

WHO HOLDS THE NARRATIVE? FACEBOOK DISCOURSE AND POLITICAL MESSAGING AFTER THE FICO ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT¹

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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.

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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

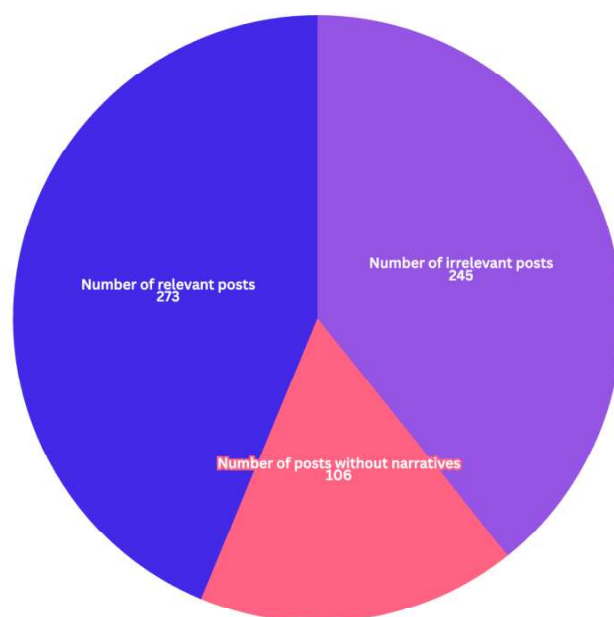
of the procedure. Although automated content analysis techniques offer partial solutions, their applicability is constrained in multilingual and context-dependent environments such as the Slovak political discourse (especially given that they have problems with irony, context, language, and often fail 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.

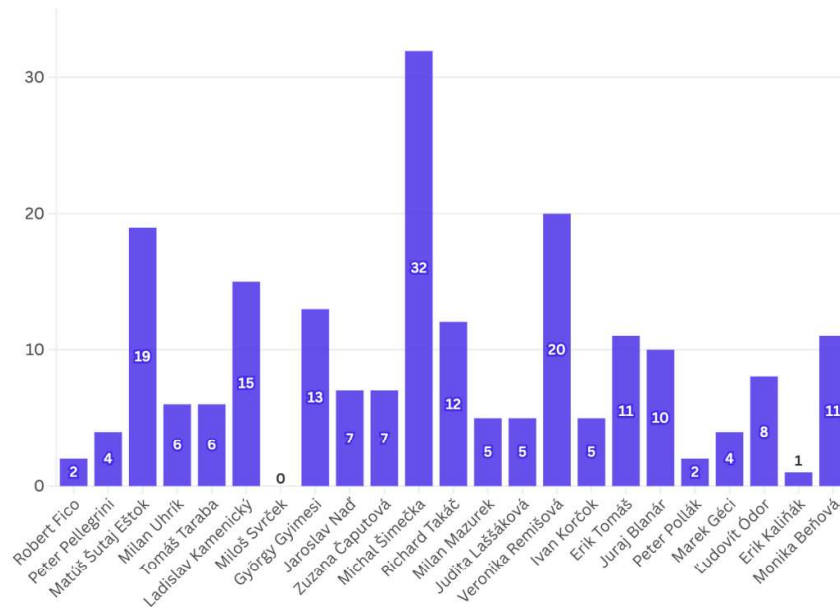
Graph 1: Number of posts in research.



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.

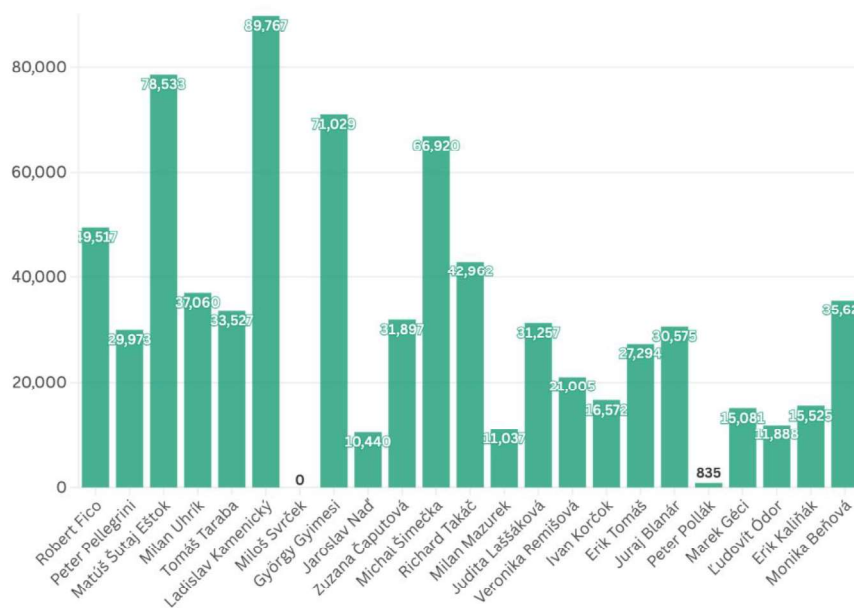
Graph 2: Number of posts (relevant posts including those without narratives) by actors.



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.

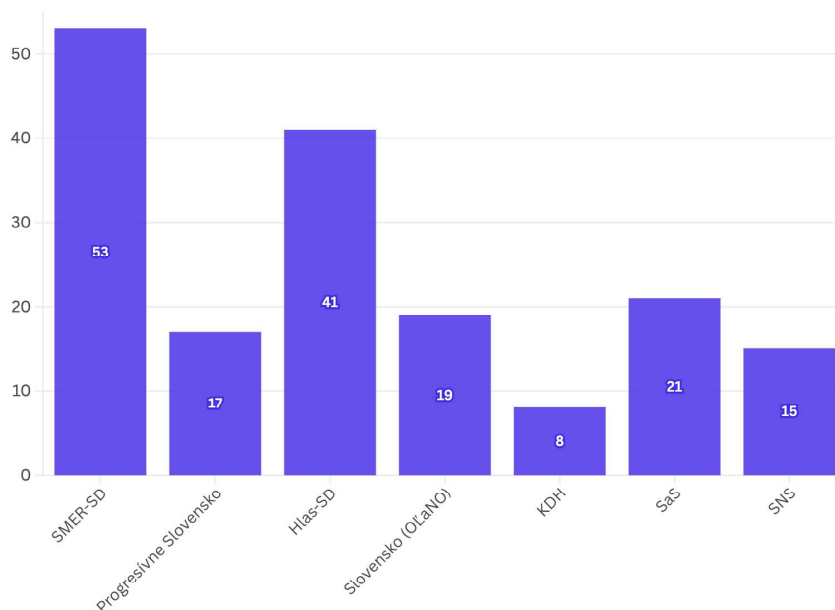
Graph 3: Number of posts (relevant posts including those without narratives) by actors.



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.

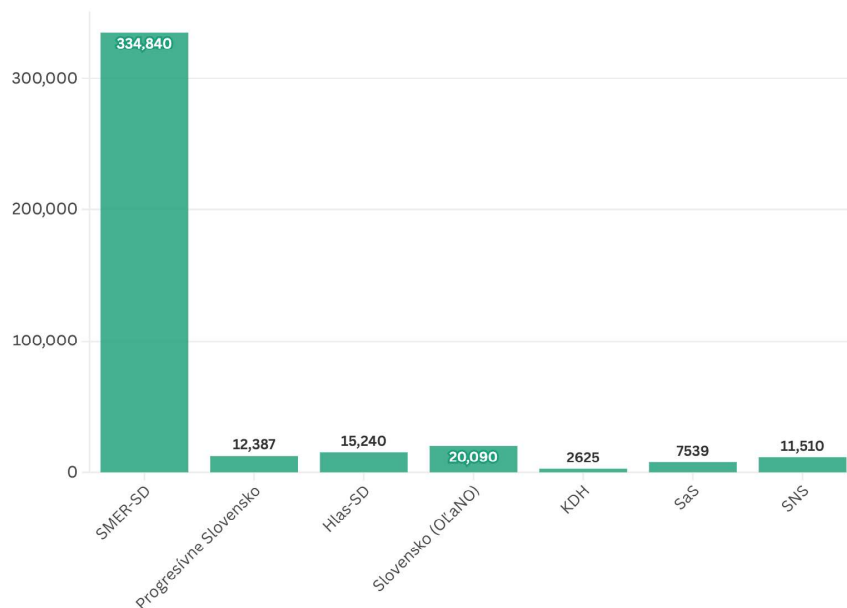


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

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 representatives⁴. 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.

⁴In the case of SMER-SD, this also included content from a MEP (Luboš 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

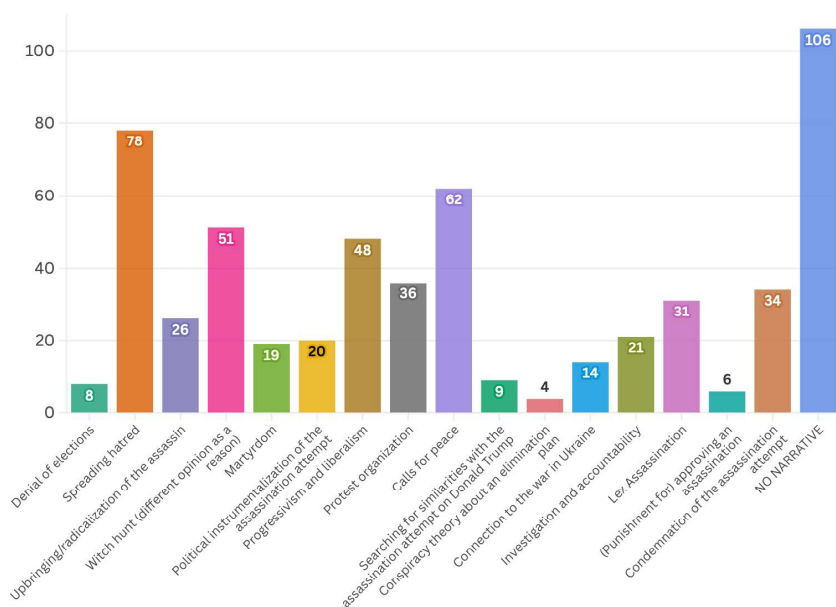
Pertaining to the number of interactions generated in the case of the political entities monitored, Graph 5 shows a significant disproportion at first glance. The SMER-SD party received more than 330,000 interactions. In comparison, other parties together received only 69,491 interactions through 121 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).

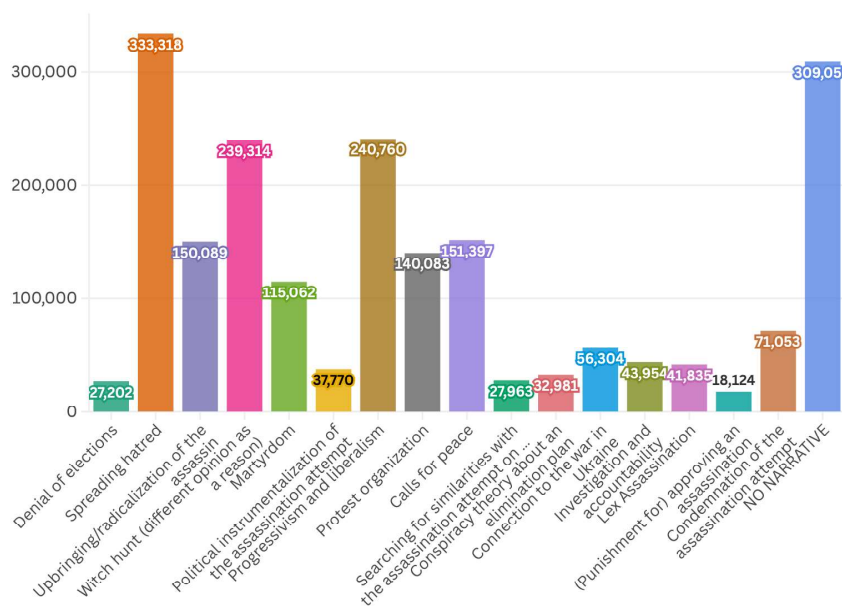


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

The findings show that only a subset of narratives was used extensively, while others appeared only sporadically. Narratives emphasizing 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).



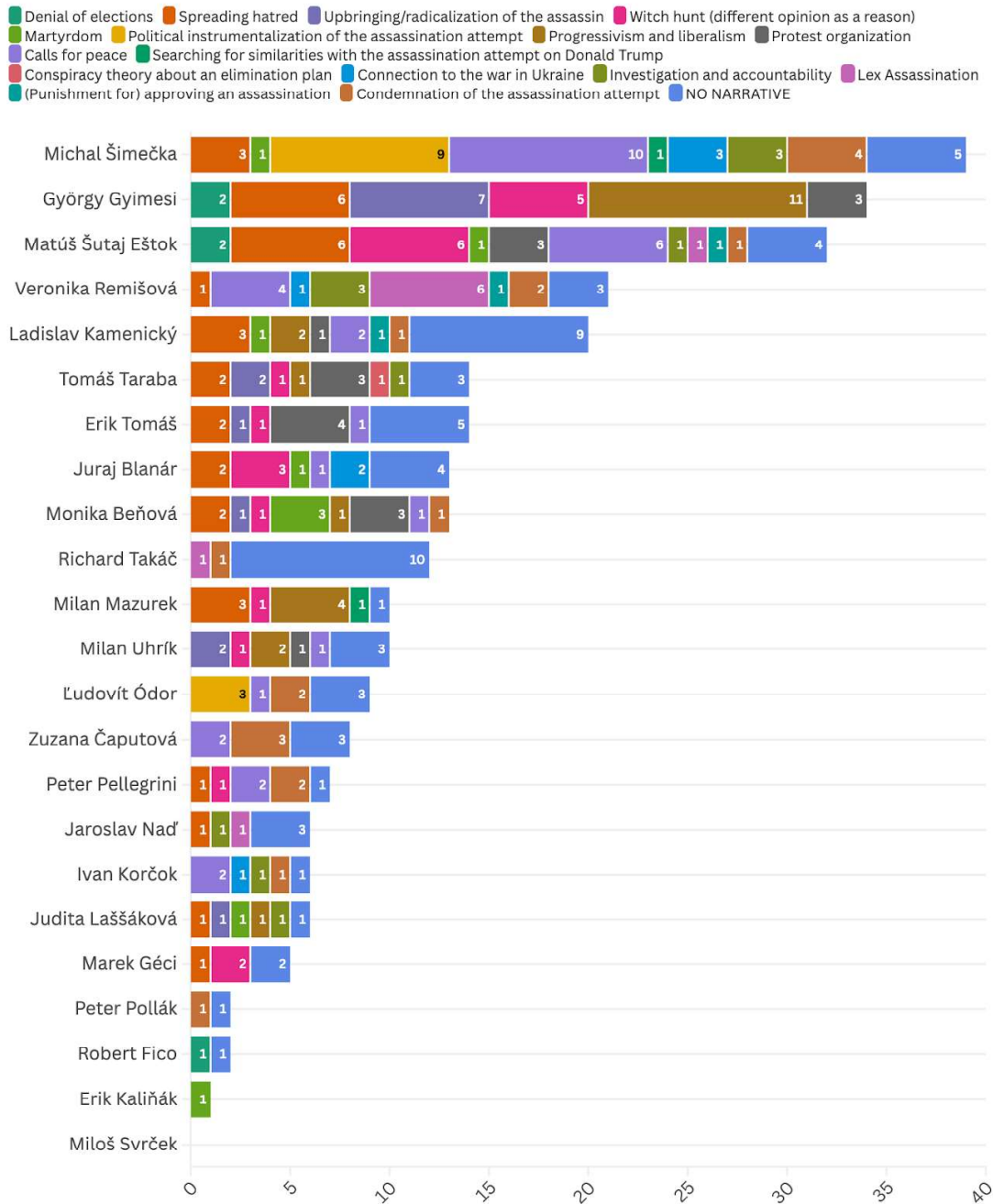
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

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.

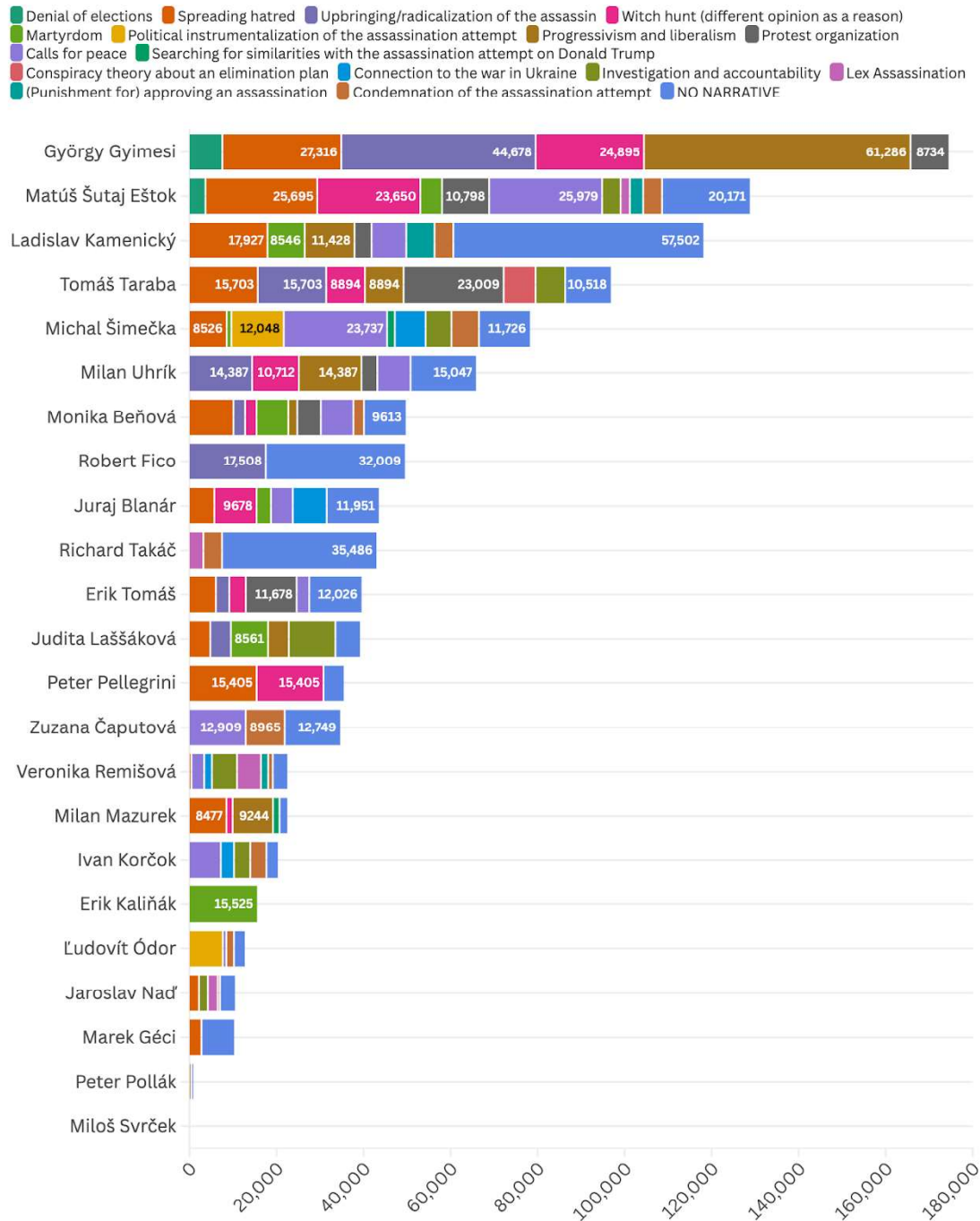


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

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.

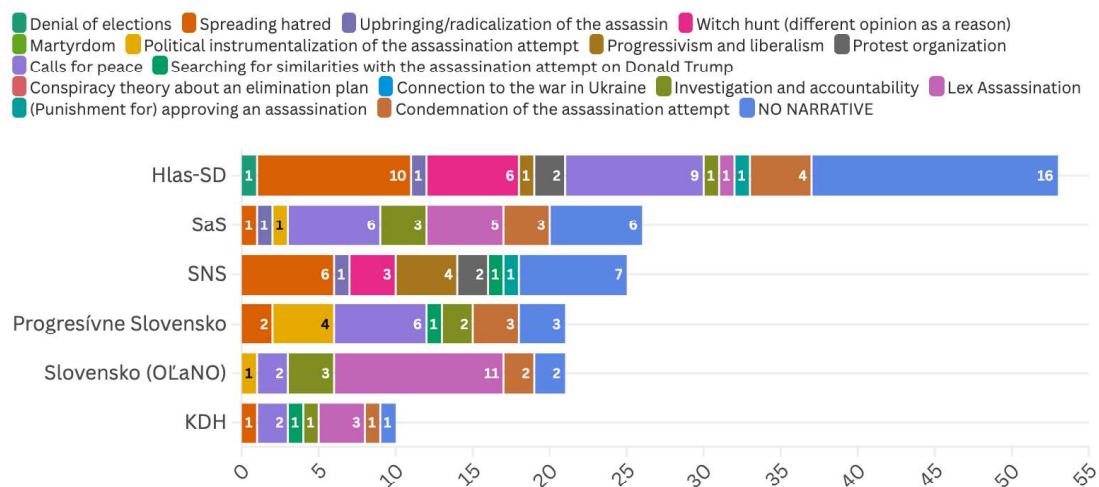


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

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).

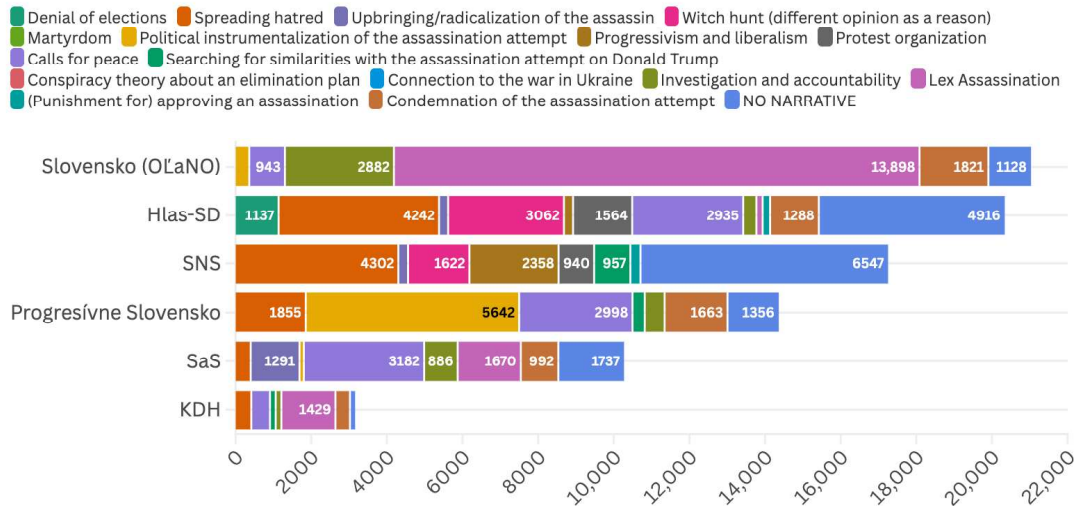


Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from CrowdTangle

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	-	A member 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			

			PARTIES	COALITION / OPOSITION
Jaroslav Nad'	former Minister of Defense of the Slovak Republic	chairman of Demokrati		
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