. According to Lake, democratic states can behave just as aggressively as authoritarian regimes if it aligns with their national interests.

These theorists highlight that DPT overestimates the role of democratic governance in preventing wars and that broader factors beyond the political system must be considered to explain international conflicts. Similarly, perhaps the most mainstream realist scholar in international relations – John Mearsheimer – also joins these criticisms (unsurprisingly). He argues that DPT does not address the complex issues related to geopolitics and military interests. In his work The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001), Mearsheimer points out that states, regardless of their political system, may act according to realist principles of power and security, which is why DPT fails to capture the full dynamics of international relations (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The criticism of DPT has thus been a long-standing phenomenon. While some theorists continue to support it, the evidence and arguments put forward by its critics suggest that its validity in the complex world we live in is not as clear-cut as its proponents often hope.

1.1 Empirical Evidence for and Against DPT

Empirical evidence for and against DPT forms the core of the conceptual debate in IR. Proponents of the theory argue that the absence of wars between established democracies is an indicator of its validity, pointing to numerous historical examples. However, critics challenge this claim, highlighting alternative explanations for the observed patterns of peace. This part of the paper primarily examines the weaknesses and historical cases that undermine its fundamental assertions.

1.2 Arguments Supporting DPT (?)

Proponents of DPT often cite the absence of significant wars between democracies as its strongest empirical foundation. For example, during the Cold War, relations between Western democracies such as America, Britain, and France remained peaceful. Similarly, the EU is frequently mentioned as a model of democratic cooperation, where shared governance and liberal norms have supported decades of peace among member states (Schimmelfennig, 2010).

A commonly cited example for liberals is also the alliance between the USA and Britain, characterized by deep trust and mutual respect. This relationship has endured critical moments in history, including World War II and the Cold War, and remains strong today (Placek, 2012). Proponents

of DPT argue that such alliances are evidence of the unique ability of democracies to resolve disputes through dialogue and diplomacy rather than conflict.

The integration of Europe after World War II is also frequently cited as a case study for DPT. The creation of democratic institutions, such as the European Coal & Steel Community and its later evolution into the EU, facilitated economic interdependence and political cooperation, preventing further conflicts between historical rivals like France and Germany (Attia, 2016). Idealists attribute the low probability of war to this democratic governance, which strengthens stability.

1.3 Criticism of Supporting Evidence

Despite these examples, critics of DPT argue that its empirical support is limited. Proponents tend to focus on cases that support the thesis and ignore exceptions and complexities of the observed phenomena. In other words, they are satisfied with the universal explanation of DPT without considering the more complex aspects that play a role in why, in a particular case, conflict does not occur (Rosato, 2003). Moreover, while Western democracies have enjoyed relative peace, their behaviour toward non-democracies and during transitional periods tells a very different story.

A number of historical case studies contradict the logic of DPT. The previously mentioned conflict between Finland and Britain during World War II involved two democratic countries, yet they found themselves on opposing sides of the conflict, as at that time (i.e. in 1941, when the UK declared war on Finland) both countries had entirely different interests, which they perceived as vital to their survival. During the Kargil War in 1999, whether we like the designation or not, two democracies clashed, India and Pakistan, two democracies with complementary values based on different religious traditions and, additionally, nuclear arsenals. The last international conflict on the South American continent was a clash between two democracies: the war over the Cordillera del Condor, a completely uninteresting, mountainous, uninhabited area between Peru and Ecuador, where a few dozen soldiers died and the mountains ended up in Peruvian hands. The war in Nagorno-Karabakh was also de facto fought between two states with democratic forms of government (this was in 1991, prior to the authoritarian regime of the Aliyev family in Azerbaijan). One can even go far back into history, into ancient times, to the Punic Wars (2nd–3rd century BC) and the Peloponnesian War (5th century BC). These conflicts cannot be viewed through the lens of the modern liberal European concept of

democracy; despite their unequal suffrage and oligarchic features, Rome, Carthage, Athens, and Melos (and other Greek democratic poleis into which the Delian League decided to militarily intervene for strategic reasons) were democracies at the time of these conflicts (Russett, 1993).

Critics also cite Cold War-era the United States (U.S.) military interventions in Latin America aimed at preventing the rise of leftist ideologies in republican leadership (Schenoni and Mainwaring, 2019). Such a scenario occurred in the 1950s in Guatemala (among other reasons, also to defend the interests of the United Fruit Company (UFC) company, which operated in Guatemala and needed to maintain exploitative practices for its survival) and in the 1970s in the notoriously best-known case of Chile, when left-leaning Allende was overthrown with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) help and replaced by right-wing dictator Augusto Pinochet. The U.S. even went as far as preventing the emergence of democracy if that democracy was expected to be leftist. A sufficient example is Anastasio Somoza Debayle, president of Nicaragua from 1967 to 1972 and again from 1974 to 1979. Although he was as a ruthless dictator, the U.S. continued to support his regime as a non-communist stronghold in Nicaragua.

2 METHODOLOGICAL & CONCEPTUAL SHORTCOMINGS

Despite its widespread acceptance, DPT is burdened by methodological and conceptual shortcomings that challenge its credibility and applicability. These issues stem from questions of causality, inconsistent definitions, historical and cultural biases, and the inability to adapt to the changing nature of international relations. This part of the study critically examines the shortcomings and claims of the theory's weakening theoretical coherence and validity as such.

2.1 Causality vs. Correlation

One of the most significant methodological criticisms of DPT is its inability to demonstrate a causal relationship between democracy and peace. While proponents of the theory claim that democratic states do not go to war with one another, critics argue that the observed correlation does not necessarily imply causation (Spiro, 1994). For example, the absence of war between democracies may be attributed to other factors (confounding variables), such as economic interdependence, shared cultural norms, or hegemonic stability, rather than the nature of their political systems.

The problem of endogeneity further complicates this issue. DPT assumes that democracy causes peace, but it is equally possible that peace creates favourable conditions for the emergence of democratic governance. What if the causality is reversed? States that are already peaceful and economically stable are more likely to adopt democratic institutions, making it difficult to distinguish cause from effect (Rosato, 2003). This circular logic weakens the explanatory power of the theory and raises questions about its empirical foundation.

2.2 Definitional Ambiguities

Another major shortcoming of DPT lies in the vague and inconsistent definitions of its key concepts, namely "democracy" and "peace." Proponents of the theory often adopt broad definitions of democracy that include states with varying degrees of democratic institutions and practices (Kinsella, 2005). However, this approach undermines the theory itself, as the probability that a flawed democracy might attack another is not zero; history has already shown otherwise. Moreover, DPT lacks definitional frameworks that would filter out such states. Countries like the U.S., Britain, and France are frequently cited as model examples of peaceful democracies and evidence of how DPT functions. Yet, there are specific reasons why these states are members of the same alliance and no longer engage in war with each other. Furthermore, their involvement in wars and interventions, especially against non-democratic states, complicates the "peaceful" narrative. What about Iraq, for instance? Following the protests of 2019–2021, this ethnically heterogeneous country was catalyzed into a democratization process. Although it is a flawed democracy with high levels of corruption, socio-economic problems, especially those stemming from the last civil war (2014–2017), and unstable political institutions, it is still a democracy (Salim, 2021). In fact, it may currently be one of the most democratic countries in the Middle East (though the competition is limited).

Now, imagine a scenario in which Iraq, under a democratically elected government, decides to attack Israel, also a flawed democracy (given its ethnocentric structure and apartheid-like elements), but nonetheless a democracy. If such a military conflict were to happen, it would likely not come as a surprise, as people would not assign much significance to Iraq's status as a democratic state[4]. Furthermore, if the attack were carried out

[4] This scenario has, after all, already occurred during the Six-Day War, when Lebanon, at the time a democratic country, was among the Arab states that went to war with Israel.

in accordance with the will of the people, it would further challenge the foundations of DPT, which links democratic governance with peace, partly based on the assumption that elected leaders avoid war to secure re-election and retain voter support. DPT does not claim that "liberal democratic states of the modern Euro-Atlantic type" with additional specific characteristics do not go to war with each other. It simply states that democracies do not go to war with one another.

The definition of peace is no less problematic. DPT predominantly focuses on the absence of interstate wars while overlooking other forms of conflict (after all, from the perspective of security studies, there is a broader range of international conflicts than just war itself, /Glasl, 2011/), such as civil wars, proxy wars, and non-traditional security threats like terrorism or cyberattacks. The most famous civil war is arguably the American Civil War. If democracies cannot prevent military conflict within their own democratic communities, how could they prevent conflict with one another? By narrowing its focus to interstate wars, DPT ignores the complex and dynamically evolving nature of modern conflicts, thereby diminishing its relevance in international relations.

2.3 Selection Bias & Historical Context

DPT also suffers from selection bias, as it focuses on specific periods and regions where democracies coexist peacefully (Slantchev, Alexandrova, Gartzke, 2005). For example, it relies heavily on the post-World War II era, particularly among Western democracies. This focus overlooks cases in which democracies have engaged in conflict with each other (such as the aforementioned Britain and Finland, or India and Pakistan, etc.).

Furthermore, the theory's emphasis on Western democracies reflects a historical and cultural bias that limits its validity on a general level. DPT assumes that once a country adopts a democratic system, it automatically shares similar norms and values, ignoring the diversity of cultural contexts within these countries. Logically, the democratic practices of the EU member states will differ from those of emerging democracies in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. This lack of universality weakens the claim that the theory provides an explanation for global peace (Henderson, 2009).

2.4 Excessive Emphasis on Western Liberalism

DPT is often criticized for its West-centric perspective, which assumes the superiority of liberal democratic norms and institutions. This "non-

globalized" bias not only limits the theory's applicability in non-Western contexts but also sustains a hierarchical view of global governance and international relations theory as a whole (Pourmokhtari, 2013). By promoting democracy as a universal solution to conflict, DPT ignores alternative political systems and models of governance that can also contribute to peace.

For instance, non-democratic states such as China have maintained peaceful relations with many of their neighbours through mechanisms like economic cooperation and regional diplomacy (Bakker, 2020). Similarly, traditional and hybrid models of governance in regions such as sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East and North Africa region have played significant roles in conflict resolution. DPT's inability to account for these alternative paths to peace highlights its narrow theoretical framework and dependence on Western liberalism as a normative foundation.

2.5 Time-limited Theoretical Shortcomings

Another significant conceptual shortcoming of DPT is its reliance on specific historical and geopolitical contexts. Many of the theory's arguments stem from the period after 1945, when American security policy was established in the West within the bipolar system of the time, and international institutions such as the UN and NATO were created. These factors, rather than democracy itself, may have played a more significant role in maintaining peace among Western democratic states (Rosato, 2003).

After World War II, the U.S. and the Soviet Union were significantly marked geopolitically, while smaller Western and Central European countries were in a poor security position. Fearing a potential Third World War with the Eastern Bloc, it was only natural for Western countries to band together in a security alliance with the U.S. (Bhuiya, Jahan, 2022). The post-Cold War period further complicates the applicability of the theory. As new democracies emerge and the power dynamic shifts (from a bipolar to a unipolar and later multipolar system), the assumptions of DPT become increasingly difficult to sustain. The rise of democracies that have electoral processes but lack liberal democratic norms challenges the theory's emphasis on shared values and mutual trust (Solik, Graf 2023). Similarly, the growing influence of authoritarian regimes such as those in China, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and elsewhere raises questions about the future of democratic governance and its role in global peace (Lu, Shi, 2015).

3 ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF PEACE

Alright then, apparently the DPT does not function as properly as it might seem, so… What does? Rather than proposing a single competing theory, this article advances a pluralist explanatory approach. It argues that peace is best understood as a multifactorial outcome shaped by the interaction of structural (balance of power), economic (interdependence), and institutional (international organizations) variables. This approach does not reject DPT entirely but reframes it as a partial and context-dependent explanation rather than a universal law[SM3.1].

While the DPT claims that democracy is the main driver of peace between states, alternative explanations challenge this assertion. These alternative explanations emphasize factors (besides the mentioned balance of power, economic interdependence and IGOs) such as the shared cultural norms in promoting peace[SM4.1]. This part of the study analyses potential alternative explanations, critically compares them with DPT, and explains why a multifactor approach is inherently more meaningful for understanding peace. The authors suggest the name "Pluralist Multifactor Framework of Peace" theory, combining analytic eclecticism (Sil & Katzenstein), hegemonic stability (Kindleberger & Gilpin); security communities (Deutsch), complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye), global international relations' theories (by non-western authors to criticise the westcentrism of modern IR theories and lack of Global South emancipation in the field) and others… There is simply no universal theory, combining multiple theories is the key to grasp the very essence of true understanding of the world.

3.1 Realist Perspectives: Balance of Power & Security Studies

Theories based on the realism of international relations offer fairly compelling arguments against DPT by focusing on the balance of power and strategic interests as the primary determinants of peace. Realists such as Waltz and Mearsheimer argue that peace is not the result of democratic norms but rather a consequence of the balance of power or the dominance of a hegemon. According to this view, states act in their own interest and prioritize security and survival over ideological considerations (Mearsheimer, 2001).

As mentioned above, the relative peace among Western democracies during the Cold War period can be attributed to the presence of a common threat: the Soviets. The alliance led by the U.S. created a security structure

that united the West out of the need to balance Soviet power (Cederman, Rao 2001).

The concept of hegemonic stability further assumes that a dominant power, such as the U.S. after World War II, can enforce global order and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Pax Americana, characterized by the U.S. dominance in the military, economic, and political spheres, played a role in shaping the current international system (Layne, 2018). This realist perspective challenges DPT by attributing peace to the distribution of power rather than the nature of political systems.

3.2 Economic Interdependence & Globalization

Another significant explanation of peace is the role of economic interdependence and globalization. The theory of liberal peace suggests that states with high levels of trade and economic integration are less likely to engage in conflict, as war would disrupt mutually beneficial economic relationships (Chingono, 2009). This perspective aligns with Immanuel Kant's idea of "perpetual peace," which emphasized the importance of trade in fostering peaceful relations between countries.

Both historical and contemporary experiences support this argument. For instance, the deep economic ties between the U.S. and China, despite their ideological and political differences, function as a stabilizing factor in their relationship. Both countries understand that conflict would have catastrophic consequences for their economies, which deters direct military confrontation (Attia, 2016).

Similarly, the EU provides a compelling case study of how economic dependence promotes peace. The integration of European economies through initiatives such as the European Coal and Steel Community and the eurozone has made war between member states virtually impossible. These facts suggest that economic factors, rather than democratic governance alone, play a key role in reducing the likelihood of conflict (Robbani, 2007).

4 PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE THEORETICAL DISPUTE IN THE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

Contemporary international politics is moving away from rigid theoretical frameworks that were long considered authoritative for understanding global processes. DPT, which assumes that democratic states do not go to war with each other, has in recent decades proven to be an insufficiently explanatory concept. Historical examples such as the war between the

U.S. and Great Britain in 1812, the Turkish invasion of Cyprus (and others mentioned in previous parts of the paper), or diplomatic crises between European countries show that democracies are not immune to conflicts (whether physical or verbal in nature). In the current context, this issue is reflected, for instance, in the geopolitical tensions between the U.S. and the EU, where differences in economic and security priorities are gradually deepening. During Donald Trump's second term, this dynamic could become even more pronounced, raising questions about the stability of transatlantic relations and the functionality of liberal institutions (Pribecevic, 2020).

Liberalism, as one of the dominant theoretical approaches in international relations, emphasizes the importance of institutions and cooperation among states. However, this approach is increasingly unable to adequately reflect new global challenges, such as geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific. The U.S., China, and other regional actors are increasingly turning to bilateral and minilateral security agreements, showing that faith in multilateral mechanisms does not correspond to the reality of power politics. Regional groupings such as The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the African Union, and others are proving insufficiently effective in addressing security dilemmas, while formats like the Quad[5] or the AUKUS[6] are gaining importance (Satake, 2023), reflecting the strategic priorities of individual states rather than a liberal vision of collective security (in this article, ramification is perceived as possibly the most important contribution of liberalism to 21st-century diplomacy).

In Europe, liberal dogmas are gradually being reassessed within domestic political processes as well. The growing electoral support for parties with more defined geopolitical orientations, whether right- or left-leaning (in the traditional left-right spectrum), points to a transformation of political thinking and a shift from universalist visions toward more pragmatic and realist approaches (Mudde, 2021). In this respect, these tendencies should not be seen as revisionist or heretical but as a natural response to a changing international environment in which existing paradigms are eroding. The EU, for example, faces major challenges in energy policy, where the original ambitious Green Deal plan is meeting growing resistance not only from political elites but also from civil society and industrial sectors. The gradual pragmatization of this agenda, for example through renewed support for

[5] The Quad is a diplomatic partnership between Australia, India, Japan, and the U.S. committed to supporting an open, stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific that is inclusive and resilientl.

[6] AUKUS is a trilateral security partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. intended to promote a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

nuclear energy or the transitional use of fossil fuels, shows that political decisions are increasingly driven less by ideological norms and more by economic and security imperatives.

In this context, it is necessary to also reassess the role of international relations theory itself in diplomacy and policy-making. As Piotr Pietrzak notes in the Sixth Great Debate, the academic community must move away from self-serving intellectual debates that lack practical relevance (Pietrzak, 2024, pp. 160–161). Nigel Thrift (2000) emphasizes that instead of hyperbolic rhetoric that appeals only to a narrow circle of readers, the focus should be on real geopolitical practices and power discourses. This approach is crucial not only for academia but also for diplomacy itself, which in recent years has been facing increasing uncertainty and the need to adapt to new power configurations.

The current shift in global politics clearly shows that existing theoretical frameworks are becoming inadequate. It is necessary to develop new models capable of reflecting the dynamics of a multipolar world, where traditional institutions no longer fulfill their original stabilizing role (Kurfűrst, Solik, Baar, Baarová, Graf, 2024). Energy security, geopolitics in the Pacific, the rise of Europe's strategic autonomy, and the transformation of domestic political landscapes are examples of processes that cannot be adequately explained through rigid theoretical concepts of the past century (Griffiths et al., 2007). However, this does not mean that theory should be completely rejected; on the contrary, its practical application must be more flexible and capable of reflecting current geopolitical challenges.

CONCLUSION

DPT has significantly influenced academic and political discussions in the field of international relations by asserting that democracies are inherently less likely to go to war with one another. This optimistic view was widely adopted as a foundation for promoting democracy worldwide, particularly in the post-Cold War era. However, as this article has shown, DPT is far from being an unassailable paradigm. Its theoretical assumptions, empirical arguments, and normative implications reveal significant limitations that require a more nuanced approach to understanding the causes of peace.

Theoretically, DPT is grounded in liberal assumptions about shared norms, institutional constraints, and economic interdependence. Although these principles seem to explain certain patterns of peace among democracies, they are subject to critical shortcomings. The theory overgeneralizes the

behaviour of democracies and assumes that all democratic states share common values and practices. Moreover, it underestimates the role of power politics and strategic interests in shaping state behaviour, as emphasized by realist critiques. The assumption that democratic norms universally promote peace fails to account for the diversity of political cultures and historical contexts, especially outside the Western world.

Empirically, the evidence supporting DPT is selective and often suffers from methodological biases. Proponents cite examples such as the peaceful relations among Euro-Atlantic democracies in the 20th century, but counterarguments, such as the record of conflicts between democracies, challenge its validity. The assumption that democracies naturally avoid conflicts is the result of a selective reading of history, where inconvenient cases (e.g., U.S. interventions in Latin America) are either ignored or interpreted in ways that do not threaten the theory's premises. The theory's narrow focus on interstate wars also excludes other forms of conflict, such as civil wars and cyberattacks, in which democracies may be involved. Methodological issues, including selection bias and the problem of endogeneity (e.g., the lack of participation by international relations scholars from East Asia, the Middle East, or sub-Saharan Africa, as would be expected by the Global IR approach), further weaken the causal link between democracy and peace. These limitations suggest that other factors, such as economic dependence, international institutions, and power dynamics, may better explain observed patterns of peace.

Alternative explanations of peace offer a more complex and multifaceted view than DPT alone. Realist theories emphasize the importance of power dynamics and security considerations, while liberal perspectives highlight the role of economic interdependence and globalization. Constructivist approaches stress the importance of shared identities and norms, and institutionalist theories focus on the role of international organizations in maintaining stability. Together, these frameworks challenge the deterministic assumptions of DPT and provide a broader range of variables that contribute to peace.

While the democratic peace thesis offers valuable insights into the relationship between democracy and peace, its limitations call for a more critical and inclusive approach. Peace is not the product of a single factor but the result of complex interactions among political, economic, cultural, and institutional elements. As the nature of conflicts evolves in the 21st century, the international community must move beyond simplistic theories such as the DPT and adopt multilayered strategies to address the root causes

of all types of conflicts in pursuit of sustainable peace. By doing so, both academics and policymakers can better respond to the complexities of the global system and foster stability in an increasingly interconnected world.

DPT is undoubtedly one of the most influential concepts in the field of international relations, and although this article has critically examined its conclusions, this does not necessarily imply a rejection of all its principles. Rather, it highlights that reducing complex international relations to a dichotomy of "democracy versus non-democracy" leads to dangerous simplifications that can foster antagonism and justify conflicts under the guise of defending "our" values against "theirs."

History shows that the belief in one's own moral and ideological superiority has often led to military interventions or geopolitical strategies aimed at spreading democracy but instead resulted in the destabilization of regions and the exacerbation of global conflicts. After all, as the cases from Vietnam to Iraq have shown, the adoption of democratic principles cannot be imposed from the outside.

There is no ambition in this study to highlight or favour any theoretical approach in IR.

The author of this article does not sympathize with any particular theoretical school in international relations, as no theory, whether liberalism, realism, Marxism, or constructivism, is universally applicable. Each international phenomenon has its own historical, social, and political context that requires analytical flexibility and the ability to approach problems from multiple perspectives. The attempt to create a universal theory of international relations is as elusive as trying to apply Newtonian mechanics to the world of quantum physics. There will always be cases where we turn to liberalism to explain value-based conflicts, to realism for balance-of-power dynamics, to Marxism for economic exploitation between countries, or to constructivism, historical sociology, and other poststructuralist approaches for cases shaped by their specific historical context. Complex interactions between states (and non-state actors) cannot be confined to a single interpretive framework without losing essential nuances.

It is therefore unsurprising that today's world does not match the expectations of those who believed in the definitive triumph of the liberal order. As the events of recent decades have shown, democracies are not immune to authoritarian tendencies, economic dependencies, and geopolitical pressures that can lead to aggressive policies toward other states. Therefore, academic debate must move away from black-and-white

labeling and embrace the complexity of the world as an unavoidable reality.

For this reason, we must reject absolute truths in international relations and instead adopt an analytical approach that incorporates multiple perspectives and theories. DPT can be a useful explanation of certain phenomena, but its rigid application leads to erroneous conclusions and potentially to political decisions that do not align with the realities of the international system. History is not a linear narrative progressing toward a single truth; it is constructed, reinterpreted, and continuously evolving.

This study therefore suggests that Democratic Peace Theory should not be treated as a universal explanation of international peace, but rather as a limited and context-bound framework. Future research should focus on integrating insights from realism, liberalism, and constructivism into more flexible analytical models capable of capturing the complexity of contemporary international relations. The multifaceted and multidisciplinary approach is absolutely necessary in order to understand the world of today, and that world of today is shifting from the very paradigm of the bipolar and unipolar world of the past quite rapidly.

The DPT might not take into account wars waged by autocratic or hybrid regimes, but it is a very eloquent and excusable way of showing under which specific conditions liberal states can be perceived as more peaceful. The perception of liberal states being inherently less violent is now gone, as U.S. forces under Trump's administration attacked Iran. This "unexpectedly longer" invasion will spark many unintended consequences, one of which will definitely be a more rapid decline of liberal democracies, as non-democracies began to outnumber democracies for the first time in 2022 after twenty years (V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report (2023)), and a shift of the international order towards the model proposed by the BRICS countries.

The authors of this article do not suggest that the liberal world should entirely give up on the struggle to emphasize liberal values in a normative way, but it should do so with caution regarding its own violent history/presence, not intervene in wars that were not waged against it, and accept the very existence of non-democratic states as part of the international community, as they will not wane anytime soon[S.

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CONSPIRATORIAL ACTIVITIES OF ŠTEFAN LAUNER AND ANDREJ LANŠTJÁK AGAINST THE NATION-FORMING ACTIVITIES OF ĽUDOVÍT ŠTÚR IN THE LATE 1840S

Marcela Gbúrová[1] and Martin Šoman[2]

Abstract
This paper focused on the disinformation activities of Štefan Launer and Andrej Lanštják against the nation-forming activities of Ľudovít Štúr and his associates in the late 1840s. The first part of the paper focuses on Štúr's programme of the relationship between "individuality" and "commonwealth" of language nation-forming modernisation in Slovakia and Launer's and Lanštják's idea of Czech as the most practical and natural language tool of the Slovaks. The second part of the study focuses on Štúr's and Launer's conception of the future ethno-modernisation path of the Slavic peoples. The third part is the dominant part of the study, in which the authors analyses the polemics, criticisms, renegadeism, and some ways of conscious disinformation and subversive activities of Š. Launer and A. Lanštjak in relation to the nation-forming activities of Ľ. Štúr and his collaborators. Despite the activities of Š. Launer and A. Lanštjak, it turned out that the path,, which was started by Štúr and his collaborators, was successful, because it maintained the collective ethnic awareness and cultural homogenisation of the Slovak population in a politically unfavourable time.

Keywords: *Ľudovít Štúr, Štefan Launer, Andrej Lanštják, Disinformation, Language Reform, Civilisational modernisation of Slavic nations*

INTRODUCTION

Institutionally, the term disinformation first came into use in the 1920s. Nevertheless, instances of disinformation can be observed as early as the preceding period. Examining previous instances of its use is essential from a methodological standpoint, particularly in the context of gaining

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historical perspective and analyzing the evolution of unreliable information. (Bruno, Moriggi 2025). Disinformation and conspiracy activities and influence operations have now become a common part of political and geopolitical battles for ideological, political, economic, or media power. The goals of these activities are highly malicious (Bale 2007): To damage the democratic space in which citizens create a free, high-quality, and inclusive society; to threaten national security; to undermine people's trust in the democratic system; to promote various ideological propaganda; to mislead an opponent or hostile group of people; to create a false image of an influential politician, a competitor's product, and the like; to create false narratives about the harmfulness of vaccines; to convince a certain group of people that events in the world are controlled or influenced by a group of people who control or influence world events. It should be emphasized that all the disinformation activities are particularly successful in politically, economically, ideologically, and socially divided societies, where the same event can be interpreted in several ways (Moore Sanders 2002). The danger of disinformation, hoaxes, and conspiracy theories lies mainly in the fact that they offer frustrated citizens clear-cut answers to complex socio-economic or political-ideological phenomena and processes (Stempel et al. 2007). The same applies to explanations of global issues, ecological disasters, and other serious events that aim to disrupt social cohesion, threaten public health (Havey 2020), the functioning of democratic institutions (Papaioannou et al. 2023), and polarise society in terms of opinion.

One way to influence a belief in various types of disinformation is to identify the social factors that contribute significantly to its spread (Mrva - Szabó 2025). In 2018, the European Union presented a key document for the online environment, the Code of Practice on Disinformation (Code of Practice... 2018). This was because disinformation spreads much faster on online platforms than through traditional media. This was also confirmed by the results of Flash Eurobarometer 464. The survey was conducted in 28 Member States from 7 February to 9 February 2018. A total of 26,576 respondents took part[3]. The following European Union documents (Action Plan against Disinformation, 2018; Tackling online disinformation: a European approach, 2018; Commission Guidelines on Strengthening the Code of Practice against Disinformation 2021; Commission Guidelines on Strengthening the Code of Practice against Disinformation, 2022) emphasised the strengthening of tools for detecting manipulative information in European Union countries.

[3] for more details, see: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2183

According to the findings of Katarína Matušková (Matušková 2024), the Slovak Republic is part of the multidisciplinary centre Central European Digital Media Observatory, which examines the main sources and causes of disinformation issues in the online space in the Central European countries. It is also important to note its anchoring in the Slovak legislative environment since 1 August 2022, when Law Act No. 264/2022 Coll. on Media Services and on Amendments and Supplements to Certain Law Acts (Media Services Act), which gives it the power to communicate with platforms and require them to comply with established rules, as well as the competence to deal with illegal and misleading content. Thanks to this Law Act, the Broadcasting and Retransmission Council was changed to the Media Services Council, which in October 2022 established the Media Literacy platform with the aim of bringing together entities with the same mission in the field of education.

There is a long history of conspiratorial activity. These activities can also be observed during the historically pivotal 1840s, when many intellectuals and patriots of the Slovak nation (Gbúrová, 2016) sought to find solutions for the future of the Slovak nation within the Austrian monarchy, Slavic and European borders (Gbúrová, 2016). These solutions focused on the cultural and political institutionalisation of the Slovak nation, following the history-making vision of humanity of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Herder's conception was based on the connection between nature and society. He described it in detail in Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit (Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity, 1784-1791). It should be emphasised that this conception was politically neutral, peaceful, and non-aggressive. Nevertheless, it acquired political implications in the multiethnic environment of the Austrian monarchy because it constituted the issue of ethnic minorities and the development of national movements in the form of language nationalisms. Hegel impressed Slovak intellectuals with the idea that history is made up of historical, state-owning peoples who gradually pass on the baton of progress and development to each other. With this idea he encouraged not only the intellectual elites of large nations that had not yet made their mark in the history of civilisational modernisation, but also the elites of small nations that sought to contribute to the debate on the progress of humanity.

It should be emphasised that Slovak intellectuals and patriots were highly differentiated. They differed not only in their political and social orientation and type of socialisation, but also in their views on the epoch of culminating Romanticism, on the Central European geopolitical environment, on national nationalisms based on the language-cultural-ethnic principle, on

civic modernisation, and on the results of the revolution of 1848-1849 in the Austrian Empire. What strongly divided them was the idea of Slavic commonwealth in the depressing atmosphere of disappointed revolutionary hopes. A part of them inclined towards an innovation of the Slavic idea on Austro-Slavic principles, others rejected it as an unfashionable cultural and political vision, and still another part pushed for an East Slavic concept led by Russia. Their platforms of opinion were being defined through personal contacts and informal discussions with intellectuals of other national communities within the Austrian Empire or the wider, mainly Slavic, world. Some of them transformed themselves into committed politicians, which brought them into disputes not only with domestic opponents but also with representatives of government policy. There were also those who, for personal or political-ideological reasons, became agents, confederates, or collaborators who cooperated with the ruling Hungarian political circles.

The above-mentioned issue of Slovak political thought in the 1840s can also be observed in the modernising ideas on Slovak and Slavic environment of three representatives of this thinking - Ľudovít Štúr (1815 - 1856), Štefan Launer (1821 - 1851), and Andrej Lanštják (1829 - 1908). The objectives of this paper include (a) outlining a picture of the conspiratorial activities of Š. Launer and A. Lanštják in relation to the nation-forming activities of Ľ. Štúr and his associates in the late 1840s; (b) verifying the thesis that the clash of values of two opposing political ideologies creates a hotbed for the rise of various controversial activities, some of which move from the critical exchange of opinions and attitudes to activities conceptualised by conspiration.

We implemented the research issue using three basic methods. Considering the historical nature of the topic, we used the historical method, which was used to analyse the source materials obtained from contemporaneous Slovak and Hungarian press from the 1840s. The comparative method was used to find out the value differences between the ethnic-emancipation projects of the Štúr group and the projects of their critics. Using political-science research methods, we evaluated the ideological and political contexts of those projects and the ways in which they were presented in the contemporaneous press.

1 ŠTÚR'S PROGRAMME OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN "INDIVIDUALITY" AND "COMMONWEALTH" IN THE FIELD OF LANGUAGE NATION-FORMING MODERNISATION

Ľudovít Štúr was one of the founding figures of Slovak national-political history. Through his work and political activity, all the basic issue areas of the entire Slovak Romantic generation can be traced. One of these basic areas, which he programmatically named as the relationship between "individuality" and "commonwealth", was given special attention in his theoretically conceived contribution Pospolitnosť a individuálnosť' (Commonwealth and Individuality) (Štúr, 1986).

The background of the relationship between "commonwealth" and "individuality" was in the value system of Romanticism, which opened the issue of the "awakening" of national subjectivity in complex socio-political conditions. The raising of this issue in Slovak society was specific in that it was carried out from the basis of the principle of humanity as the original, distinctive form of national existence. It could not be expected that the desire of the popular strata for transformation from a subject into an object of history would be implemented by way of revolutionary radicalism. Rather, a "painful" transformation, full of compromises and partial concessions, or permanent clashes with the political reality of the Austrian monarchy, could have been anticipated.

The Slovak national commonwealth in the 1840s suffered from significant deficits of nation-state existence. It was not a ruling ethnic group, it did not have a full social composition, it lacked a larger group of educated elites and a wealthy bourgeois and land-owning class, it did not have an effective political potential for action, and there was no mass national movement as a basis for the formulation of state political demands. Ľudovít Štúr was fully aware of this fact. He knew that in the politically and ideologically broadly profiled Slovak nation-forming generation of the time, in which there was no shortage of multiple clashes of a political and conceptual nature between supporters of republicanism and monarchism, federalism and centralism, absolutism and liberalism, Hungarianism, and pan-Slavism, he could only assert himself with his nation-forming programme by active deeds in the sphere of life practice. In the first place, he had to take a stand in the relation between the individual and the nation. This was important because there were many ambiguities, many shifting solutions, in the complicated and eminently romantic dialectic between the "part" and the "whole" which were exploited for their propagandistic aims, especially by the power political elites and their confidants.

In that period, Ľ. Štúr focused fully on the struggle to promote the Slovak programme, both in the linguistic-literary and cultural spheres and in the political sphere. His basic aim was to "awaken" the nation as an ethno-cultural "commonwealth" and thus to prepare it spiritually for service in the development of the civic whole - the Hungarian homeland. Štúr knew that language had many functions, but in terms of the formation of national subjectivity, collective cohesion, and national identity, its integrative function was decisive. In this vein, he sought to convince his opponents (Ján Kollár, Pavel Jozef Šafárik, Samo Bohdan Hroboň, Ján Horárik, Andrej Lanšťják, Štefan Launer, Ondrej Seberini, and Ľudovít Seberini) that without the separation of Slovak from Czech, a national "self-feeling", i.e. a way of being an "integral" nation would not be created. Štúr rejected the "variant-wise" linguistic model as unpromising in terms of the language identification of the Slovak nation. Instead, he advocated the "delimitation" language model, but not in its purist, rather in a strictly tolerant variant, which emphasised the enriching or functional role of Czech in relation to Slovak. Ľ. Štúr believed that the perception of Czech in Slovak society as a pragmatic support in the development of written Slovak would in no way endanger its cultivation, appropriate to the circumstances of its existence.

Štúr's purposefulness, professional qualifications, committed pragmatic politics, and skilful negotiation tactics should be highlighted as important in this act of ethnic emancipation. It was also important that he had no confessional barriers, which enabled him to unite all relevant confessional currents in the issue of the Slovaks' literary language. The revolutionary events of 1848 and further developments after the revolution confirmed that the path of national identity development through a fundamental language reform, which he and his collaborators had started, was the right one, as it maintained the collective ethnic awareness and cultural homogenisation of the Slovak population in a politically unfavourable time (Gbúrová, 2009).

2 SLAVISM IN ŠTÚR'S PROGRAMME OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN "INDIVIDUALITY" AND "COMMONWEALTH"

Ľ. Štúr had a tough time coping with the relationship between "individuality" and "commonwealth" also in the topic of Slavism which was an important area of his national revivalist programme. Two periods may be distinguished in the genesis of his attitudes towards this relationship: (1) the pre-revolutionary period and (2) the post-revolutionary period.

The first period is characterised by his critical development of the Kollárian concept of Pan-Slavism. He revised Kollár's concept of Slavic cultural-literary commonwealth, especially because of the latter's conscious promotion and creation of Slovak national identity, which became one of the pillars of his Slavic programme. While J. Kollár spoke about the Slavic nation and distinguished four tribes in it, Ľ. Štúr incorporated 13 tribes into the Slavic spiritual synthesis, which he developed against the background of the Hegelian dialectic of "part" and "whole" (Štúr, 1886). Štúr's concept encountered criticism from the Czech side, which was understandable, since he divided the original Kollárian Czechoslovak tribe into two separate tribes - Czech and Slovak. This division did not suit the Czech poet, journalist, and politician Karel Havlíček-Borovský (1821 - 1856), who, after his personal experience with the Russian environmental, political, and social reality of 1844 (Bakoš, 1995), developed a "Czech" version of Kollárian concept of Pan-Slavism (Havlíček-Borovský 1956). According to that version, the Slavs do not form a single nation, but four separate nations. He favoured one "homeland", which should consist of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Silesia, and one common language (Havlíček-Borovský, 1956, pp. 39-42). This was an obvious inclination towards Austro-Slavism, which Ľ. Štúr considered a manifestation of egoism and lack of Slavic unity (Štúr, 1957).

The failure to implement the cultural and especially the political vision of the Slovak nation within the Austrian monarchy in the revolutionary period of 1848/49 caused disappointment and even fatalistic thinking among Slovak patriots. The revolution disturbed the evolutionary logic of their nation-forming thinking. Štúr replaced the issue of Slovakness with the theme of Slavism and its future and replaced the primacy of the nation by the primacy of the state. Since the Habsburg monarchy did not provide him with a model of an ideal state formation, he turned his attention to Russia as the only Slavic power. He moved from a dynamic conception of Slavic commonwealth to a Russophile-oriented Slavicness, which he associated with the idea of a supreme unity headed by Russia. He imagined it without feudal features - slavery, serfdom, gentry privileges, secret police, etc. He presented a coherent view of the post-revolutionary understanding of the Slavic issue in his work Slovanstvo a svet budúcnosti (Slavism and the World of the Future) (Štúr, 1993). At that time, he preferred the power of Slavic synthesis - Slavic "commonwealth" in his Russophile variant. He suppressed the dimension of a pragmatic politician based on the ideological concept of the relationship between Slovakness and Slavism and, just the contrary, another feature of his romantic nature came to the fore - the belief in a higher historical-metaphysical or messianic sense of history.

3 LAUNER'S AND LANŠTIAK'S IDEA OF LANGUAGE MODERNISATION IN SLOVAKIA

The starting point of the pronounced positions of Štefan Launer (1821-1851) and Andrej Lanštják (1829-1908) on the issue of the national language of Slovaks was in the criticism of the 1843 language codification act initiated by Štúr, which is the basis of the national programme of the Slovak ethnic group and its identity (Kačala, 1994).

Š. Launer (Gbúrová, 2019) responded to Štúr's reform initiative in a very vehement manner and rejected it as unjustified and harmful for the future of Slovaks. It could be assumed that it would offer Slovak citizens an original instrument of language modernisation that would be much more promising than Štúr's language reform. However, the reality was different. Launer presented the Slovak public with only a few reasons why not to adopt "Štúr's language" and why to adopt Czech, which he saw as the most practical and natural language tool for Slovaks. He summarised his position on this issue in his best-known work, Povaha Slovanstva (The Nature of Slavism) (Launer, 1847a), and in another less extensive book, Slovo k národu svému (A Word to My Nation) (Launer, 1847b).

Despite his good relationship with Ján Kollár, he did not accept his project of a unified Czechoslovak language, nor did he identify with the compromising attitude of Pavol Jozef Šafárik, who wanted to bring Czech and Slovak closer together. Launer base his arguments on the scientifically dubious claim that Czech was a local "Lingua Adamica".

A. Lanštják became friends with Štefan Launer while studying in Halle. Launer won over the not-so-much pervasive Lanštják thanks to his scholarship and uncompromising attitudes. Lanštják repaid his great ideological role model with anti-Štúrian works (Lanštják, 1847, 1848). In them, he confirmed his pro-Launer ideological orientation. In addition to extremely expressive language, misinformation and propagandistic themes, he presented in them a low professional level, especially in his analysis of Michal Miloslav Hodža's Dobruo slovo Slovákom súcim na slovo (A Good Word to Slovaks Who Are Suited to Hear the Word) (Hodža, 1847) and the programme of the first national association and the ideological and organisational centre of the Slovaks' national-cultural endeavours - Tatrín (Tatrín, 1844).

4 LAUNER'S VISION OF THE MODERNISATION OF SLAVISM

The civilisational paradigm of the Slavic and especially the Slovak world was outlined by Štefan Launer in his book Povaha Slovanstva (The Nature of Slavism) (Launer, 1847a). He constructed his ethnic-modernisation project differently from Ľudovít Štúr. He was aware that he found himself in an age of competing nationalisms of the emancipatory type. As emphasised by T. Pichler, "these nationalisms wanted to prove their legitimacy by pointing, mostly ideologically, to the uniqueness of the nations they represented and to which they ascribed a 'mission' in history" (Pichler, 2011).

Štúr's Slavic Pan-Russianism, or conservative utopianism, was out of step with liberal political modernism based on individualism and universalism of civil rights and liberties, which, on the contrary, was close to Štefan Launer. He looked at Slavism through the eyes of a European rather than a Slav. As a result, for him "all the peoples of Europe were united by one spirit" and attracted by something like "chemical affinity" (Launer, 1847a).

He attempted to show that into each branch of the "four-branched" tree of Western European scholarship the life of the Slavic tribes was to be "grafted" in terms of their "world-historical" foundation. Launer's solution was as follows: (1) Italian scholarship is represented in Slavic studies by the Illyrians, (2) French scholarship and French spirit are represented in Slavic studies by the Poles. (3) The English "world trade" and "shipbuilding" are represented in the Slavonic world by the Russian nation, (4) German edification, the German spirit in Slavonic world is represented by the Czechs, Moravians, Slovaks, and Silesians.

According to him, Hungary is divided into two parts. One part focuses on practical Western European politics. It is represented by the Hungarians who, as the lawmakers of Hungary, are oriented towards French and English scholarship and politics. The other part of Hungary is oriented towards the German theoretical and philosophical way of life. It is represented by the Slovaks as part of the "Czechoslovak tribe", who are connected to German politics, morals, science, and religion. Their historical mission is to translate the German spirit into their own culture (see Gbúrová, 2019). The problem with these detailed ethno-cultural-religious parallels was in their very weak scholarly justification. For this reason, they became a propagandistic support for some politicians of liberal orientation in Hungary, who worked to problematise national-identification processes in the Slovak nation-forming environment.

5 POLEMICS, CRITICISMS, RENEGADEISM, AND CONSCIOUS DISINFORMATION ACTIVITIES OF Š. LAUNER AND A. LANŠTJAK

The shift from ethnic consciousness to national consciousness, which Europe marked at the end of the 18th century in Germany, was carried out in Slovakia by educated Evangelicals led by Ľ. Štúr in the mid-1840s. They opposed four factors: (1) The line of Czechoslovak cultural and language unity represented by Kollár's concept of Slavic commonwealth and cultural and language tribalism, where Czechs and Slovaks considered themselves as one tribe with one culture and a common Czech or Slovakised Czech language. (2) The extreme wing of the Czechoslovak idea, which supported the Kossuthian liberal project of Hungarian political nationhood and the Hungarian constitutional single-language nation state (Š. Launer, O. Lanštják, O. Seberíni, etc.). (3) The language "separatism" of Bernolák's followers, who based their choice of the specific form of the national literary language on the peripheral Slovak dialects. (4) The growing Hungarian nationalism, which stemmed from the so-called reform period of Hungarian political history of the 1930s-1940s, namely from Széchenyi's Great Hungarian state idea and Kossuthian patriot thesis - the identification of the language border with the state border. Evaluating all the consequences of this definition, Ľ. Štúr and his associates decided to qualitatively shift Kollár's attitude towards Slavic "tribalism" and to call the Slovaks a separate tribe and to elevate the colloquial language to a norm.

A native of Krupina, Š. Launer also took part in this process of national identification. towards the close of the 1840s. During his lyceum (Banská Štiavnica, Bratislava) and university (Halle) studies, he revealed a lot not only about his thought models (especially G. W. F. Hegel, M. Luther), but also about his character, which predestined him for the role of an uncompromising opponent of concepts, visions, and projects with which he disagreed. Several testimonies of his colleagues (Sládkovič, 1862; Grossmann, 1874) show that he had something of a Napoleonic complex: he was short in stature, resolute, persistent, ostentatious, ambitious, stubborn, quarrelsome, domineering, internally adapted to the role of a leader of a minority radical current of opinion. In 1842, when two rival wings formed among the students of the Bratislava Slovak Lyceum - the majority of pro-Štúr and the minority anti-Štúr wings, Launer gave vent to his leadership trait and programmatically sided with the opposition to Štúr (Kleinschnitzová, 1928). In Halle, he quarrelled with almost all Slovak students; only those who were opinionated, spiritually immature, and whom he felt needed a

strong paternal protective hand over them, suited him. In this environment he won to his side a native of Palúdzka, Andrej Lanštják, who served him well in his anti-Štúrian mission at the end of the 1840s.

Launer and Lanštjak defined themselves in relation to the Štúr followers by the radical rejection of their language reform, which they regarded as a gross distortion of state (Hungarian) and national (Czechoslovak) integration. Š. Launer took advantage of the complicated situation of the search for the most appropriate solution to the language issue of the Slovaks in Hungary to make visible his scholarship, his intellectual gifts, his conflicting nature, and his denunciations and renegadeism. He came to Slovakia with a coherent theoretical idea of ethnic-emancipatory modernism, which he published in Czech in his book Povaha Slovanstva (The Nature of Slavism), and later (in 1847-1849) he searched for its implementation possibilities (Slovo k národu svému (A Word to My Nation). Banská Štiavnica,1947; Všelicos pro obveselení mysli - Various Things to Cheer the Mind. Banská Štiavnica, 1848; A Štúr féle tótság veszedelmes iránya. Budín, 1848; Našim milým Slovákům (To Our Dear Slovaks). Banská Štiavnica, 1848; Vysvětlení proč náš král svržen jest z trůnu? (Explanation, Why Our King Is Dethroned?), Banská Bystrica, 1849).

Lanštják served Launer with his anti-Štúrian and anti-Slovak papers (Lanštják, 1847, 1848). He spoke, wrote, and exchanged letters only in Czech and Hungarian. In his defence of Launer's theses, Lanštják sharply attacked Michal Miloslav Hodža for his national-emancipation demands (Dobruo slovo Slovákom sucim na slovo) (A Good Word to Slovaks Who Are Suited to Hear the Word), including his promotion of the Tatrín national association.

The Štúr followers watched Launer's and Lanštják's actions very closely and considered a defensive strategy against this form of renegadeism. They knew that Lanštják lacked not only a positive attitude towards Slovakia, but also a personal attitude, which was his great disadvantage in professional and cultural-political communication. His renegadeism was first-plane, explicit, transparent. Therefore, he was not a serious competitor for them. Perhaps that is also why they chose an unconventional form of attack against him - persiflage. In the satirical and humoristic column Počta zo Sebechleba (Orol tatránski - The Eagle of the Tatras - a literary and educational supplement of the Slovak National Newspaper), Ondrej Hodža, an associate of Ľ. Štúr, in his article, "Čo bláznovi po rozume, keď ho ňemá" (Why Should a Fool Care About the Reason When He Hasn't Got Any" (Hodža, O., 1847), ridiculed him with a thoughtful and well-argued magazine defence of the concept of the literary Slovak language. He revealed Lanštják's low moral qualities, but also

the problematic level of his working method, showing false information, professional, and stylistic defects. A concentrated collective critical attitude towards Lanštják was considered by the Štúr scholars (in addition to O. Hodža, this struggle was joined in by Ľ. Štúr, Karol Braxatoris, and Štefan Jančovič) as sufficient to convince the reading public of the Orol tatránski (The Eagle of the Tatras), published in literary Slovak, of his renegadeism and low professional and moral qualities. His 1847 pamphlet Anti-Magyar found a response not only among the Štúr followers, but also in the Hungarian press, including the organ of the Hungarian liberal opposition, Pesti Hírlap, which was known for its persistent proclamation of the Magyarisation of the historic Hungary. It should be noted that this pamphlet was written in Hungarian so that the theme of Hodža's postulates from his work Dobruo slovo Slovákom suciu na slovo (A Good Word to Slovaks Who Are Suited to Hear the Word) could be thematised in the widest possible Hungarian context and critically evaluated, especially in Hungarian journalism.

Š. Launer was a different type of opponent for the Štúr group. Some of them knew from personal experience about his stubborn nature, his indiscriminate ways of asserting himself at any cost, of being important in the environment in which he worked. J. M. Hurban, who was known as a serious man, pointed to another of his characteristics - sycophancy (Hurban, 1851), Launer's idea was based on the incorrect ethno-genetic theory that the Slovaks "are Germans in morals, science, and form of religion. They have been included in history to this end, to translate, to reinterpret into Slavism, the purest Protestant principle expressed in Germany, together with the Silesian Moravians and Czechs" (Launer, 1847a). He tried to substantiate his position with historical considerations, analogies, and contemporaneous knowledge from the Czech and Slovak environments, especially from the Hussite period. Launer's thesis of the Slovaks' connection with Protestantism was neither historically, nor sociologically, nor politically correct. Launer was not inclined to make compromises, especially on religious issues. He did not consider religions other than Evangelical religion to be spiritually beneficial. He spoke out strongly against Ľ. Štúr on the grounds that he made concessions to the Catholic clergy in the creation of the literary Slovak language in 1843.

The language of Slovak dialects, according to him, is indeed "natural", but spiritually "raw", there is little high education in them. He could not imagine a priest preaching a sermon with high content of Christian narratives in the language of "crude" tavern communication. Unlike Štúr, he believed that the new codified Slovak was an undeveloped, terminologically poor language

that would not reach the qualitatively high level of standard languages such as the Czech he promoted. Czech, he emphasised, was primarily perceived as the liturgical language of Slovak Lutherans, as the language of the Reformation, the language of the Church preacher and religious reformer Jan Hus (1369-1415). Launer did not intend to abandon this tradition. Ľ. Štúr had a strong opinion in this respect, which was confirmed in real language practice, that Czech could not arouse mass enthusiasm and activism in Slovakia. Despite this, Launer decided to become an advocate of the "old" language, he was unable to generate any alternative tempting offer of a great future for Czech in Slovakia. He went so far in his activism that he wanted to promote Czech through the publication of an anti-Štúrian Slovak newspaper in Czech. It was to be called Uhersko-slovenské noviny (Ugrian-Slovak Newspaper).

He needed to gain collaborators for the promotion of his liberal political programme theses also from the ranks of the national communities of Hungary, whose task was to destroy the emancipatory activities of the nation-forming elites of these communities. It offered various benefits in return for the above-mentioned subversive activities. Launer sensed that he could develop his ideas about the future political course and the practical advantages of that course by identifying with the political and ideological goals of the Kossuthian liberals and assisting them in their implementation. In particular, he introduced himself to them with his best-known book, Povaha Slovanstva (The Nature of Slavism) (1847), and a year later with a reflection written in Hungarian (Launer, 1848), in which he responded to Štúrian salutatory poem, Cíti radosti Jeho c. kr. Visosti arcikniežaťu Štefanovi (Feeling the Joy for His Imperial Royal Highness Archduke Stephen) (Orol tatránski III, 1848, pp. 655-657) to the new Hungarian Palatine Archduke Stephen in November 1847 (see Marták 1938, pp. 156-157). It should be emphasised that the above-mentioned poem, in which the Štúrians expressed their hope that the new palatine would be accommodating to the demands of the Štúrians, was for Launer both a pretext and an opportunity to present himself to the Magyarising political public with the ideologically condensed text of his developmental Slavic theory, his renegadeism, and his devotion to the Kossuthian political orientation, in which the idea of a single-nation and single-language Hungary took the dominant position. At several points in his text, he emphasised that he was indeed a Hungarian Slovak by nationality, who historically, etymologically, and spiritually belonged to the Czech-Moravian-Silesian-Slovak nation. Politically, he feels himself a citizen of the Hungarian homeland. With this pro-Hungarian attitude, he

bequeathed to the Štúrians that their language was only a Hungarian dialect, so that they have no right to have it recognised as the official language of a nation that does not exist in Hungary. The fact that he supported the efforts of Hungarian political circles to have Hungarian replace Latin as the diplomatic language in Hungary should, in his opinion, be welcomed by all the Štúr followers.

Another example of his destructive anti-national activity is in the controversial procedure he used in evaluating an article by Štúr's collaborator Ctibor (Zochius) Zoch (Ohlas proťi Ohlášení...), which, in a correct manner (there was a preponderance of factual arguments over expressive evaluative parts), polemicised with Launer's advertising text (Launer, 1847b) related to the publication of his book, Povaha Slovanstva (The Nature of Slavism). Instead of calmly evaluating and polemicising with Zoch's arguments, he gratuitously demeaned Zoch as a person and belittled his evaluative approach. He wanted to present himself to his readers as an uncompromising debunker of false information about his book with his sharp polemical approach, but already his introductory remark ("Here you will see, the Slovaks, that Cochius's head is a slop cesspool; and do not say then that I have done him an injustice") hinted to the readers what type of unfair evaluation he resorted to.

One more piece of evidence is his indiscriminate attack on Daniel Lichard (1812-1882) in the text Slovo k národu svému (A Word to My Nation). His former colleague and teacher of mathematics at the Banská Štiavnica college announced the publication of the Noviny pre hospodárstvo, remeslo a domáci život (Newspaper for Economy, Craft, and Domestic Life) (the newspaper was being published weekly in Skalica from 27 April to 16 November 1849) in Štúrian Slovak. Launer was so angered by this information that he criticised his colleague for it in an indiscriminate manner. Lichard was deeply touched by Launer's "canal" criticism and found it necessary to react quickly to it to clear his name. Ľ. Štúr, who originally did not intend to have further disputes with Launer on the pages of Orol Tatránski (Eagle of the Tatras), made an exception in the case of Lichard. He published his Otvorení list... (An Open Letter…) (Lichard, 1848), in which the reading public could draw their own picture of the differences between the level of the replies of the two "concerned" parties. Moreover, Launer suffered another defeat in this dispute: the disrespect of his students of the Banská Štiavnica Church-Evangelical "school", his Church-Evangelical commonwealth, the advocates of literary Czech, and the broader Banská Štiavnica neighbourhood, including the Catholic commonwealth of believers, whom he regarded as

supporters of the reactionary conservative national line. If we do not take into account the short critical editorial response of the Orol Tatránski (Eagle of the Tatras) to Launer's text Slovo k národu svému (A Word to My Nation) under the title Nová babraňina oproťi Slovenčiňe (New messup against Slovak) (1868)), which was triggered by a number of letters, especially from the mining towns of Banská Štiavnica, Banská Bystrica, Kremnica, Ľubietová, and Slovenská Ľupča, then we can argue that D. Lichard put an end to the polemics with Launer's opinions in the Slovak press. In a certain way he inspired other publicists (e.g. from the camp promoting Czech or Czechoslovak) not to respond further to Launer's articles and books, which mixed real facts with deliberate misinformation.

Launer was very critical of the Šturians and their national activities. This was because he had strong political backing not only with the Kossuth liberals, but also with Karol Zay, the general overseer of the Evangelical Churches and an ardent promoter of the union of the Calvinists with the Evangelicals A. C. in Hungary, who worked closely with the Hungarian government political circles and had influence on the administration of Hungarian Evangelical education. Štúr considered legal action against Launer for his "canal" criticism of Štúrian activities, but he knew too well that he had more to lose than to gain in a potential legal dispute. He was aware that he had a negative position with the aforementioned K. Zay, but also that if he violated the condition related to the permission to publish the Slovenské národné noviny (Slovak National Newspaper) (this permission states that "hostile" articles, "irritating" personal or national attacks must not be published - Hodža, M., 1920, p. 258), he could lose his licence, and the political-legal "uproar" around Launer was not worth it.

Launer, with his anti-Štúrian and anti-Slovak attitudes and his defence of the governmental Hungarian policy, made the representatives of the domestic national movement particularly unfriendly. For them he became a renegade, a separatist, a persona non grata.

6 PRAŽÁK'S DEFENCE OF LAUNER'S AND LANŠTJÁK'S ANTI-SLOVAK ACTIVITIES

The establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in the autumn of 1918 marked a qualitatively new stage in development of the Slovak nation and of the development of the literary Slovak language. The preamble to Constitutional Law Act No. 121/1920 Coll. (ZÁKON ze dne 29. února 1920), which began with the words "We, the Czechoslovak nation...", proved to be

a political issue in Slovak-Czech relations after the establishment of the new republic. The mention of the "Czechoslovak nation" appeared in pre-revolutionary political documents, but its presence in the constitutional text was a serious reason for the Slovak side to fear that the unitary construction of the state structure would enter the institutional construction of the state. Among the series of law acts adopted by the National Assembly of the Czechoslovak Republic, in connection with the topic under analysis, mention should be made of the Language Law Act No. 122/1920 Coll. of 29 January 1920 (ZÁKON ze dne 29. února 1920), which determined the principles of language law in the conditions of the Czechoslovak Republic. The philosophy of the law was based on the Treaty of Saint-Germain, which stipulated that Czechoslovakia should incorporate into its legal system the protection of language, racial and religious minorities. On the issue of language rights, Czechoslovakia was contractually obligated that the state would not interfere with the language, religious, commercial and other rights of its citizens. This law laid down the rules and conditions for the use of the official "Czechoslovak" language in official dealings, while at the same time providing a framework for the use of the languages of national minorities. The above-mentioned legal norm, which was perceived in Czech society as "a great work of tolerant Czechoslovak democracy" (Soukupová, 2015), caused considerable tension on the Czech political scene between Karel Kramář's Czechoslovak National Democracy and the parties of the then ruling coalition. The latter accepted the terms of the Treaty of Saint-Germain without major reservations. K. Kramář advocated a "state" language, which he saw as a symbol of state independence and the freedom of the "Czechoslovak nation". The ruling parties were in favour of adopting the term "official" language mainly because of the friendliness towards national minorities, but also because of the respect for the term "official language" which was in the text of the Treaty of Saint-Germain. Another reason was the negative experience of the use of the term "state language" in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire (Šútovec, 1999). The literary Slovak language acquired new social functions after 1918 because it became, pursuant to Section 4 of the above-mentioned Law Act (ZÁKON ze dne 29. února 1920), a state language in addition to Czech. The revival of the theory of Czechoslovakism formulated by certain circles in the Czech (especially Prague) environment at the birth of Štúrian Slovak was a negative phenomenon in the development of literary Slovak. Albert Pražák, who was a representative of Czechoslovak-oriented scholarship, also joined in the defence of Czechoslovak language policy. As a sharp critic of the Štúrian concept of an independent literary Slovak

language and an advocate of Czechoslovak tribal and political unity, he rehabilitated Launer's theory of Slavism (The Nature of Slavism) in his work Dějiny spisovné slovenštiny po dobu Štúrovu (The History of Literary Slovak During the Time of Štúr) (Pražák, 1922). He even regarded it as an original attempt at a philosophy of Slavic history and as a contradictory ideology of the representatives of the Slovak national movement (Pražák, 1922) grouped around Ľ. Štúr. He especially appreciated Launer's "original" proof of the thesis of a Czech-Moravian-Slavic-Slovak unified tribal, religious, and spiritual whole. To arouse a sense of objectivity of the statement among the readers of his book, he was only critical of Launer's "biting" and "unpolished" style in his anti-Štúrian polemics, of his analysis of Czech nature, which Launer drew directly from the German Reformation principle, and of Launer's inconsistencies in his criticism of the Štúr followers. He overrated Lanštják's work (Lanštják, 1847), not because of its narrative value, but mainly because he promoted the idea of Czechoslovak unity on historical, linguistic, literary, and philosophical grounds and sharply polemicised with Štúr's philological theory of tribalism (Pražák 1922). Based on Launer's critique of Štúr's language codification act, he was critical of Štúr's writings Nárečja slovenskuo alebo potreba písaňja v tomto nárečí (Slovak Dialect or the Necessity of Writing in This Dialect (1846) and Náuka reči slovenskej (Theory of the Slovak Language) (1846). He did not argue with their philological and cultural-social dimension, because he would have had to admit their importance as a tool of communication of broad layers of the Slovak population and organisations of cultural-social, religious, and public life. He saw the issue in the method of Štúr's argumentation, which, according to Pražák, was constructed from politically expedient "violent premises". The main motive for his criticism, as it was for Launer, was the anti-Czech political dimension of Štúr's codification. Pražák's rehabilitation of Lanštjak's and Launer's anti-Štúrian critiques became one of his important arguments in the struggle against the language-political dimension of written Slovak in the early years of the Czechoslovak Republic.

CONCLUSION

The shift from ethnic consciousness to national consciousness was made in Slovakia by educated Evangelicals led by Ľudovít Štúr in the mid-1840s. They qualitatively shifted Ján Kollár's attitude towards Slavic "tribalism" and called Slovaks a separate tribe and elevated the colloquial language to a norm. With the language-cultural reform, which put to rest the Herderian

concept of a 'natural', organic nation defined through language, they engaged in a process of language modernisation that became the basis for the creation of political communities within Hungary. Štefan Launer and Andrej Lanštják also intervened in that complicated process of national emancipation in the 1840s. They defined themselves in relation to the Štúrians by their radical rejection of their language reform, which they regarded as a gross distortion of state (Hungarian) and national (Czechoslovak) integration. They demonstrated their position in their anti-Štúrian polemics, in which, instead of substantive argumentation, they used various methods of disinformation and conspiracy in order to undermine the Štúrians' national development projects and thus to assist the ruling liberal Hungarian policy in promoting the concept of a unified Hungarian political nation. Despite various attempts to destroy it, Štúr's linguistic reform proved its historical validity

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SOCIAL PRESSURE, NETWORK TOPOLOGY, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF THE VOTING NORM

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Abstract
This study presents the results of an agent-based simulation of the effects of social pressure and network topology on the persistence of the voting norm. It aims to examine how variations in network topology and the degree of reduction of social influence shape the persistence of intended turnout. The decision rule for an agent/voter is an extended calculus of voting by Riker and Ordeshook, considering social pressure and the mechanism of internalisation of the sense of civic duty. The model includes networks generated using the Watts-Strogatz algorithm, which differ in rewiring probability. The model assumes two phases of voting norm spreading: a mobilisation phase (full social pressure), in which intended turnout increases, and a reduction phase (pressure fully or partially suppressed), in which turnout decreases and then stabilises at a level appropriate to the network. In the mobilisation phase, differences in intended turnout between the studied networks mainly depend on the structure of connections between individuals, and in the reduction phase, on the degree of suppression of social pressure. Even a small social influence can lead to a dynamic increase in intended turnout and maintain it at a relatively high level if the network is highly clustered and contains few random edges.

Keywords: *Voting norm; Intended turnout, Social networks, Watts-Strogatz algorithm, Agent-based model*

INTRODUCTION

The results of empirical studies indicate links between social pressure and electoral participation. Social influence on the decision to vote occurs in both face-to-face social networks (Gerber et al., 2008; Lindgren et al., 2025; Ternovski, 2024) and online networks (Bond et al., 2012; Haenschen, 2016). High contagion of the voting norm is usually observed in households, where most of the mobilisation signal is transmitted to other household members (Blais et al., 2019; Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2012; Nickerson, 2008). Research further indicates the importance of the influence of the immediate neighbourhood and a narrow circle of friends (Blais et al., 2019; Gerber et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2017).

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The social environment can impact the decision to vote not only in the short term. Indeed, it turns out that even a singular mobilisation appeal (e.g. door-to-door canvassing or political direct mail) can not only increase a voter's propensity to participate in the next election, but also initiate a process of perpetuation of the voting norm, which then manifests itself (at least for some time) in the voter's habitual voting behaviour (Coppock & Green, 2016; Gerber et al., 2003; Green & Shachar, 2000). What explains the persistence of turnout? Why does participating in one election increase the probability that an individual will also vote in subsequent elections? Why is it that in communities where a high voter turnout is currently observed, it is likely to remain at similar levels well into the future? Donald Green and Ron Shachar (2000), for example, emphasised the importance of consuetude in voting and the evolution of civic identity. They proposed an explanation at the individual level, similar to Samuel Abrams, Torben Iversen and David Soskice (2011), who included informal social networks in their analysis. They found that voting and its persistence can result not only from a formed psychological habit but also from rational compliance with the pressures of the immediate environment.

An alternative explanation to the individualist approaches has been put forward by Georgia Kernell and Peter Lamberson (2023). According to their model, turnout inertia is a product of the structure of the social network: the level of turnout is determined at a point of stable equilibrium arising from interactions in the network. Between the equilibria denoting low and high turnout lie tipping points; crossing them pushes the system towards higher or lower turnout. Each stable equilibrium corresponds to a basin of attraction, a region of initial conditions from which the dynamics return to a given equilibrium. It attenuates minor perturbations, which ensures the persistence of turnout in subsequent elections, while at the same time making it possible for prominent differences in participation rates to become perpetuated in similar communities for years.

Kernell and Lamberson built an analytical model based on game theory and social network analysis that accounts for general relationships between network topology and intended turnout, rather than simulating the system from the bottom up, agent by agent, in contrast to James Fowler's (2005) agent-based model, which embeds agents in the Watts-Strogatz small-world network (Watts & Strogatz, 1998). The Fowler model makes it possible to observe how local interactions and imitation lead to turnout cascades and under what conditions the scale of these cascades increases. The agent-based approach enables the identification of the conditions under which

local incentives trigger network-wide changes. It complements the analytical approach by focusing on the specific structure of the relationship between agents and the relationships between the features of this structure and the functioning of the system[2].

In this study, I refer to the agent-based approach. Despite a growing body of research on social influence and voter turnout, relatively little attention has been paid to the structural conditions under which a voting norm, once diffused through a network, persists or decays over time. Existing analytical models, such as those of Kernell and Lamberson (2023), characterise stable intended turnout equilibria as a function of network topology and social interactions; however, they do not provide an agent-based simulation of voting norm diffusion and decay. Agent-based models, in turn, have largely focused either on cascade dynamics or on the formation of turnout intentions, leaving norm persistence under conditions of declining social pressure comparatively understudied (e.g. Fieldhouse et al., 2016; Fowler, 2005). This article addresses that gap by focusing on the joint role of social pressure and network topology in persisting the voting norm. The aim of this article is to examine how variations in network topology and the degree of reduction of social influence shape the persistence of intended turnout in an agent-based simulation. The following research questions were formulated: (1) Will the voting norm persist in the network once the incentives that led to its creation are weakened or reduced altogether? (2) How do the structural properties of the network affect the persistence of the norm? The starting point of my analysis was the calculus of voting by William Riker and Peter Ordeshook (1968), into which I introduced factors that measure social influence. Based on the concretised Riker and Ordeshook model, I built an agent-based model by embedding agents/voters in networks generated using the Watts-Strogatz algorithm with different rewiring probabilities.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Anthony Downs (1957) assumed that rational voters focus solely on political and economic goals when deciding to vote. Such voters seek to maximise the expected utility of voting, guided by narrowly conceived self-interest. They decide to go to the polling station and cast a vote only if the expected benefits of voting outweigh the costs. Voting benefits represent

[2] Regarding the impact of social networks on political participation, see also: Amaro de Matos and Barros (2004), Fowler and Smirnov (2005), Rolfe (2005), Siegel (2009), Fosco, Laruelle and Sánchez (2011) and Fieldhouse, Lessard-Phillips and Edmonds (2016).

the difference in the expected utilities of the policies of the two candidates. Voters compare the policies they expect the candidates to implement and assess how individual policy proposals can affect their own lives and the chances that a given candidate will win and deliver on their promises. The costs of voting, on the other hand, are mainly the time and effort that voters have to spend not only on election day to go to the polling station and cast their vote, but also to acquire and assimilate information about the parties and candidates beforehand. The direct cost of participating in elections is usually incomparably lower than the cost of obtaining information.

The analysis of the Downsian model leads to the conclusion that a rational voter should abstain from voting. The reason for this is the very low probability of casting a decisive vote, which means that the costs of voting usually exceed the expected benefits. However, this conclusion, remains at odds with the observed level of voter turnout: in fact, many citizens in democratic countries participate in elections. This tension between the individual-level prediction of abstention and the empirically observed participation in elections is referred to in the literature as the "paradox of voting" (Aldrich, 1993).

William Riker and Peter Ordeshook (1968) proposed one approach that provides a basis for a partial resolution of the paradox of voting[3]. They first formalised the Downsian model and then introduced a sense of civic duty into the model – a type of consumption benefit independent of the probability of casting a decisive vote. They obtained a model expressed by the following equation:

$$R = PB - C + D, \tag{1}$$

Where: R is the expected utility of voting; B is the personal benefit that a voter may obtain in the event of a preferred election outcome; P is the probability of casting a decisive vote; C is the cost of voting; and D is the sense of civic duty.

Individuals with a sufficiently strong sense of civic duty will vote without regard to the benefits and costs and the probability of casting a deciding vote. Voting is therefore not, in Riker and Ordeshook's view, a purely instrumental act, as is the case in the Downsian model. Indeed, Riker and Ordeshook's voters may care more about obtaining consumption benefits,

[3] Keith Dowding (2005) succinctly discusses attempts by rational choice writers to explain the electoral participation of a significant proportion of citizens in democratic states. See also Geys (2006) and Mueller (2003).

such as the satisfaction of reaffirming loyalty to the political system or the satisfaction of acting in accordance with the voting ethic, than about their preferred candidate's victory (see Goldfarb & Sigelman, 2010). In Riker and Ordeshook's model, the sense of civic duty can be interpreted as an internalised, norm-based benefit of voting. The model treats factor D exogenously. It does not allow for an examination of how the voting norm forms and how it spreads in the population, as well as, which is crucial for my study, how the persistence of this norm depends on the way social influence is reduced in the network and on the structure of connections between individuals.

3 MODEL

To bring Riker and Ordeshook's model closer to reality, it is necessary to include the pressures arising from social interaction. My modification involves introducing two factors into equation (1): S, which reflects the strength of social influence, and β, which expresses the degree of susceptibility of the voter to social influence. In addition, I link the factor D to the coefficient δ, which is a weight indicating how much utility a given level of sense of civic duty provides. The concretised equation (1) takes the following form:

$$R_i(t) = PB - C + \delta D_i(t) + \beta_i S_i(t). \qquad (2)$$

With significant social influence and a high susceptibility of the voter to it, the expected utility of voting can be positive, even with little personal benefit and a low probability of casting a decisive vote. Therefore, social norms can be an important determinant of voting, as the model assumes[4]. The presented modification provides a starting point for the "networking" of decision-making, that is, the construction of an agent-based model assuming that individuals do not make decisions in isolation, but in a specific relational context[5].

In order to investigate the influence of social pressure and the structural properties of the network on the persistence of the voting norm, I conducted

[4] When $\beta>0$ and $S>0$, the product of βS functions as a normative social payoff, reflecting such benefits of conforming to a voting norm as reputational rewards or group approval.

[5] In the study, I used a model with dynamic adaptive thresholds, which retains the core of the classical calculus of voting without breaking with the foundations of rational choice theory. An alternative would be to adopt a decision rule based on purely behavioural heuristics: "Imitate the behaviour of your direct neighbour with a given probability" (see Fowler, 2005)..

an agent-based simulation consisting of 1200 runs (12 scenarios (6 rewiring probability values (p) × 2 social pressure scale factor values (α)) × 100 replications) in the population of 1000 voters (N), embedded in networks generated using the Watts-Strogatz algorithm (Watts & Strogatz, 1998)[6]. In each network, each agent was initially connected to ten immediate neighbours (k=10, $k/2$ on each side of a node), and then each edge was randomly rewired with a probability value fixed for the given network $p \in \{0, 0.05, 0.1, 0.3, 0.6, 1\}$[7].

Each run comprised 100 iterations (rounds of contact with immediate neighbours)[8], with the first 25 being the mobilisation phase (with full social influence) and the remaining 75 – the reduction phase. In the first scenario, the strength of social influence was reduced after 25 iterations to 0%, and in the second to 20%. Three measures of the intended turnout were adopted:

(1) percentage of agents declaring their intention to vote in the 25th iteration (end of mobilisation phase);

(2) percentage of agents declaring their intention to vote in the 100th iteration (final state of the population);

(3) the difference between the above percentages was interpreted as the degree of reduction in the norm.

The initial state of the agents was identical in both scenarios of reducing social pressure in the same network. At the time of t=0, a randomly selected 0.5% of agents were assigned a declaration of voting intention (external mobilisation incentive). Then, in each iteration ($t \geq 1$), each agent i "calculated" the expected utility of voting according to equation (2) and declared an intention to vote if $R_i(t) > 0$. The decisions of agents were subject to synchronous updates.

I set the values of the parameters of equation (2) so as to: preserve the proportions appropriate to the classical calculus of voting, obtain a realistic activation threshold, and expose the role of social influence transmission. I estimated the value of P for N=1000 as ≈0.0252, using the formula of Guillermo Owen and Bernard Grofman (1984, pp. 314–315):

$$P = \frac{2e^{-2(N-1)(p-\frac{1}{2})^2}}{\sqrt{2\pi(N-1)}} \tag{3}$$

[6] I ran the simulation in R 4.2.3 (R Core Team, 2023), using the packages: igraph (Csárdi & Nepusz, 2006), dplyr (Wickham et al., 2023) and ggplot2 (Wickham, 2016).

[7] An operation performed only once at the initialisation of each network.

[8] In each round, the model computed the mean of the signals from an agent's direct neighbours (i.e. its 1-hop neighbours).

where: N is the number of voters and p is the probability of voting for candidate 1. I adopted p=1/2 (symmetric voter preferences). Owen and Grofman noted that for large electorates, the probability of a single vote breaking a tie (when N is an odd number) or leading to a tie (when N is an even number (my case)) is almost identical. For N=1000 at p=1/2, the relative error of the applied approximation is ≈0.075%, so it is sufficiently accurate for the study population. I estimated the value of P ex ante as a constant common to all agents in all simulation runs to separate individual instrumental motivation from social influence. This settlement avoided counting network effects in the expected benefits of voting (PB).

In all replications, I adopted B=3 and C=1. Keeping the constant values of B and C ensured the comparability of the studied social influence reduction scenarios and allowed a clear distinction between instrumental incentive and endogenous network effects. The value β_i was drawn once from the interval [0,1] at the beginning of the experiment and remained constant over time and identical for a given agent i across all networks and replications. The variable $S_i(t)$ was the percentage of the agent's i immediate neighbours, who declared an intention to vote in the iteration $t-1$, linearly scaled to the interval [0,10]. After the mobilisation phase (t>25), the scaled percentage of those declaring their intention to vote was multiplied by the social-pressure scale factor $\alpha \in \{0,0.2\}$ (total pressure exclusion and pressure reduction to 20%), respectively. The coefficient δ=1.5 measured the strength of the intrinsic motivation that determined whether the voting norm would persist in the population once the impact of the immediate neighbourhood was reduced/removed. For each agent, $D_i(0) = 0,$ that is, the absence of an internalised voting norm at the start, was adopted. In each iteration, the variable D_i was updated according to the following formula:

$$D_i(t+1) = (1-\lambda)D_i(t) + \lambda v_i(t), \qquad (4)$$

where: $\lambda \in [0,1]$ is the norm's learning/decay rate and $v_i(t) \in \{0,1\}$ is a variable that indicates whether the agent i declared a willingness to vote at the time t (0 = no, 1 = yes). In the simulation, I assumed λ=0.1, meaning that after each declaration of voting intention $(v_i = 1)$, 90% of the previous value D_i was retained, to which 0.1 was added, while the absence of a declaration $(v_i = 0)$ caused D_i to decrease by 10% in the next iteration.

I simulated different combinations of the values of the two factors:

(1) rewiring probability, which controls the level of randomness of the topology (from p=0 – ring lattice to p=1 – fully random network);

(2) social pressure scale factor, taking values corresponding to two scenarios: a=0 – complete deactivation of pressure after 25 iterations and a=0.2 – reduction of pressure to 20% of the initial level after 25 iterations.

Results were reported as averages after replications, together with standard errors (SE), relative standard errors (RSE), and 95% confidence intervals (CI) determined as two-sided t-intervals based on the variance between replications.

4 RESULTS

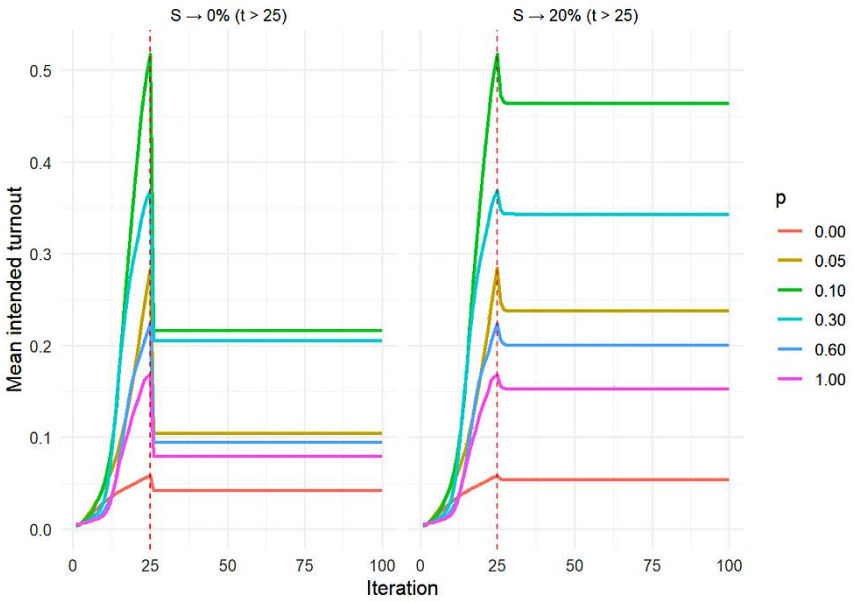
The simulation results show a clear two-stage transmission of the voting norm: up to the 25th iteration, there is an increase in the intended turnout in all networks, followed by a decrease and stabilisation at different levels, depending on the topology and the strength of social pressure. Until the mobilisation signal (t≤25) is switched off or attenuated, the differences in the transmission dynamics of the norm depend primarily on the rewiring probability. At p=0, the mean intended turnout barely exceeds 5%, whereas with even a small proportion of random connections (p=0.05) it jumps to ≈28%. It reaches its highest level at p=0.1 (≈52%). As the network approaches a fully random topology, the level of frequency decreases, reaching ≈17% at p=1. The clear increase in turnout between p=0 and p=0.05 suggests the existence of a structural threshold, beyond which a few random edges begin to play a significant – though not yet dominant – role in shaping the dynamics of the network. The relatively high level of turnout at p=0.1 is due to the classic properties of a small world: high clustering, maintaining and reinforcing local pressure, and few random edges shortening the average path length. The relative standard error of most estimates is below 20%. Higher values appear primarily for p≥0.6, reflecting greater instability in highly randomised networks. The simulation results are presented in Table 1. The values in t=25 are identical for α=0 and α=0.2, as α only works for t>25.

Table 1: Mean intended turnout (averaged over 100 replications) as a function of the rewiring probability and social pressure scale factor.

d	α	Mean (t_{25})	SE	RSE	95% CI	Mean (t_{100})	SE	RSE	95% CI	Mean Δ (t_{100} - t_{25})	SE	RSE	95% CI	Retention (t_{100} - t_{25})
0.0	0.0	0.0580	0.0075	0.1284	[0.0432, 0.0728]	0.0422	0.0051	0.1222	[0.0319, 0.0524]	-0.0158	0.0025	0.1578	[-0.0208, -0.0109]	0.7276
0.0	0.2	0.0580	0.0075	0.1284	[0.0432, 0.0728]	0.0540	0.0069	0.1287	[0.0402, 0.0678]	-0.0040	0.0006	0.1400	[-0.0051, -0.0029]	0.9310
0.05	0.0	0.2845	0.0328	0.1153	[0.2194, 0.3496]	0.1047	0.0127	0.1209	[0.0796, 0.1299	-0.1797	0.0215	0.1197	[-0.2224, -0.1370]	0.3680
0.05	0.2	0.2845	0.0328	0.1153	[0.2194, 0.3496]	0.2380	0.0268	0.1201	[0.1813, 0.2948]	-0.0465	0.0054	0.1166	[-0.0572, -0.0357]	0.8366
0.1	0.0	0.5179	0.0421	0.0813	[0.4344, 0.6014]	0.2163	0.0273	0.1260	[0.1622, 0.2704]	-0.3016	0.0304	0.1008	[-0.3619, -0.2413]	0.4176
0.1	0.2	0.5179	0.0421	0.0813	[0.4344, 0.6014]	0.4644	0.0397	0.0854	[0.3857, 0.5431]	-0.0535	0.0074	0.1392	[-0.0682, -0.0389]	0.8967
0.3	0.0	0.3685	0.0437	0.1187	[0.2817, 0.4552]	0.2025	0.0336	0.1633	[0.1389, 0.2721]	-0.1630	0.0294	0.1806	[-0.2214, -0.1046]	0.5495
0.3	0.2	0.3685	0.0437	0.1187	[0.2817, 0.4552]	0.3435	0.0417	0.1215	[0.2607, 0.4263]	-0.0250	0.0064	0.2550	[-0.0377, -0.0123]	0.9322
0.6	0.0	0.2244	0.0378	0.1685	[0.1494, 0.2995]	0.0946	0.0233	0.2463	[0.0484, 0.1409]	-0.1298	0.0268	0.2066	[-0.1829, -0.0766]	0.4216
0.6	0.2	0.2244	0.0378	0.1685	[0.1494, 0.2995]	0.2006	0.0353	0.1760	[0.1306, 0.2708]	-0.0238	0.0065	0.2728	[-0.0367, -0.0109]	0.8939
1.0	0.0	0.1680	0.0341	0.2033	[0.1003, 0.2358]	0.0797	0.0229	0.2869	[0.0344, 0.1251	-0.0883	0.0233	0.2640	[-0.1345, -0.0402	0.4744
1.0	0.2	0.1680	0.0341	0.2033	[0.1003, 0.2358]	0.1526	0.0322	0.2110	[0.0887, 0.2164]	-0.0155	0.0041	0.2682	[-0.0237, -0.0073]	0.9083

From the 26th iteration, the networks' evolution is mainly determined by the degree of reduction in normative incentives. When social pressure is switched off completely, the level of intended turnout decreases in all networks; the largest decreases occur where the highest increase was recorded up to the 25th iteration (in the network with p=0.1, turnout decreases by 30 percentage points). This phenomenon reflects path dependence with partial reversion: the steeper the earlier increase, the greater the magnitude of the later decrease, although the level of the measured phenomenon still remains above the initial value. In contrast, even a significant 80% reduction in the power of social influence generates incomparably lower drops: on the network from p=0.3, turnout stabilises at 34%, and the average drop between iterations of 25 and 100 is only 2 percentage points. A small amount of social pressure thus proves to be sufficient to maintain pro-citizenship attitudes in the simulated population in the long term. This observation was also confirmed by estimates of the retention rate. In the case of a total pressure reduction (α=0), the retention is low and strongly dependent on the topology (36.8-72.8%), whereas when the pressure is reduced to 20%, the retention remains high and even across all topologies (83.7-93.2%). All estimated differences in mean turnout between iterations 100 and 25 are statistically significant at the 5% level – their 95% t-confidence intervals do not include 0. The evolution of the mean intended turnout is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Evolution of the mean intended turnout (averaged over 100 replications) for different levels of rewiring probability and social-pressure scale factor.



source: own study.

The simulation results show that networks with a small-world structure are most favourable in both scenarios for reducing social pressure. The combination of moderate p with non-zero S ensures that the intended turnout remains relatively high; too low or too high a proportion of random edges leads to lower equilibria. When the mobilisation signal is completely switched off, the smallest relative decrease in turnout is recorded by the highly clustered ring lattice, in which the spreading of changes is slowed down by a high average path length. To summarise: the network topology determines the differences in the level of intended turnout up to the 25th iteration, while in the later phase of the simulation, the differences in the persistence of the voting norm also depend on the degree of reduction of social pressure.

5 DISCUSSION

The simulation reveals a two-phase logic of the spreading of the voting norm. The first phase (iterations 1-25) shows that a small percentage of random edges ($p \in \{0.05, 0.1\}$) is sufficient to trigger a sharp increase in the declared voting intention. This effect reflects the classic properties of the small world: shortening the average path length increases the reach of the mobilisation signal, while high clustering reinforces local social pressure. Consequently, we are seeing a cascading increase in the declared willingness to participate in elections. In densely connected neighbourhoods, individuals with relatively lower susceptibility to social influence are also persuaded to vote, provided that the proportion of agents declaring their intention to vote in their immediate neighbourhood is sufficiently high. This pattern is consistent with Granovetter's (1978) threshold model and Centola and Macy's (2007) complex contagion theory, according to which behaviours requiring social reinforcement only spread once a critical number of active neighbours has been exceeded.

The accelerated diffusion effect observed in the first phase occurs with a moderate number of random edges; a further increase in the randomness of the network inhibits the increase in the declared turnout. This observation is consistent with the findings that the effective transmission of social norms in tightly clustered communities with strong in-group ties is facilitated, under certain conditions, by the existence of a few long ties (Eckles et al., 2023; Latora & Marchiori, 2001; Siegel, 2009). The propagative role of long ties, for example, is suggested by field experiments with mailings revealing the voting history of neighbours (Gerber et al., 2008; Rogers et al., 2017). Mailing can act as a shortcut that links households, broadening the knowledge of the voting behaviour of neighbours and lowering the cost of reaching new people with the norm. It does not form physical relationships but functionally accelerates the spread of the voting norm, just as a random edge shortens the distance in the Watts-Strogatz model.

The second phase (iterations 26-100) indicates the role of the degree of social influence reduction. When the mobilisation signal is completely switched off, the mean intended turnout decreases – depending on the topology – by 2–30 percentage points, whereas with an eighty per cent reduction in the influence of the immediate neighbourhood, the falls are only 0.4–5 percentage points. The decline from t=26 is due to the weakening of S and the dynamics of D: with λ=0.1, the lack of a voting declaration lowers D_i in subsequent iterations, making it more difficult to cross the

$R_i(t) > 0$ threshold. Highly clustered networks with a moderate number of random edges again have the highest turnout. The results obtained are consistent with field experiments showing that even single mobilisation incentives can condition an increase in individual turnout, which then persists for some time (Coppock & Green, 2016; Gerber et al., 2010; Mann, 2010; Panagopoulos, 2010; Rogers et al., 2017).

The simulation reveals the structural conditions of voter turnout highlighted by Kernell and Lamberson (2023). However, the role of the network structure differed between the two phases of the simulation. Up to t=25, differences in the level of intended turnout are mainly determined by the structure of connections between agents: the highest increase in turnout was recorded in the range of p values, typical of a small world. From t=26, however, the degree to which the influence of the immediate neighbourhood is reduced becomes crucial. With a partial reduction in social pressure, a combination of moderate p and high clustering keeps turnout relatively high. In turn, the total reduction in social pressure leads to a significant decrease in the declared voting intention. The exception is the ring lattice, which retains the greatest stability (lowest relative decrease in the intended turnout rate). However, the differences in turnout rates between the social influence reduction scenarios studied are not sustainable. The tested system shows high sensitivity to even small changes in the values of individual parameters. Already, for example, the extension of the mobilisation phase to 30 iterations significantly approximates the trajectories of turnout evolution between the analysed scenarios of social pressure reduction. A longer mobilisation phase creates the possibility of a stronger internalisation of the voting norm, which translates into smaller drops in turnout once the influence of the immediate neighbourhood has completely ceased[9].

The study provides an alternative to individualist approaches, which focus on the preferences and decisions of individual political actors, ignoring the social and cultural context. The simulated model does not explain voter turnout as a simple sum of independent decisions of individuals but shows how the decisions of voters embedded in specific relational structures generate emergent collective effects. This gives us a more complete picture of voting decisions and a better understanding of why a voting norm persists or disappears depending on the structure of connections in the population. The model shows that a favourable network architecture can

[9]A similar effect is produced by increasing the initial number of agents declaring their intention to vote to 1%.

lead to a dynamic increase in turnout and to its maintenance even with a small number of agents initially declaring their intention to vote. It offers a partial solution to the paradox of voting, which is not available in studies that ignore the level of social interaction.

6 LIMITATIONS

The research utility of the simulated model is limited by several design and operational simplifications. However, these simplifications play a very important role, as they allow the focus to be on the essence of the problem being investigated and the study to be carried out efficiently within the constraints of computing power. Below, I have listed some of the most important ones:

- Static network structure. Rewiring only occurs when networks are initialised, making it impossible to analyse the feedback between the attitudes of individuals and the structure of social relations.
- Highly idealised decision rule. Although the model includes randomness in the network structure and initial conditions, the voting decision is deterministic: it takes into account neither the individual random component (idiosyncratic noise, e.g. perception errors) nor other forms of decision uncertainty (e.g. probabilistic selection rule).
- Synchronous updates. All agents update decisions simultaneously; asynchronous updating can change the pace and scale of cascades.
- Residual heterogeneity of the voters. In the model, the only characteristic that varies individually ex ante is the susceptibility of voters to social influence. The costs of voting, the expected benefits and the weight of civic duty remain identical for all agents. As a result, the model does not allow for an examination of how variations in economic or moral motivations affect turnout dynamics.
- Two scenarios for reducing social pressure after the mobilisation phase. The accepted scenarios ignore cases in which the pressure may diminish up to a certain point and then be renewed.
- Calibration of the social influence scale. S is linearly scaled to the interval [0,10], and the reduction of influence follows t=25 by leaps and bounds; other schemes (non-linear scaling S, smooth reduction) may give different trajectories for the evolution of turnout.
- No consideration of the impact of external incentives. The studied system is closed; the only source of variability in it are internal social

interactions. The failure to capture the impact of the environment limits the ability to compare the model with the real world, where voters are subject to complex and multidirectional institutional and informational influences.

Including omitted factors in a model can increase its explanatory potential and bring it closer to reality.

CONCLUSION

The simulation shows that the persistence of the voting norm is the result of the coupling between social pressure and network topology. Even a small influence from the immediate neighbourhood can lead to an increase in intended turnout and help maintain it at a relatively high level if the network is sufficiently clustered and the random edges do not dissappear completely. These findings are in line with empirical observations suggesting that the effectiveness of social influence does not depend solely on the content and strength of the incentives, but also on the way in which they spread through the population.

The results point to a broader conclusion about the structural conditions of collective political behaviour: network architecture is not a neutral medium through which information merely passes, but an active determinant of whether norms emerge, consolidate, and endure. This finding has practical implications. Campaigns and institutions seeking to sustain civic engagement may benefit not only from increasing the strength of mobilisation appeals but also from attending to the relational structures through which those appeals travel.

The study also demonstrates the value of the agent-based approach as a complement to analytical models. By simulating intended turnout dynamics from the ground up, it becomes possible to track how local interactions produce macro-level patterns of norm persistence – patterns that cannot be derived from equilibrium analysis alone. Future research could extend this framework by incorporating heterogeneous costs and benefits of voting, dynamic network rewiring, or empirically calibrated network structures. Abandoning the assumption of synchronous updating or introducing stochastic decision rules would be a further natural step toward a more realistic representation of the dynamics of political participation.

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