Narrative Dynamics in Times of COVID-19 on Facebook: A Quantitative–Qualitative Analysis of Slovak Political Actors

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Abstract

The study focuses on the political communication of Slovak political actors on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on identifying the major narratives present in political communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, with specific regard to anti-pandemic measures and reflection on their significance in the process of framing public debate, focusing on the most active political actors in the online information environment of the Slovak Republic. The ambition of the research is to examine how individual political representatives and political entities communicated the topic of the pandemic, what types of narratives they used, and to what extent these narratives were successful in generating interactions and shaping political discourse. The research design combines quantitative and qualitative content analysis of posts published on Facebook between 2020 and 2021, with particular attention paid to categories of narratives related to vaccination, testing, masks, treatment, and anti-pandemic measures. The analysis focused on the frequency, structure, and interactivity of individual narratives and compared the sentiment of communication "in favor" and "against" measures as an indicator of attitudes toward the government's management of the pandemic. The results show that social networks—especially Facebook—played a key role in political communication during the pandemic. The discourse was characterized by a high degree of personalization, emotionalization, and polarization. The most successful narratives in terms of generating interaction were those that questioned the legitimacy of the measures. In terms of actors, representatives of the then opposition and anti-system entities dominated, as they were able to effectively address the audience through conflictual and mobilizing narratives. The study confirms that the pandemic crisis created strategic space for the rise of populist and anti-government rhetoric and accelerated the shift of political communication to the online environment. The results point to the continuing one-way nature of political communication on social networks, low levels of citizen participation, and an increased risk of misinformation spreading. The findings contribute to the understanding of how political communication works in crisis situations and offer a theoretical and empirical basis for further research on digital politics, crisis management, and hybrid information threats.

Keywords: political communication, social media, COVID-19, narratives, Slovakia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected many aspects of society, with the most pronounced impact being felt in the online space. Due to anti-pandemic measures and an appetite for new news during the crisis, people spent significantly more time consuming content on social networks. The COVID-19 pandemic brought with it a paradox, whereby social networks became a space for informing society about the course of the pandemic, anti-pandemic measures, and the availability of vaccinations. At the same time, however, they provided a space for the spread of disinformation and emotionally charged messages. Given that COVID-19 was primarily a health crisis, the primary emotion was fear. Social media users may have felt fear for their lives or health stemming from the disease itself, or fear of losing their freedom or jobs as a result of anti-pandemic measures. Inducing fear is one of the most effective communication strategies.

The aim of this study is to identify the main narratives present in political communication in the online space of Slovakia during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the study, the authors focus on the posts of the most active actors of the individual political parties represented in the National Council of the Slovak Republic during the period under review. To achieve this goal, the authors chose both qualitative (content analysis and interpretation of political communication) and quantitative methods (data analysis).

In terms of theory, the study is grounded in the tradition of research on political communication on social media and in approaches that conceptualize political discourse in terms of framing and narratives. The analysis assumes that political elites strategically use social media to frame crisis situations and to mobilize support or dissatisfaction, relying on direct, personalized and emotionally charged communication. At the same time, the research draws on narrative and framing perspectives which understand public communication as a struggle over interpretive frameworks in which actors select, emphasize and connect certain aspects of reality in order to construct coherent stories about the causes, responsibilities and solutions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. This theoretical framework allows us to treat the monitored Facebook posts as narrative constructions that shape public perceptions of the pandemic, anti-pandemic measures and vaccination, and to link their content and sentiment with broader debates on populism, disinformation and trust in institutions.

The analysis focuses not only on the actors of political communication, but also on identifying key narratives, such as the origin of COVID-19, testing, vaccination, and anti-pandemic measures. The study monitors the occurrence of individual narratives and the number of interactions, as well as negative and positive attitudes towards them and the reasons for these attitudes. The study thus offers a comprehensive view of the dynamics of political communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. By analyzing the dominant narratives

and their social response, the authors seek to contribute to the understanding of how political actors framed the public debate on the pandemic. The results of the research aim to shed light on the formation of political discourse in times of crisis and provide an empirical basis for further exploration of the relationship between populism, disinformation, and the effectiveness of political communication on social networks in the Slovak context.

The study is conceived as interdisciplinary research that combines perspectives from political science, sociology, media studies, and psychology. The COVID-19 pandemic was a complex phenomenon with impacts on political decision-making, public opinion, and the mental well-being of the population, which is why the analysis of political communication on social networks is based on knowledge from several scientific disciplines. The innovative approach of the study lies in the combination of qualitative (content analysis, interpretative frameworks) and quantitative methods (analysis of data, interactions, and statistical trends), which enable comprehensive mapping of narratives, their social resonance, and communication effectiveness. Thanks to this methodological integration, the study not only contributes to political science discourse, but is also applicable in the fields of social policy, media studies, and strategic crisis communication.

The structure of the study corresponds to the above-mentioned research levels and objectives. The Literature Review chapter provides a theoretical and contextual framework for examining political communication on social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main theoretical framework of the study combines three complementary perspectives. First, it builds on research on political communication in the digital environment, which highlights the central role of social media in transforming relations between political actors, the media and citizens, and in enabling direct, personalized and often populist forms of communication. Second, it adopts a framing-based understanding of political discourse, according to which political actors interpret the pandemic through specific interpretive frames that define problems, attribute responsibility and suggest normative evaluations and solutions. Third, it employs a narrative approach that treats political communication during COVID-19 as a set of recurrent narrative patterns about the nature of the virus, the legitimacy and effectiveness of anti-pandemic measures, the risks and benefits of vaccination, and the trustworthiness of institutions and experts. Together, these perspectives provide the conceptual basis for the construction of narrative categories used in the empirical part of the study and for the interpretation of how political actors shaped public debate on the pandemic in the Slovak online environment.

It draws on extensive domestic and foreign literature dealing with the transformation of the media environment in the digital age and its impact on political communication, public trust, and the dissemination of information in times of crisis. It also includes an overview of research reflecting the specifics of the Slovak media environment, which underwent a fundamental

transformation during the pandemic—from increased consumption of online content to a significant increase in the influence of social networks as the main channel of political communication. In addition to the research design, the second part focuses on mapping the data set that the authors analyzed after monitoring the specified information environment on the social network Facebook. It contains quantitative data and an interpretation of narrative categories, while also documenting the number of posts published by the monitored actors during the selected period. In the third part, the study focuses on the analysis of narratives used by political actors in Slovakia to communicate about the COVID-19 pandemic and related anti-pandemic measures on Facebook. The ambition of this main chapter of the research is to map the frequency of occurrence of individual types of narratives, their thematic structure, and the level of engagement they generated among users. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the results show which areas—such as vaccination, testing, treatment, and anti-pandemic measures—dominated online communication and which of them generated the greatest response. The chapter also tracks differences between individual narrative categories according to their sentiment (support vs. rejection of measures) and compares their success in terms of the total number of interactions. The analysis offers a comprehensive view of how political communication during the pandemic translated into specific narrative frameworks and how these frameworks shaped public discourse. The graphical outputs serve as a visual representation of the intensity, trends, and distribution of individual narratives, providing an empirical basis for interpreting broader communication patterns and polarization tendencies in the Slovak online space during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the discussion chapter, the authors present a synthesis of the key findings of the research. Attention is focused on how individual political actors shaped the discourse on the pandemic, which narratives dominated, and what interactions their communication provoked.

1 Literature review

Numerous studies dealing with political communication on social networks are available. For example, the study by Chatterjee and Dutta presents a systematic review of the literature focusing on the impact of social media on political communication, analyzing research from 2000 to 2022 and emphasizing that social networks have fundamentally changed the way political actors communicate with the public, shifting attention away from traditional political parties to individual leaders (Chatterjee and Dutta 2024). An analysis of the impact of social media on political communication, particularly in the context of the revolutionary changes that these platforms have brought to the way political actors communicate, is presented in a study by Deželana and Vobić. The authors emphasize that social networks enable political actors to communicate directly and immediately with voters

without the mediation of traditional media, thereby changing the dynamics of political communication. This study focuses not only on new forms of interaction and voter mobilization through social networks, but also on challenges such as negative campaigns and the spread of misinformation in the digital space. It points out that social media are also changing the content of political communication, which is increasingly personalized and focused on building a direct relationship with the audience (Deželan and Vobić 2016). A study by Ernst et al. offers an interesting analysis of the use of Facebook and Twitter by extremist and populist parties in six selected countries. From the perspective of political communication on social media, the study points out that that these platforms allow populist parties to bypass traditional media intermediaries and communicate directly with their voters through personalized and targeted messages. (Ernst et al. 2017) From the perspective of political communication on social networks, the study by DePaula and Hansson emphasizes how government posts are linguistically adapted for political purposes, often using rhetoric that polarizes and politicizes social issues, offering a case study that shows specific ways in which government institutions use social media to influence political discourse and public opinion. (DePaula and Hansson 2025) The study by Durotoye, Goyanes, Berganza, and De Zúñiga examines political participation on social networks and online environments from the perspective of different platforms and social ties of discussants, emphasizing that the use of different platforms has different effects on political discourse and citizen engagement. This study offers a comprehensive theoretical and methodological framework for understanding the impact of social media on political participation. (Durotoye et al. 2025)

Several studies and research teams have also focused on political communication on social networks in the Slovak Republic. Štefančík offered a theoretical perspective on the functioning of social networks as a tool for political communication and propaganda in Slovakia. (Štefančík 2002). Although the study by Butoracová Šindlerová and Garaj focuses on the potential use of political party websites in the context of political communication in Slovakia before the 2020 elections, from the perspective of new media, this study is important because it illustrates how political entities combine traditional online tools (websites) with social networks to communicate effectively with their voters. (Butoracová Šindleryová and Garaj 2022). The language used by Slovak politicians on social networks is the subject of an article by Eva Stradiotová, which reflects on the specifics of political discourse in the digital environment. The author analyzes the statements of primarily populist politicians on Facebook and emphasizes how these statements use emotive and polarizing language to influence public opinion. Social networks serve not only as a tool for directly addressing voters, but also as a platform for spreading political views and mobilizing support. (Stradiotová 2021)

Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter acted as a bridge between public authorities communicating about the crisis and

the public seeking information. Political leaders themselves, regardless of their political affiliation or position in government in individual countries, also played a significant role in this communication. A study by Mohamed Nour and Adnan Kisu provides an overview of the communication strategies of political leaders during the COVID-19 pandemic in countries with high infection rates. In terms of political communication on social media, the study highlights how leaders used these platforms to inform the public immediately and directly about pandemic measures, as well as to build trust in times of crisis. (Mohamed Nour and Kisa 2024) Jurkevičienė and Bičkutė also analyzed the communication strategies of political leaders on social media during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in their study. This study emphasizes the importance of transparent and effective crisis communication, which was key to managing public trust and reducing uncertainty in society. The authors examine how political leaders used social media to inform citizens, build solidarity, and strengthen their legitimacy during the pandemic. They emphasize the ability to adapt communication strategies in response to the ever-changing conditions of the pandemic. (Jurkevičienė and Bičkutė 2022). The importance of transparency and consistency in politicians' messages on Twitter, which helped to alleviate uncertainty and promote responsible citizen behavior, was analyzed in a study by Rufai and Bunce. The study provides important insights into the effectiveness of social media as a crisis communication tool and its impact on political legitimacy during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Rufai and Bunce 2020) Wei Sun's study presents an introductory overview of a special issue of a journal dedicated to media and communication dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the perspective of political communication on social networks, it highlights the challenges faced by communicators in the context of rapidly changing information, the emergence of misinformation, and the need to maintain public trust. The author points to the importance of effective, transparent, and empathetic communication, which can help mitigate the negative social impacts of the pandemic while promoting civic engagement. (Sun 2021) This is why effective crisis communication by political leaders has come to be considered extremely important for managing the pandemic, gaining public trust, and encouraging citizens to take the necessary measures.

However, research into political communication in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic has also revealed instances where political communication has had a negative impact on society. A systematic review documents a study by a group of authors led by Ferreira Caceres, which analyzes the spread of false information on social networks leading to vaccine refusal, disregard for measures, and questioning of scientific authorities, which significantly complicated the management of the pandemic. (Ferreira Caceres et al. 2022) Expanding on these findings, Arman and Yukaru provide a more nuanced understanding of the psychological and political mechanisms underlying vaccine hesitancy. Their research reveals that vaccine hesitancy does not emerge solely from exposure to misinformation, but rather through a

complex serial mediation process involving loss of control during pandemic, distrust in authorities, conspiracy mentality, dichotomous thinking, and intolerance of uncertainty. This psycho-political framework demonstrates that individuals who experience a sense of losing control due to pandemic restrictions become more prone to distrust authorities, which subsequently enhances conspiracy mentality and dichotomous worldviews—ultimately leading to vaccine hesitancy. Notably, the study found that distrust in authorities acts as a critical mediator between loss of control and conspiracy mentality, suggesting that rebuilding institutional trust is essential for counteracting vaccine hesitancy during public health crises. (Arman and Yukaru 2025) Other authors analyze, for example, the crisis communication strategy of authorities on social networks during COVID-19 and point to its ineffectiveness, which contributed to mistrust and weaker public participation. (Song et al. 2025) Dienlin focused on the negative effects of excessive use of social media during the pandemic crisis on psychological well-being, which subsequently weakens society's ability to deal with crisis situations. (Dienlin 2025) A study by a group of authors addressed the flood of contradictory information during lockdown on social media, leading to uncertainty and a loss of trust in public institutions. (Masambuka-Kanchewa et al. 2024) The pandemic created a strategic environment for the spread of misinformation and political propaganda, with social networks serving as "echo chambers." Political discourse during the crisis had a significant impact on the spread of hoaxes and misinformation, which was a global phenomenon, as evidenced by a number of other publications available in scientific databases. (Pérez-Curiel and Velasco Molpeceres 2020) (Goban-Klas 2020)

During the period under review, populist and anti-scientific rhetoric by politicians was strongly present. (Burni et al. 2023) Among other things, populism is characterized by its understanding of society as divided into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups – the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite." Key dimensions of populism include people-centrism, anti-elitism, and popular sovereignty. It is assumed that real or artificially created crises represent an opportunity for the rise of populism. Although the COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen, exogenous shock that was not directly attributable to the usual targets of populist discourse (political or economic elites), populists actively sought to use the crisis as a tool to strengthen their political positions. Therefore, this aspect of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has become the subject of several studies. (Moniz et al. 2024) (Resende 2021) One of their main agendas was the trend to intentionally blur the lines between labelling states a failing or fragile one, when in reality the term flailing state should be used. This evokes a rather unstable environment where its easier to work with emotions of the target group. (Jakabovič 2025, 121-128) Overall, it has been shown that the COVID-19 crisis has forced populist leaders to adapt their discourse. Among other things, in many democratic states, political representatives with

populist tendencies, mostly in opposition, have sought to politicize the pandemic, often focusing on the managerial failures of governments. (Bobba and Hubé 2021)

In general, we can conclude that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the media environment was characterized by several key aspects:

- Increased media consumption – Media consumption increased in general, especially news related to the development of the pandemic; (Tench et al. 2023, 135)
- Lack of credible sources – Many people had trouble finding credible sources and reliable information; (Tench et al. 2023, 116)
- Infodemic – the pandemic was accompanied by an "infodemic," which is an excessive amount of information, some of which was accurate and some of which was not, making it difficult for people to find credible sources and reliable advice; (Tench et al. 2023, 35) (Maarek 2022, 24)
- Spread of misinformation – misinformation and conspiracy theories related to COVID-19; (Tench et al. 2023, 35)
- Change in media use – social media use increased, but traditional media retained its importance as a source of relevant and verified news; (Tench et al. 2023, 74)
- Impact on mental health – media use and information consumption had a widespread impact on individuals' lives during the pandemic, particularly during lockdown periods; (Tench et al. 2023, 36)
- Pursuit of transparency – traditional media demanded a more transparent flow of information from government officials, with varying effects across different states and groups; (Tench et al. 2023, 135)
- The role of fact-checking – fact-checking and access to reliable sources of health information were key to protecting public health and safety; (Oswald et al. 2022, 66)
- Politicization of the pandemic - In some states, communication was linked to political goals, which affected public trust; (Maarek 2022, 344)
- Trust in government vs. experts – Unlike in other contexts, citizens in some countries placed greater trust in governments than in experts as sources of information. (Tench et al. 2023, 214)

The situation was similar in Slovakia. The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic had a profound impact on people's lives and led to changes in media behavior. As a result of the anti-pandemic measures and lockdown, most people spent more time at home. During this period, there was a significant increase in the use of the internet and online media in Slovakia. According to research by the MEDIAN SK agency, Slovaks spent 35 minutes more time using the internet between March 16 and April 19, 2020, compared to the pre-crisis period. (Čech et al. 2020) In the context of Slovakia, online media and the internet proved to be an important

source of information. In 2020, more than 490,000 articles on COVID-19 and the coronavirus were published in the Slovak media, with online media accounting for the largest share (426,423 articles). There was also a significant increase in interactions on social networks, which reached almost 32,850,000 interactions in 2020, with the highest number of interactions in March 2020 (9,589,471). (Krajčovič 2021, 2–3) Despite the massive use of social networks to obtain information during this period, social media ended up with the lowest credibility rating among the monitored media in Slovakia in 2021. (Teraz.sk 2021)

We find it interesting that although disinformation spread by well-known figures (e.g., politicians and celebrities) accounted for only 20% of the total amount of disinformation output in Slovakia, it accounted for as much as 69% of all interactions on social networks. Furthermore, trust in conspiracy theories and disinformation related to COVID-19 was exceptionally high in Slovakia. (Sámelová et al. 2021, 130–31). During this period, Facebook did not verify the truthfulness or falsity of statements made by active politicians or political parties because it did not want to interfere with democratic competition and restrict freedom of speech. This fact provides an important framework for understanding the communication of political leaders, who were thus able to use the platform without Facebook fact-checking their own statements. Other entities active on Facebook, which performed some of the functions of journalism, therefore also played a key role in the fight against the "infodemic." Among the active fighters against disinformation were government and police profiles, e.g. the Ministry of Health of the Slovak Republic, which used Facebook to regularly publish official and verified information, actively explained medical processes, and explicitly refuted hoaxes related to COVID-19, but also, for example, the Facebook page Hoaxes and Scams – Slovak Police, which saw the largest increase in fans during the first wave of the pandemic (March 2020) and also during the second wave (October 2020), actively refuting misinformation related to the pandemic and testing.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia highlighted the importance of Facebook as the primary communication channel for political leaders, serving not only to inform the public about government measures, but also for political struggle, polarization of society, and the dissemination or refutation of disinformation. The internet, websites, and social networks serve as platforms where political entities or individuals present their views, attitudes, and ideological principles on social and political issues independently and at any time. Social networks have their own specific logic, which is based on virality, leading political actors to spread messages that users "like," comment on, and share. Social networks represent a new channel of political communication with advantages such as the possibility of interactivity and obtaining feedback from the electorate. At the same time, they make it possible to bypass the control mechanisms of traditional media (so-called gatekeeping). The advantages and risks of using social networks for political communication have received sufficient attention in the scientific community. (Ernst

et al. 2017) (Školkay and Daniš 2022) At the same time, analyses of political communication often point to Facebook and Twitter as the most frequently studied platforms. (Butoracová Šindleryová and Garaj 2022)

A similar trend was also visible in Slovakia, reinforced by the fact that the Slovak political scene has long been unstable and fragmented, with a marked personalization of politics and the frequent emergence of new political entities. New parties often innovate in the areas of political promotion, campaigning, and communication. Among the parties that have established themselves in Slovakia and distinguished themselves from traditional parties are, for example, Freedom and Solidarity (SaS), Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽaNO), SIEŤ, and SME RODINA. Moreover, even before the pandemic, political entities such as SaS (Freedom and Solidarity) in Slovakia tended to use modern forms of communication, including social networks (especially Facebook), to reach voters, especially the younger generation. Political entities in Slovakia were often characterized by strong leadership and innovative approaches to promotion. (Hynčica et al. 2018) During the pandemic, the core of political leaders' communication shifted to the online space, especially Facebook, which they began to use even more frequently to broadcast political messages. The pandemic hit Slovakia at a time of change in the government, which also influenced the media discourse. (Sámelová et al. 2021) Facebook was often the preferred platform for populist communication on social networks during this period, especially among opposition parties and actors on the political extremes, because it offers a higher level of proximity, reciprocity, and non-elitist character. (Ernst et al. 2017)

In the online environment, and especially in Slovakia, the increase in misinformation has led to a so-called infodemic. Politicians were perceived by the public as the biggest spreaders of false and misleading news about COVID-19. Misinformation and conspiracy theories can damage human health, undermine social cohesion, and threaten democracy. In this context, Facebook faced criticism for its insufficient efforts to limit the spread of false news. (Sámelová et al. 2021) Findings suggest that Slovak political parties have moved to social media during the pandemic, but overall, online communication is still characterized by a one-way flow of information from sender to recipient, with a lack of voter engagement. (Butoracová Šindleryová and Garaj 2022) The Covid-19 pandemic period also provided space for the use of disinformation as a tool for building the influence of foreign states within Slovak society, an example of which was the effort to cultivate a positive image of China in the Slovak political discourse (Dvorský 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced political leaders to make more intensive use of social media for communication. These platforms enabled them to spread direct and strategic messages. Populists saw the crisis as an opportunity to sensationalize failures (of science, institutions, experts) and politicize issues such as masks and lockdowns. Social media thus

played a key role not only in informing the public, but also in polarizing society and spreading conflicting political narratives.

2 Methodology

The research focuses on the systematic monitoring, analysis, and evaluation of political communication on Facebook in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and related anti-pandemic measures. The authors of the study approach this issue with the conviction that the pandemic was one of the key moments in the current Slovak political reality, significantly influencing the character of the social atmosphere and the way in which political entities interact with the public. Alongside the migration crisis and the war in Ukraine, it is also one of the most significant communication tests of the last decade—a test that has examined the state's capacity for strategic communication and at the same time created space for actors who distort public debate. The authors' ambition is to describe how public discourse was shaped during this period and what role individual political representatives played in it. They therefore view the presented research as a topic with significant interdisciplinary overlaps, applicable not only in political science, but also in sociology, psychology, security studies, and other social science disciplines.

The study aims to conduct interpretative research that allows for a parallel examination of the qualitative nature of political communication while mapping the occurrence and dynamics of key narratives over time. Methodologically, it is therefore based on two complementary levels: a qualitative component, which includes content analysis and interpretation of communication strategies, and a quantitative component, focused on measuring the incidence and effectiveness of individual narratives. The emphasis on Facebook stems from its dominant position in the Slovak online environment, as well as from the fact that it is a medium that has long faced criticism for insufficient regulation of content distribution. The research is also based on the assumption that social networks are one of the most important tools for 21st-century politicians to inform the public and influence political preferences.

The aim of the research is to identify the major narratives present in political communication during the COVID -19 pandemic, with specific regard to anti-pandemic measures, and to reflect on their significance in the process of framing public debate, focusing on the most active political actors in the online information environment of the Slovak Republic. 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 communicate the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-pandemic measures? To what extent was the topic communicated by individual narratives?
- Which narratives were the most effective in political communication, or rather, which ones received the most interaction?
- Which of the monitored actors were the most active in political communication? Which actors were the most effective?

Beyond these goals, the study seeks to advance existing research conceptually, empirically and analytically. Conceptually, it refines the application of framing and narrative perspectives to crisis-related political communication by systematically linking narrative categories to sentiment, engagement and party-system position. Empirically and analytically, it offers a longitudinal mapping of COVID-19 narratives in the Facebook communication of Slovak political leaders and shows how combining qualitative interpretation with quantitative indicators reveals how populist and anti-system actors capitalize on health crises.

The research was conducted in several interrelated phases. In the initial stage, the authors focused on the systematic collection of data, which was then subjected to analytical processing. The primary dataset was obtained using the Gerulata Juno monitoring tool (provided by Gerulata Technologies), designed to monitor communication on social networks, detect sentiment, and visualize data patterns. In one specific case—when monitoring Igor Matovič, who uses a private profile on Facebook and whose content cannot be monitored by Juno—the authors supplemented the data using the CrowdTangle platform (available from Meta until August 14, 2024). The data collection itself was carried out on July 25, 2023, and included posts published between March 1, 2020, and February 22, 2022. In addition to the time frame, two other selection criteria were applied during data collection.

The monitoring did not focus on the entire Slovak- language space, but on a predefined group of political actors. This list was compiled on the basis of parliamentary political entities that were present in the National Council of the Slovak Republic during the period under review. One representative was selected for each political entity – the politician with the highest number of followers at the time of data collection. It is important to note that the list of actors does not only reflect the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections; it also includes representatives of political entities that were formed or established during the period under review. This approach was particularly relevant in the context of the fragmentation of the Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko party at the beginning of 2021. Overall, the research focused on 11 actors, which are listed in the table below (Table 1).

Last but not least, another criterion for data collection was that the monitored and subsequently analyzed content was searched for based on a list of keywords or through a specific search query, which was as follows: pandemic OR anti-pandemic OR testing OR

vaccination OR vaccine OR mask OR respirator OR corona OR coronavirus OR covid OR antigen OR muzzle. OR expresses a logical function that allows content to be searched based on a conjunction relationship. The query also contained inflected forms and other variations of keywords that corresponded to the linguistics of the Slovak language.

The sampling strategy was designed to capture the core of Facebook-based political communication about COVID-19 in Slovakia. By focusing on the most followed representatives of parliamentary parties and newly formed entities, the dataset reflects actors with the greatest potential to shape public debate during the pandemic. The keyword-based query ensured thematic relevance by including only posts with substantive references to the pandemic, anti-pandemic measures, testing or vaccination.

Table 1: Monitored actors and their political affiliation

ACTOR	POLITICAL ENTITY (at the time of data collection)
Ľuboš Blaha	SMER-SD
Peter Pellegrini	Hlas-SD
Marián Kotleba	Kotlebovci – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko
Milan Mazurek	Republika
Tomáš Valášek	Progresívne Slovensko
Miroslav Kollár	SPOLU
Richard Sulík	Sloboda a solidarita
Igor Matovič	Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti (OĽaNO)
Boris Kollár	SME Rodina
Tomáš Taraba	Život-Národná strana
Veronika Remišová	Za ľudí

Source: Authors' work

After completing the data collection, the authors proceeded to manually annotate the data. The content analysis focused exclusively on posts with text content or those that contained visuals accompanied by text. Videos and other multimedia content formats were therefore not included in the analysis. In the next step, the posts were classified according to two main criteria: thematic relevance and content type. The purpose of this preliminary data classification was to minimize potential research limitations (specified below) and to create a consistent basis for further analytical and interpretative work.

- Relevant posts – content and topic related to the COVID-19 pandemic, content was in text form.
- Irrelevant posts – either the content did not relate to the COVID-19 pandemic or was in a form other than text.
- Posts without narrative – content and topic focused on the COVID-19 pandemic, content was 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 an initial orientation in the data, the authors then created a set of narrative categories. The specific narratives are listed below. They were defined on an ongoing basis during the analysis.

The categorization of narratives served as an analytical framework for grasping the content elements of political communication. In the context of political discourse, narratives represent structured interpretive patterns or stories that give meaning, coherence, and emotional charge to political events, policies, or actors. They are not limited to presenting facts—rather, they place them in a framework that is compatible with the values, identity, and emotions of the audience. Narratives shape the way the public interprets political issues through emotional resonance (e.g., fear, anger, hope), the construction of group identity ("us" versus "them"), and the offering of morally charged explanations and solutions.

This system of categories made it possible not only to qualitatively delimit the content, but also to quantitatively visualize the ways in which the political actors monitored framed the COVID-19 pandemic. The coding procedure combined deductive and inductive elements. An initial codebook based on research on crisis framing, populist communication and COVID-19 narratives was iteratively refined during pilot coding. A total of 16 categories of narratives were identified, which are listed together with their description and number of cases in Table 2. The number of cases corresponds to the number of posts in which a given narrative was detected at least once—even in situations where its elements appeared repeatedly within a single post, only one occurrence was counted. This system of categories operationalizes the theoretical assumptions of framing and narrative approaches, translating abstract concepts about interpretive frames and stories into empirically observable types of narratives in Facebook posts.

Table 2: Monitored narratives. Descriptions and counts

NARRATIVE	DESCRIPTION OF THE NARRATIVE	NUMBER OF CASES
COVID as a mild illness	COVID-19 presented as a common illness similar to the flu; downplaying risks and rejecting the need for fundamental measures.	80
COVID as a severe illness	COVID-19 framed as a serious disease posing a high risk to society; appeal for responsibility and respect for expert recommendations.	24
COVID does not exist	Denying the very existence of the virus; considering the pandemic to be a media or political construct.	5
Artificial origin of COVID – from the USA	Claims that the virus was created or released by the United States for geopolitical or economic dominance.	3
Artificial origin of COVID – from China	The virus understood as the result of a Chinese experiment or a laboratory leak; geopolitical criticism of China.	2
Natural origin of COVID	The pandemic interpreted as a natural (uncontrolled) phenomenon.	0
COVID leaked from a laboratory	The virus is considered to be the product of a laboratory accident; the narrative links scientific research with global risk.	11
COVID as a tool to restrict freedom	The pandemic understood as a pretext for introducing totalitarian measures and controlling the population.	50
COVID as a tool for population reduction	Conspiracy narrative about plans to reduce the population through virus or vaccinations.	5
TESTING – generally positive	Testing presented as an effective tool for controlling the pandemic and a manifestation of social responsibility.	77
TESTING – generally negative	Testing is seen as ineffective, unnecessary, and bureaucratically unmanageable.	211
TESTING as unnecessary	Rejection of testing as an unnecessary intrusion into citizens' lives with no real benefit.	114
TESTING with hidden motives	Conspiracy theories claiming that testing is used for surveillance, data collection, or to harm people's health.	116
VACCINATION – generally positive	Vaccination is seen as a scientific achievement and the most effective form of protection against the virus.	104
VACCINATION – generally negative	Vaccination associated with mistrust, fears, and criticism of political decision-making.	103
VACCINATION – negative because it does not work	Vaccination considered ineffective as virus continues to spread.	84
VACCINATION – negative because it is harmful	Claims about harmful or fatal consequences of vaccination.	70
VACCINATION – negative because of hidden motives	Conspiracy claims about vaccination aimed at population control or political manipulation.	31

VACCINATION – negative because of pharmaceutical company interests	Criticism of vaccination as a tool for pharmaceutical corporations to make a profit.	46
VACCINATION WITH EMA approval – generally positive	Vaccines approved by the EMA are presented as proven, safe, and scientifically sound.	20
VACCINATION WITH EMA approval – generally negative	The EMA is perceived as a bureaucratic institution serving political or economic interests, which does not guarantee the quality of vaccines.	3
VACCINATION WITH EMA approval – negative because it does not work	Criticism of vaccines approved by the EMA for their insufficient effectiveness; claims that vaccinated people still got sick.	20
VACCINATION WITH EMA approval – negative because it is harmful	EMA vaccines labeled as harmful to health; warning about side effects and health risks.	41
VACCINATION WITH EMA approval – negative because of hidden motives	EMA-approved vaccines presented as a tool for political manipulation and population control; emphasis on loss of personal freedom.	4
VACCINATION WITH EMA approval – negative because of pharmaceutical company interests	The EMA is perceived as an institution influenced by pharmaceutical corporations; vaccination is seen as a source of profit rather than public good.	47
VACCINATION WITHOUT EMA approval – generally positive	Non-Western vaccines (e.g., Sputnik V) presented as fast and reliable, and occasionally as an expression of national sovereignty.	51
VACCINATION WITHOUT EMA approval – generally negative	Rejection of uncertified vaccines due to their unverified nature and geopolitical risks.	12
VACCINATION WITHOUT EMA approval – negative because it does not work	Criticism of the effectiveness of uncertified vaccines due to a lack of clinical evidence and verified data.	1
VACCINATION WITHOUT EMA approval – negative because it is harmful	Warnings about health risks and side effects of unproven vaccines; reinforcing fear and uncertainty.	2
VACCINATION WITHOUT EMA approval – negative because of hidden motives	Uncertified vaccines presented as a tool of foreign political influence (especially Russia and China).	0
VACCINATION WITHOUT EMA approval – negative because of pharmaceutical company interests	Criticism of uncertified vaccines as a product of the economic and power interests of foreign pharmaceutical companies.	0

MASKS/RESPIRATORS – support for use	Wearing masks is seen as a sign of solidarity, responsibility, and respect for scientific recommendations.	45
MASKS/RESPIRATORS – opposition to use	Face masks are considered a symbol of oppression, an ineffective measure, or a threat to personal freedom.	51
ANTI-PANDEMIC MEASURES – supportive	Government measures perceived as necessary and morally right for the protection of health.	268
ANTI-PANDEMIC MEASURES – opposing	Criticism of measures as excessive, unprofessional, and harmful to society.	513
ANTI-PANDEMIC MEASURES as restriction of freedom / totalitarianism	Pandemic measures presented as a tool of state control and suppression of democracy.	510
ANTI-PANDEMIC MEASURES as a tool for enrichment / corruption	Measures interpreted as a means for financial gain by elites and political groups.	119
ANTI-PANDEMIC MEASURES as a threat to the economy	Criticism of measures for their negative impact on the economy, business, and employment.	107
TREATMENT – classical/modern medicine (positive)	Support for conventional medicine, trust in science and health authorities.	10
TREATMENT – natural remedies (herbs, nuts, garlic)	Preference for natural and home remedies over modern medicine.	2
TREATMENT – veterinary medicines (e.g., Ivermectin)	A conviction that the system deliberately blocks cheap and effective treatment alternatives. Recommendations for the use of veterinary medicine.	41
TREATMENT – medicines intended for other diseases	Claims that there are other effective drugs that are originally intended for other diseases, but their effectiveness is concealed by pharmaceutical interests.	4
TREATMENT – other/general	Various other dubious recommendations that fall outside the scope of classical, modern, and recommended medicine.	13

Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

The analysis of narratives was carried out on two complementary levels – quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative part focused on the occurrence of individual narratives during the period under review. The authors monitored not only the frequency of their occurrence, but also the temporal contexts in which they appeared and their links to specific social or political events that created space for their communication. The aim was to identify the narratives that appeared most prominently in the discourse and contributed most to shaping the public debate on the pandemic. The qualitative part of the analysis followed up on these findings by identifying and examining key narratives in detail. In this part, emphasis was placed on recognizing sub-narratives through which political actors shaped the discourse within the

individual main narratives. The annotation process was preceded by the identification of key narratives resulting from the initial analysis of the available dataset. Each contribution could also contain several (sub)narratives, reflecting the natural complexity of political communication. The result is a logically and thematically hierarchical system of narratives that allows for:

1. thematic categorization (e.g., individual categories/areas of narratives),
2. value differentiation (positive/negative/neutral/conspiratorial frameworks),
3. specification of reason or motive (e.g., because it does not work, because it is harmful, because of ulterior motives, because of the interests of pharmaceutical companies).
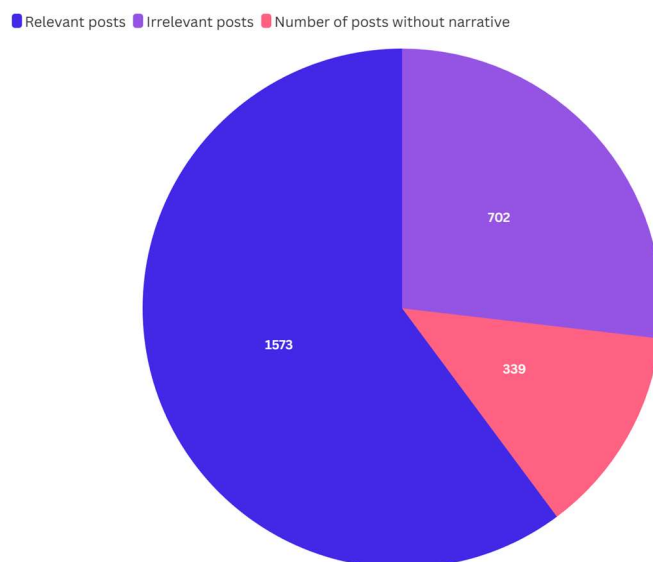
In other words, the system is two-tiered:

- Primary category = thematic frame (e.g., vaccination, measures, treatment).
- Secondary category = attitude or type of framing (e.g., positive, negative, conspiratorial, economic, ethical).

The authors also emphasize that the aim of the research is not to assess the truthfulness of the analyzed content, but to capture and describe its frequency within the overall communication activity—that is, how often individual narratives appeared in the monitored posts. The quantitative part of the analysis therefore focuses primarily on two basic indicators: the level of communication activity (number of posts published) and the effectiveness of communication (number of interactions generated). In this study, interactions are understood as the sum of reactions, comments, and shares. When working with this indicator, the authors assume that a larger volume of interactions potentially reflects a wider reach of content, either through organic dissemination or as a result of algorithmic recommendations. From the perspective of political communication, which can be seen as a process of exchanging information, attitudes, and symbolic messages between political actors and the public, a higher number of interactions is an indicator of an increased ability to influence the audience, mobilize support, or legitimize political action.

The research was accompanied by certain limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. The first is the use of interactions as the primary metric of reach. Although they provide important quantitative data on audience engagement, they do not always automatically reflect the quality of content reception or its actual impact on public opinion. Another limitation is the manual annotation of data, which allows for deeper analysis and more accurate interpretation of context, but poses the risk of subjective differences between annotators. To minimize the potential differences in interpretative approaches among the authors, a shared manual with a clear operationalization of the analyzed narratives was developed prior to the analysis. Subsequently, a pilot annotation of a selected subset of the data was conducted independently by all three authors, which allowed for the identification and clarification of ambiguous categories. During the annotation process, cases of interpretative

uncertainty were addressed through collective discussion and consensus among the authors. Although manual annotation inevitably involves a certain degree of subjectivity, the procedures adopted substantially enhanced the consistency and reliability of the analytical process. Limitations also apply to the data collection process itself. Not all relevant posts may have been identified due to the limitations of search queries, which, even when carefully configured, may not capture all variations of the topics being monitored. Technical limitations of monitoring tools—data availability, indexing methods, and algorithmic content processing—also play a role and may affect the completeness and representativeness of the analyzed sample. Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive and analytically valuable view of the phenomenon under investigation. It creates a methodological framework that can be further developed and refined in future research, while providing relevant insights into the dynamics of political communication during the pandemic.
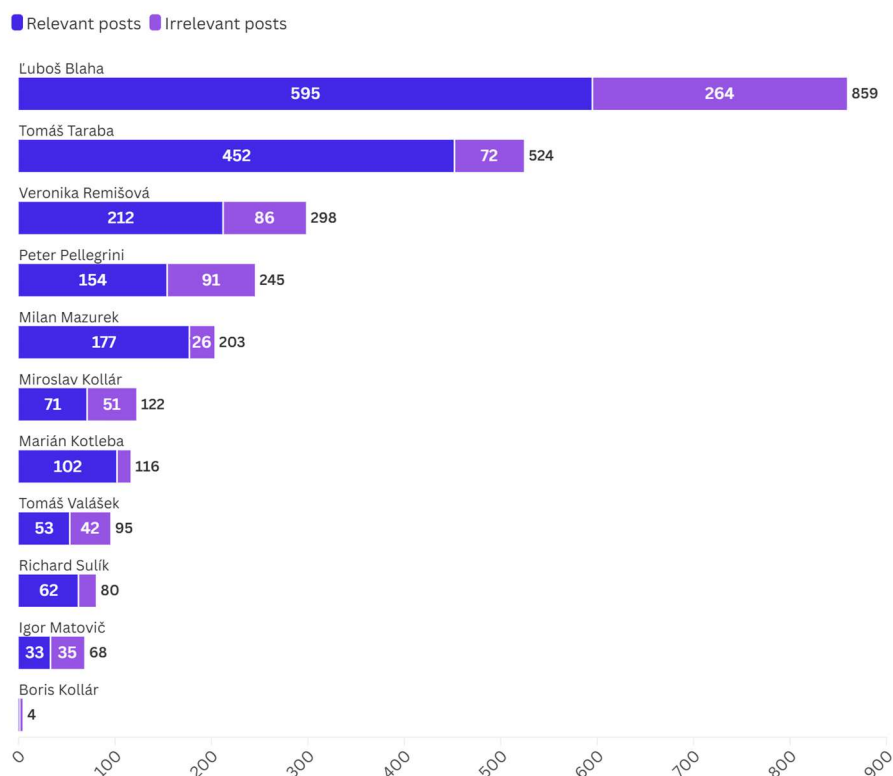

Graph 1: Number and typology of posts in research
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Based on a search using the above parameters, the authors obtained a data set containing a total of 2,614 posts. These were published on Facebook by the actors monitored between March 1, 2020, and February 22, 2022. Based on the subsequent distillation of text content that was thematically relevant to the research, the final data set that was then analyzed consisted of 1,912 posts. In this set of posts, 339 posts were subsequently identified as not containing narratives relevant to the research. Most of these were posts that, although related to the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-pandemic measures, did not link to the monitored discursive frameworks or interpretative intentions. This means that the majority of posts were relevant (n = 1573), i.e., those that were directly related to the topic of the pandemic or anti-pandemic measures and contained a recognizable narrative. It can be said that the

dominance of relevant posts confirms that the topic has become an important element of public discourse, in which actors not only reported on the development of the situation, but also actively interpreted it through various narratives. Narratively neutral posts, on the other hand, indicate the presence of communication strategies aimed at maintaining a formal or non-political tone, which served a stabilizing or complementary function in the discourse.

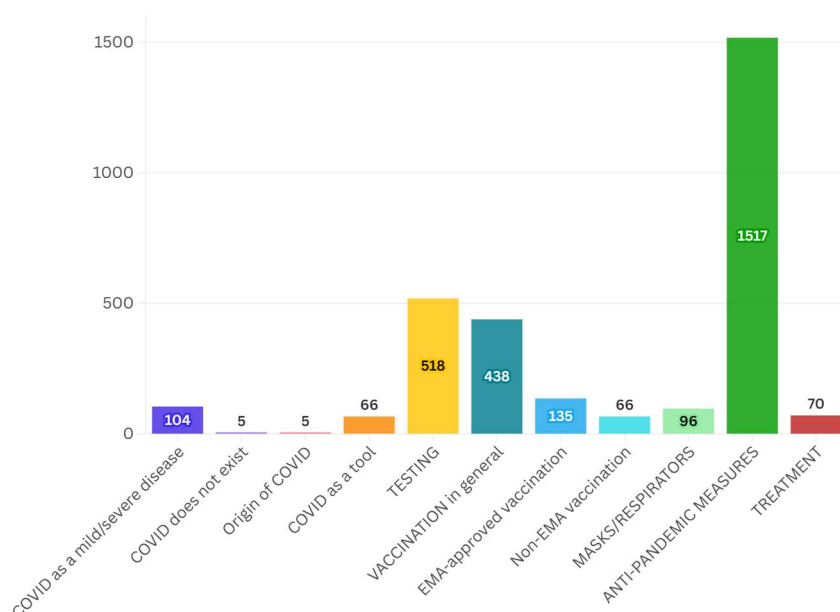**Graph 2: Number of posts by individual actors according to relevance**
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

During the monitored period, Ľuboš Blaha was the most active actor, publishing a total of 595 relevant posts on the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic. This figure clearly confirms his dominant presence in the online space and his high level of engagement with the topic. He is followed by Tomáš Taraba with 452 thematically relevant posts, making him one of the most prominent communicators of the pandemic in terms of the volume of published content. As for other actors, Veronika Remišová (212 relevant out of 298 posts) and Peter Pellegrini (154 relevant out of 245) occupy the leading positions. Both communicated continuously about the pandemic, albeit in different contexts—Remišová mainly in connection with defending government procedures and measures, Pellegrini more from a position of moderate criticism. Other prominent figures were Milan Mazurek (177 relevant posts), who was one of the most vocal critics of the official pandemic policy, and Miroslav Kollár (71 relevant posts), whose communication was at the opposite end of the spectrum – within the framework of more pro-

state arguments. Interestingly, despite their positions in the government, names such as Richard Sulík (62 relevant posts), Igor Matovič (33), and Boris Kollár (4) appear at the bottom of the list. Their lower communication activity suggests that during the period covered by the analysis, the topic of the pandemic took a back seat in their communication, or that they communicated about it through channels other than social media. Overall, it can be said that the communication activity of political representatives on the topic of the pandemic was very unevenly distributed—opposition or systemically critical actors dominated significantly, suggesting that the pandemic was used as a space for forming alternative, often polarizing discourse in the online environment.
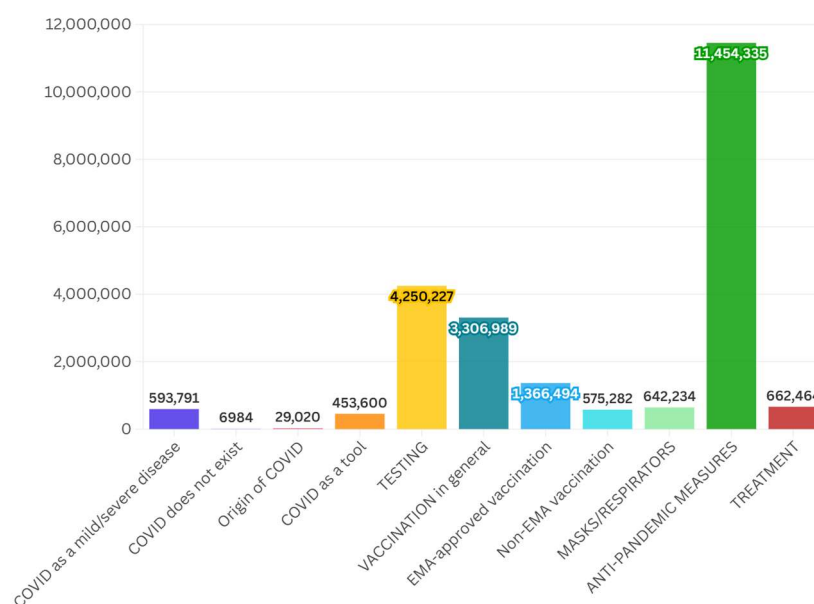
3 Results

The following section focuses on analyzing the thematic categories of narratives that shaped political communication about the COVID-19 pandemic in the Slovak information space. The aim is to identify which types of narratives dominated the discourse, how they differed in terms of content, and what level of social response they elicited. The graphs show the frequency of occurrence of individual narratives and the volume of interactions they generated, allowing for a comparison of communication activity and effectiveness across thematic areas—from the perception of the virus itself, through vaccination and measures, to treatment and individual approaches to the pandemic.

Graph 3: Number of posts by individual groups of monitored narratives
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle
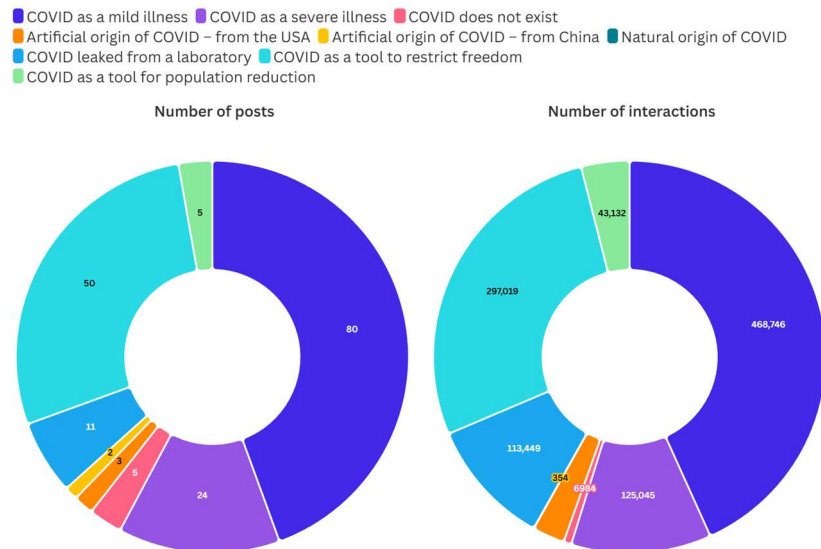
Graph 3 depicts the distribution of identified narratives in the political communication of the monitored actors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data show a significant dominance of narratives related to anti-pandemic measures (n = 1517), which were the most frequently discussed topic in the analyzed period. These narratives became the main tool for interpreting the crisis situation and a space where political actors most intensively formulated their positions on state management and restrictions affecting the daily lives of citizens. This is followed by narratives about testing (n = 518) and narratives about vaccination in general (n = 438), which together indicate that the discourse focused heavily on issues of health policy, trust in scientific institutions, and the legitimacy of government decisions. Vaccination linked to certification by the European Medicines Agency (n = 135) and outside it (n = 66) suggests that the topic of vaccination also had a geopolitical dimension, becoming a space for formulating Slovakia's attitudes towards Western and non-Western actors. To a lesser extent, there were narratives related to the disease itself—its severity (n = 104) or origin (n = 5)—which were more complementary or secondary in nature. COVID-19 as a tool (n = 66), treatment (n = 70), and masks or respirators (n = 96) constituted marginal, albeit symbolically significant, areas of discourse, reflecting the range of typologies of framing – from the creation of conspiracy theories, through charlatan recommendations, to rejection. In terms of interpretation, the graph confirms that political communication during the period under review focused primarily on crisis management and the state's response, rather than on the medical or scientific aspects of the pandemic. Narratives about measures, testing, and vaccination formed the core of public discourse.

Graph 4: Number of interactions generated by posts according to individual groups of monitored narratives
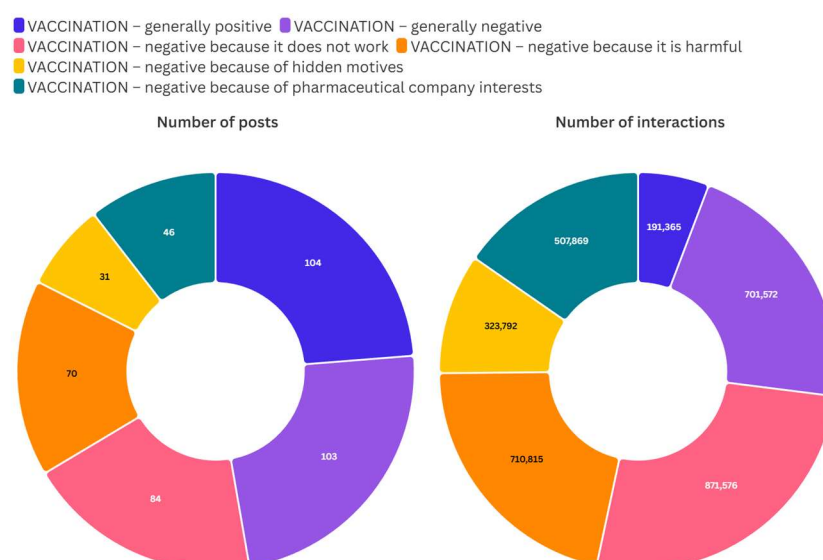Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 4, in combination with Graph 3, shows not only the frequency of occurrence of individual narratives, but also the degree of their social response, which can be perceived as an indicator of communication effectiveness. The results show that the narratives associated with anti-pandemic measures generated the most attention and interactions during the period under review, generating a total of more than 11.4 million interactions. Their dominance suggests that this topic became the main communication framework of the pandemic, through which political actors formulated their positions on the functioning of the state, individual freedom, and social responsibility. A high level of audience engagement was also recorded for narratives about testing (4.25 million interactions) and vaccination in general (3.3 million interactions), which were related to the everyday experience of citizens and were therefore particularly sensitive to emotional reactions. Vaccination in the context of the EMA (1.3 million interactions) and vaccination outside the EMA (575,000 interactions) also became significant factors in the discourse, confirming that the pandemic was also a space for the articulation of geopolitical and institutional preferences — between trust in European regulatory frameworks and sympathy for alternative sources of vaccines. On average, the highest interaction value per narrative case was achieved by the categories of vaccination with EMA certification (9,678 interactions per case on average) and treatment (9,463 interactions per case on average). These were followed by narratives about vaccination outside the EMA (8,719 interactions per case on average) and testing (8,206 interactions per case on average). These data confirm that topics related to personal experience, health risks, and individual decision-making mobilized the audience the most. In contrast, narratives about the origin of the virus (439 interactions per case on average) or its non-existence (1,396 interactions per case on average) remained marginal—their low frequency and response indicate a weaker influence of conspiracy frameworks in official political communication. In summary, it can be said that the narratives that achieved the highest level of social resonance were those that reflected the specific impact of the pandemic on the lives of individuals — whether in terms of measures, testing, or vaccination. These discursive frameworks created a space in which politics, science, and everyday experience intersected and through which political actors actively shaped the collective perception of the pandemic as a social and political phenomenon.

Legend:
- COVID as a mild illness
- COVID as a severe illness
- COVID does not exist
- Artificial origin of COVID – from the USA
- Artificial origin of COVID – from China
- Natural origin of COVID
- COVID leaked from a laboratory
- COVID as a tool to restrict freedom
- COVID as a tool for population reduction

Number of posts

80, 24, 5, 3, 2, 11, 50, 5

Number of interactions

468,746, 125,045, 6984, 354, 113,449, 297,019, 43,132

Graph 5: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives about the nature of COVID-19
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 5 displays a comparison of the number of posts and the total number of interactions within narratives that addressed the origin and nature of the virus. The data show that the most common theme of communication in this category was the narrative of COVID as a mild disease (n = 80 posts), which also generated the highest number of interactions (468,346). This narrative often appeared as a relativizing framework for the pandemic, in which political actors questioned the seriousness of the disease, appealed to the "normality" of life, and used it to criticize strict measures or vaccination. On the other hand, the narrative of COVID as a serious disease (n = 26 posts; 121,046 interactions) appeared less frequently in communication, suggesting that political representation was less often based on warnings or calls to action based on health threats. Narratives about the origin of the virus—whether in the form of claims about its artificial origin in the US or China, or about its escape from a laboratory—were equally infrequent. Their occurrence was marginal (a total of 14 posts), while the total number of interactions (approximately 266,000 in total) indicates that these topics resonated, but only with a limited audience. The narrative about COVID as a tool to restrict freedom also had a relatively low presence (n = 5 posts; 48,132 interactions), suggesting that within this category, polarizing topics were more associated with measures than with the nature of the disease itself. Narratives about COVID as a means of reducing the population were almost non-existent and their social impact was negligible.

Graph 6: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives about vaccination in general
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 6 shows the distribution of the number of posts and the volume of interactions within narratives that focused on vaccination as such, regardless of the origin of the vaccines or their regulatory approval. The data show that the dominant theme of communication was a negative attitude toward vaccination, which appeared in various forms in the vast majority of the posts analyzed. Narratives of this type (n = 334) generated more than 3.1 million interactions, confirming their significant presence and social response. Generally negative communication about vaccination (without specific framing or reason) appeared in 103 cases, generating more than 700,000 interactions. The most common negative narratives in the communication questioned the effectiveness (n = 84; 877,576 interactions) or safety of vaccines (n = 70; 710,815 interactions). These narratives reflected persistent distrust of scientific authorities and were typical during periods of stricter measures or mandatory vaccination, when they served as a means of mobilizing resistance and political identity. Less frequent but thematically significant were narratives linking vaccination to ulterior motives (n = 31; 323,792 interactions) or the economic interests of pharmaceutical companies (n = 46; 507,689 interactions). These posts reinforced the idea of systemic manipulation or "pharmalobbying," thereby expanding the anti-vaccination discourse with elements of distrust toward institutions and state authorities. In contrast, generally positive narratives about vaccination appeared only sporadically (n = 104; 191,365 interactions), suggesting that political communication was dominated by a critical to dismissive tone toward vaccination policy. From an interpretative perspective, it can be said that vaccination was one of the most polarizing topics of the pandemic. While professional institutions communicated it as a solution to the

health crisis, in the political arena it became a symbol of a broader debate about freedom, trust, and state power. The high number of interactions confirms that vaccination narratives functioned as carriers of identity and mobilization tools through which the public discourse on the legitimacy of pandemic policies was shaped.
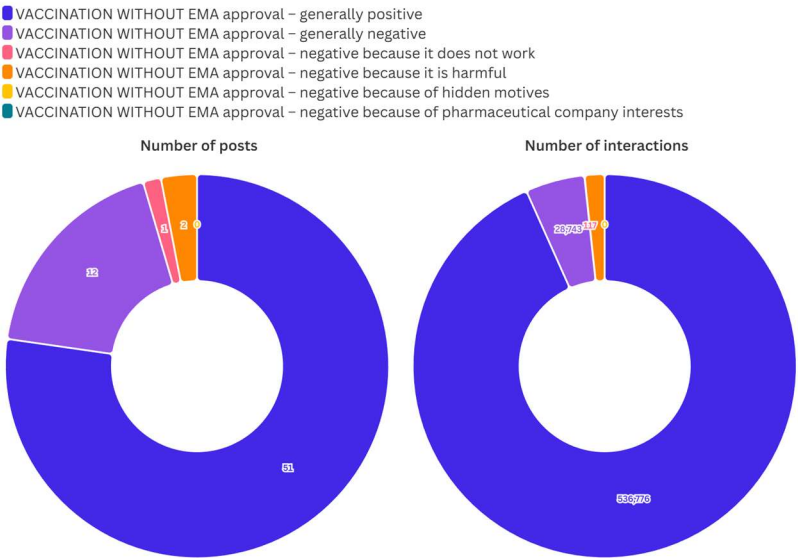

Graph 7: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives about vaccination with EMA approval
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 7 illustrates the distribution of posts and interactions within narratives focused on vaccines approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA). The data show that the communication of the monitored actors was predominantly negative in this case as well, with individual variations of this attitude taking different forms – from questioning the functionality of vaccines to constructing hidden agendas. A significant group consisted of posts presenting vaccination with EMA as ineffective (n = 20) or harmful (n = 41), which together generated over 720,000 interactions. These narratives reflected skepticism about the effectiveness of European vaccines, often framed in opposition to "alternative" vaccines outside the EMA's approval. Narratives about the ulterior motives and economic interests of pharmaceutical companies (n = 47; 551,219 interactions in total) also received a strong response, reinforcing the idea of a link between the pharmaceutical industry and political decisions. Such interpretations were often used as a political argument against the government (or parts of it) or the EU, combining criticism of globalization, Western elites, and "Brussels diktats." In contrast, generally positive narratives about vaccination with the EMA were only marginally represented (n = 20; 20,945 interactions), which corresponds to the overall trend of skepticism and questioning in the discourse on vaccination. Vaccination approved by the EMA thus
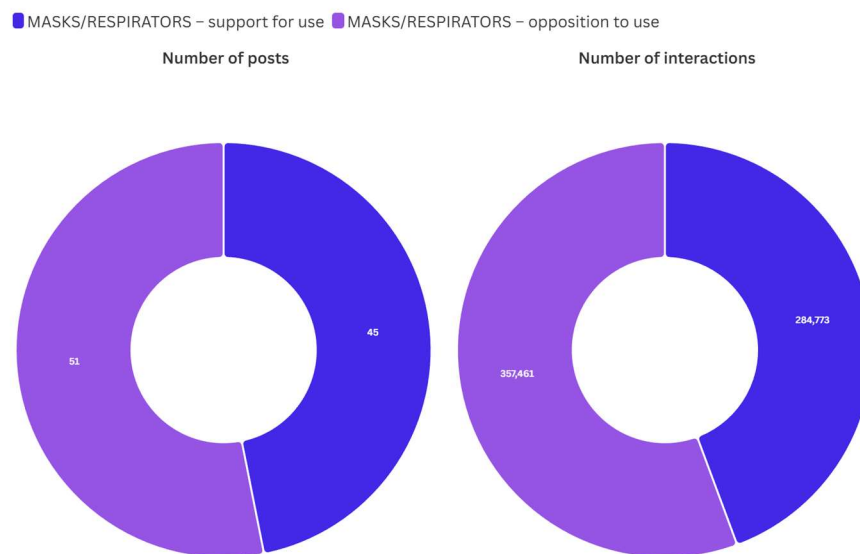
became a symbol of broader political and social tensions, in which health issues intersected with topics of trust in European institutions, sovereignty, and Slovakia's geopolitical orientation. The high level of interaction with negative narratives indicates that questioning the "European"32egitimacy of vaccination was one of the most effective forms of political communication during the pandemic.

Graph 8: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives about vaccination without EMA approval
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 8 depicts the distribution of posts and interactions within narratives related to vaccination outside the EMA, i.e., vaccines that have not undergone the approval process of European institutions. The data clearly confirm the dominance of positive framing of this topic – posts highlighting vaccination outside the EMA as a suitable, effective, or sovereign alternative constituted the overwhelming majority of communication (n = 51) and generated up to 536,776 interactions. This narrative, which was particularly prominent in political communication during the import of the Sputnik V vaccine to Slovakia (March 2021), reflected the geopolitical dimension of the pandemic. Vaccination outside the EMA as a narrative enabled a shift from the health level to the political-identity level, where it served as a tool for criticizing Western institutions and strengthening the positive image of Russia and Eastern partners. Conversely, negative narratives—questioning the efficacy (n = 1; 117 interactions) or safety of vaccines outside the EMA (n = 2; 9,646 interactions)—appeared only marginally. Their low frequency and reach confirm that, compared to communication about "Western" vaccines, this topic was framed in a much more favorable light. At the same time, it appeared in a lower amount of content. For comparison, narratives about EMA-certified vaccines appeared in 135 cases. Those without it appeared in only 66 cases. The positive tone and high
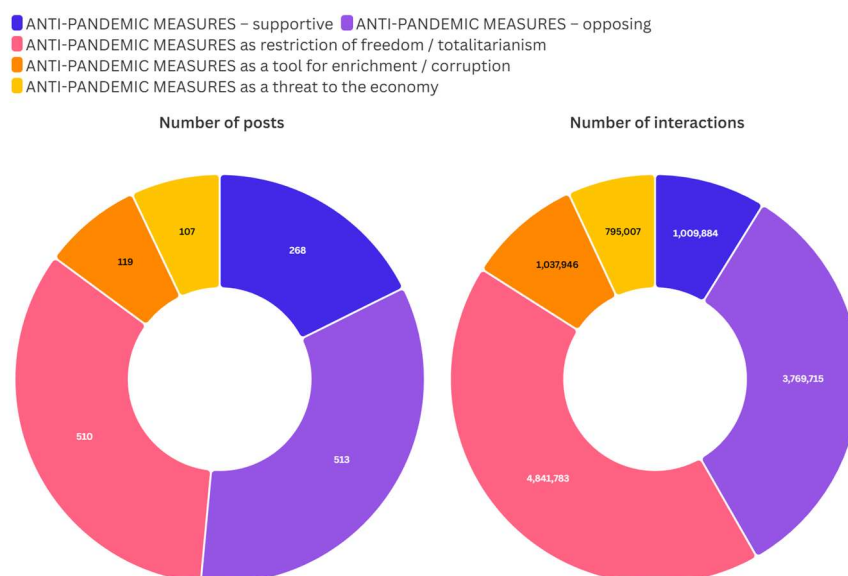
level of interaction show that this narrative was a very effective mobilizing element, capable of linking health issues with questions of geopolitical orientation.

● MASKS/RESPIRATORS – support for use ● MASKS/RESPIRATORS – opposition to use

Number of posts   Number of interactions

Graph 9: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives about masks and respirators
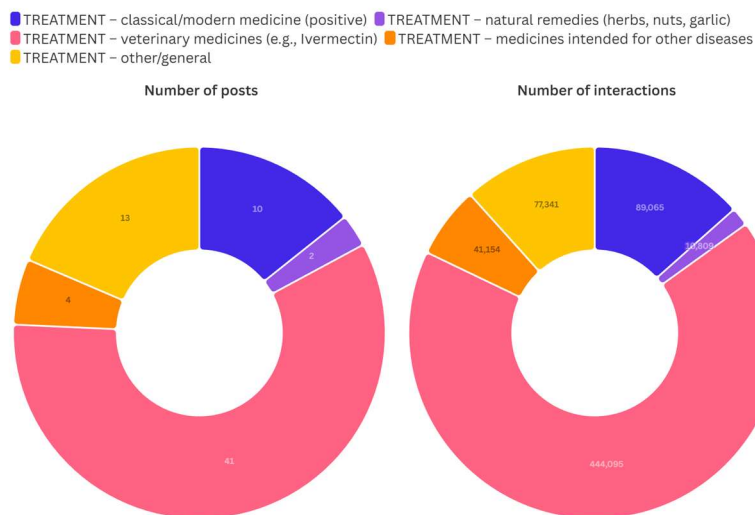Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 9 compares the number of posts and the amount of interaction within narratives that focused on the use of masks and respirators. The data show that communication in this area was evenly polarized—posts with positive sentiment (n = 45) and posts with negative sentiment (n = 51) appeared in approximately equal proportions. In terms of social response, positive narratives (284,778 interactions) generated only slightly fewer interactions than negative ones (357,461 interactions), indicating a high degree of polarization in the discourse. While supporters of masks perceived them as a responsible and solidarity-based tool for protecting health, opponents interpreted them as a tool of state control, an unnecessary restriction, or a symbol of coercion. In both cases, these were highly emotional frameworks that mobilized the audience not only on the basis of rational but also identity-based impulses. In terms of interpreting the results, it can be said that the topic of masks and respirators functioned as a microcosm of broader pandemic communication, as it allowed political actors to demonstrate their attitudes towards the state, authorities, and social solidarity. The mask thus became a visible sign of one's attitude towards the pandemic – both physical and political.

Graph 10: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives on anti-pandemic measures
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 10 shows the distribution of posts and interactions within narratives addressing anti-pandemic measures. It confirms that this category was one of the most prominent and most discussed areas of pandemic discourse. In terms of frequency, posts expressing general opposition to the measures (n = 513) or describing them as a restriction of freedom and a manifestation of totalitarianism (n = 510) dominated. These narratives together formed the core of opposition to pandemic policy and generated more than 8.6 million interactions. Their common feature was the framing of state interventions as disproportionate, authoritarian, or ineffective, often accompanied by appeals to civil liberty, the right to choose, and criticism of "government diktat." In contrast, narratives supporting the measures (n = 268) achieved a relatively balanced number of posts, but lagged significantly in terms of interaction (1,009,884 interactions). This suggests that although the voice supporting the measures was present in the discourse, it failed to generate the same level of engagement as its opponents. Narratives about the measures as a tool for corruption or enrichment (n = 119; 1,037,946 interactions) and a threat to the economy (n = 107; 795,007 interactions) complemented the overall framework of criticism of the government, linking the topic of the pandemic with long-term distrust of institutions and political elites. From an interpretative point of view, it can be said that communication about anti-pandemic measures was the most significant source of polarization in the Slovak political debate on the pandemic. Negative narratives not only prevailed quantitatively, but also achieved a higher degree of effectiveness in terms of social response.
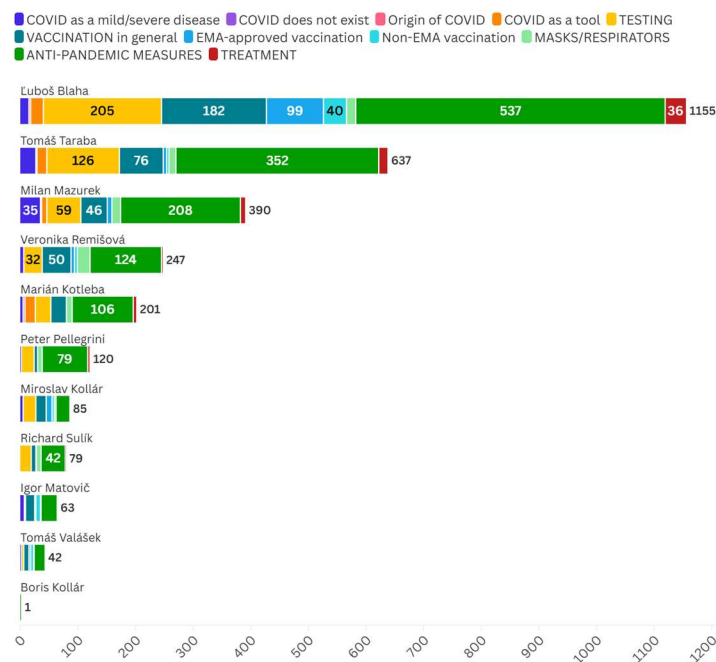
Graph 11: Number of posts and interactions by individual narratives about treatment
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 11 demonstrates the distribution of posts and interactions within narratives that focused on COVID-19 treatment methods. The results show that this category was not among the most frequent. The largest share of communication was made up of narratives about treatment with veterinary drugs (n = 41; 444,095 interactions), which were mainly associated with media-known cases of the use of ivermectin or other unapproved substances. These narratives reflected distrust of official medicine and supported the idea that alternative medicines represent a "secret" or "prohibited" form of effective help. In contrast, positive narratives about conventional medicine and the scientific approach appeared only rarely (n = 10; 89,065 interactions). Their limited occurrence points to the weaker ability of political actors to effectively communicate trust in professional authorities and to the absence of a consistent scientific framework in the discourse. Natural treatments (n = 2; 10,809 interactions) and treatments with drugs intended for other diseases (n = 4; 41,154 interactions) appeared to a marginal extent. The category of other or general forms of treatment (n = 13; 77,361 interactions) was relatively strongly represented. These narratives were characterized by an effort to normalize an individual approach to coping with the pandemic outside of institutional recommendations. The discourse on COVID-19 treatment reflected a crisis of confidence in scientific and regulatory authorities. Political communication was dominated by narratives that questioned expert knowledge and offered alternative solutions instead.

After identifying the main thematic categories of narratives, an analysis focuses on the communication behavior of individual political actors. The aim of this section is to examine which actors were most intensively involved in the discourse on the COVID-19 pandemic, what narratives they used in their communication, and what response their content elicited from the public. The analysis tracks both the level of communication activity (number of published posts)

and the effectiveness of communication (number of interactions generated), allowing for a comparison of differences in the manner and impact of individual expressions of political communication. Particular attention is paid to the extent to which individual actors communicated in favor of or against anti-pandemic measures. This dimension is not limited to the category of "anti-pandemic measures" as such, but includes a broader framework of related topics—testing, vaccination (including a distinction between vaccines with and without EMA certification), wearing masks and respirators, and methods of treatment. The approach thus distinguishes between acceptance of the state's official pandemic management procedure and rejection of it, which reflects a tendency toward alternative, often anti-system and anti-official attitudes. This contrast allows us to analyze how individual political actors approached crisis management and how their communication contributed to the formation of a polarized social discourse.
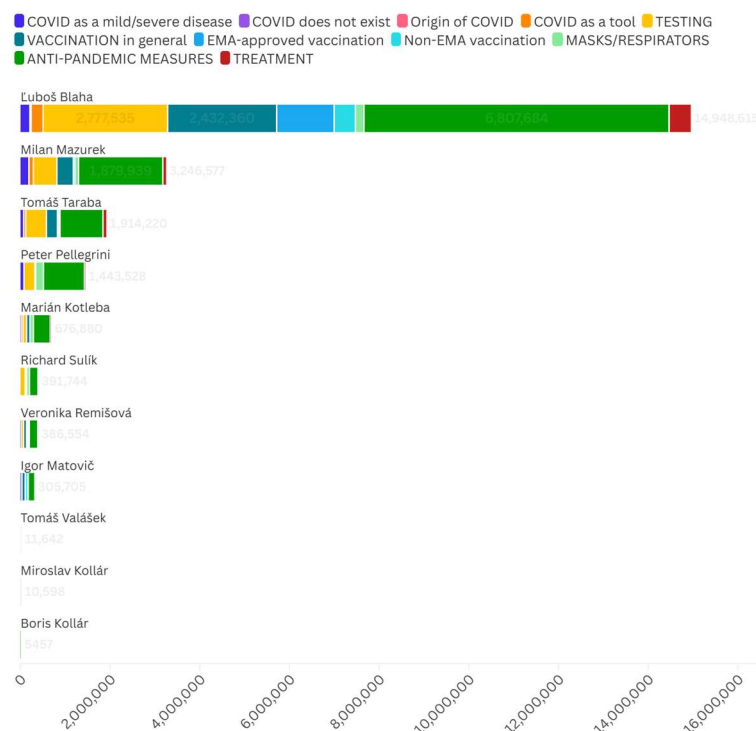

Graph 12: Number of narrative cases by group in the political communication of monitored actors
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 12 illustrates the distribution of narrative types used by individual political representatives in their communication about the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show significant differences in the thematic orientation and framing of the pandemic among the actors monitored. The most extensive and diverse communication footprint was left by Ľuboš Blaha, who addressed almost all categories of narratives. The theme of anti-pandemic measures dominated his communication (537 posts), often accompanied by critical assessments and an emphasis on their alleged negative impacts on freedom and society.
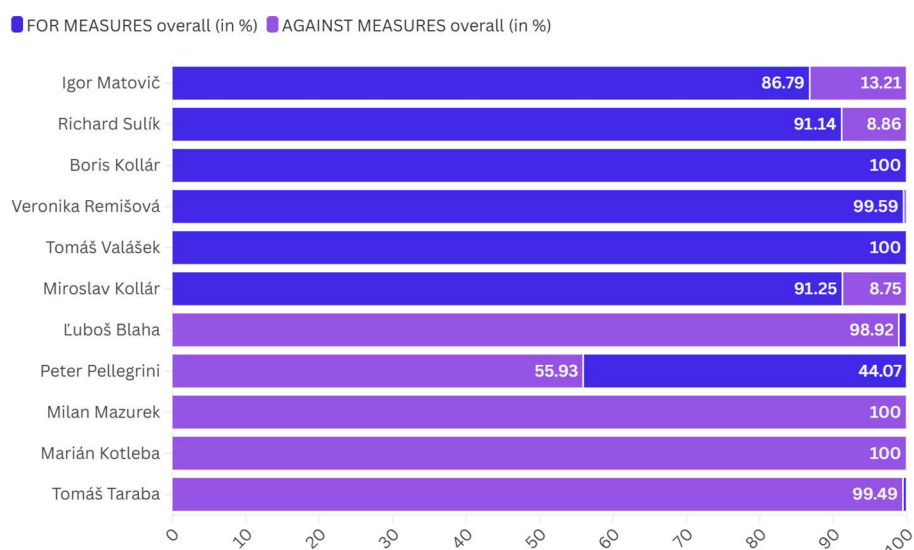
Narratives about testing (205), vaccination (182), and specifically vaccination with EMA certification (99) were also prominent, pointing to a systematic effort to create an alternative framework for interpreting the pandemic in which institutional responses are questioned. Tomáš Taraba similarly profiled himself as one of the main proponents of critical narratives, especially in the categories of anti-pandemic measures (352 posts) and testing (126). His high level of activity in these areas suggests that the pandemic was an important part of his media strategy, often using narratives with elements of skepticism towards official institutions and measures. In terms of the total number of posts, Milan Mazurek was also very active, emphasizing anti-pandemic measures (208) and testing (59) in his posts. His communication was among the most prominent in the context of anti-government and confrontational discourse, contributing to the polarization of public debate. His communication also featured narratives questioning the seriousness of the pandemic (35). At the opposite end of the spectrum is Veronika Remišová, whose communication was more evenly distributed—she devoted less attention to anti-pandemic measures (124 posts), but more often from a defensive or explanatory framework, indicating an effort to rationalize crisis management. In terms of narrative diversity, it can be said that most actors focused on a limited number of topics, indicating a targeted communication strategy and selective use of narratives with the greatest mobilization potential.

Graph 13: Number of interactions by narrative according to groups in the political communication of monitored actors
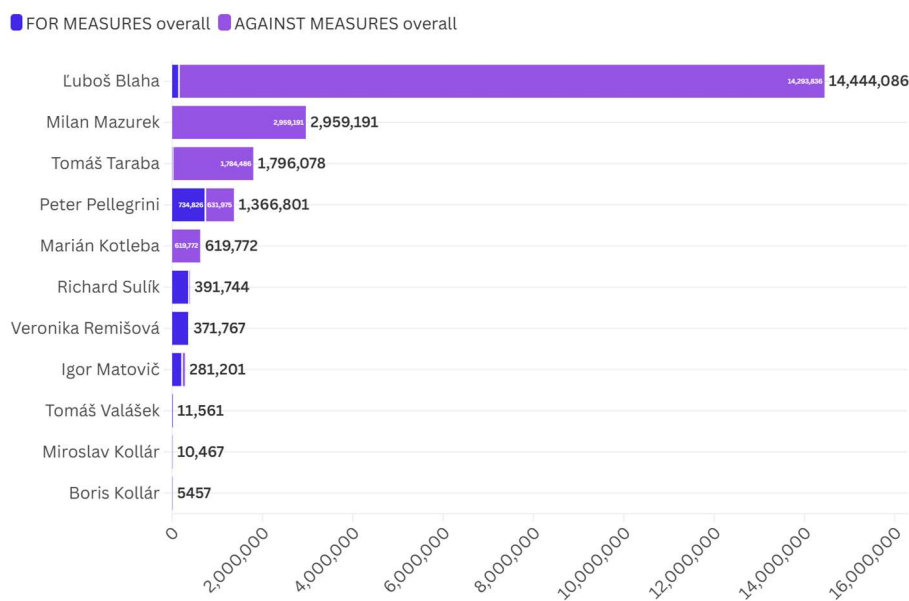Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

Graph 13 shows how individual narratives resonated among Facebook users, i.e., the level of interaction—reactions, comments, and shares—they generated in connection with the communication of specific political figures. The data show that Ľuboš Blaha was clearly the most effective communicator on the topic of the pandemic during the period under review. His posts generated a total of more than 14.9 million interactions, which is several times more than any other actor. The narratives about anti-pandemic measures (6.8 million interactions) received the greatest response, which Blaha often framed as a restriction of freedom, a manifestation of totalitarianism, or manipulation by the state. Narratives about testing (2.77 million) and vaccination in general (2.43 million) also resonated strongly, which were predominantly negative in his communication and associated with criticism of "pharmaceutical interests" or "coercive state systems." Milan Mazurek ranked second in overall reach, with his posts receiving 3.25 million interactions. His communication focused primarily on criticism of anti-pandemic measures (1.87 million), testing (more than 524,000), and vaccination (approximately 366,000), confirming the high mobilization potential of these topics in the context of anti-system communication. Tomáš Taraba follows with more than 1.9 million interactions, and like Blaha and Mazurek, he benefited from narratives questioning the effectiveness or legitimacy of the measures. His communication style combined the rhetoric of civil resistance with an effort to politically evaluate the topic, which allowed him to maintain a high level of audience engagement. Other relevant, albeit less effective, actors include Peter Pellegrini (1.44 million), Marian Kotleba (676,000), and Richard Sulík (391,000). Their communication had a lower level of interaction but was thematically consistent. At the opposite end of the spectrum are actors such as Veronika Remišová, Igor Matovič, and Tomáš Valášek, whose communication did address the pandemic but with significantly lower response rates (ranging from 390,000 to 10,000 interactions). This trend suggests that critical and polarizing narratives had a much greater impact in the online environment than neutral or pro-government communication frameworks. Political communication about the pandemic on social networks became a highly asymmetrical space dominated by critical, emotionally charged rhetoric at the expense of factual and reassuring discourse.

Actor	FOR	AGAINST
Igor Matovič	86.79	13.21
Richard Sulík	91.14	8.86
Boris Kollár	100	
Veronika Remišová	99.59	
Tomáš Valášek	100	
Miroslav Kollár	91.25	8.75
Ľuboš Blaha		98.92
Peter Pellegrini	55.93	44.07
Milan Mazurek		100
Marián Kotleba		100
Tomáš Taraba		99.49

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Graph 14: Percentage ratio of narratives in the political communication of monitored actors. For measures vs. against measures
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

The graph shows the extent to which individual political actors leaned toward supporting or rejecting anti-pandemic measures in their communication on Facebook, taking into account all topics related to the pandemic—testing, vaccination (including EMA and non-EMA), masks and respirators, anti-pandemic measures, and treatment. The results show a clear division of the actors monitored into two main groups: those who communicated mainly in favor of official measures and those whose communication was explicitly negative. On the side supporting the measures, the most prominent were Boris Kollár, Tomáš Valášek, Veronika Remišová, Richard Sulík, and Miroslav Kollár, whose communication was largely (91–100%) in line with the official pandemic management framework. Their contributions often reflected an emphasis on responsibility, social solidarity, and rational crisis management. Igor Matovič (86.79% "FOR") is a specific case—although his communication initially supported government measures, it was characterized by a confrontational and polarizing style that could have undermined confidence in the messages themselves. At the opposite end of the spectrum are actors whose communication was almost exclusively against anti-pandemic measures. Among them are Tomáš Taraba, Marian Kotleba, Milan Mazurek, and Ľuboš Blaha, who in 98–100% of their posts used narratives questioning the official state strategy, described the measures as disproportionate or totalitarian, and often referred to "alternative" sources of solutions, such as unlicensed vaccines or unproven treatments. These actors used the pandemic as a tool for political mobilization and polarization, building on emotions and distrust of the authorities. An interesting case is Peter Pellegrini, whose communication was balanced (55.93% "FOR," 44.07% "AGAINST"). This ratio indicates a pragmatic approach—an effort to appear moderate, maintain credibility in the eyes of a broad spectrum of voters, and avoid open polarization.

FOR MEASURES overall ■ **AGAINST MEASURES overall**

Actor	Value
Ľuboš Blaha	14,444,086
Milan Mazurek	2,959,191
Tomáš Taraba	1,796,078
Peter Pellegrini	1,366,801
Marián Kotleba	619,772
Richard Sulík	391,744
Veronika Remišová	371,767
Igor Matovič	281,201
Tomáš Valášek	11,561
Miroslav Kollár	10,467
Boris Kollár	5457

Graph 15: Number of interactions in political communication by monitored actors. For measures vs. against measures
Source: Authors' work. Data obtained from Gerulata Juno and CrowdTangle

The graph illustrates the response to posts by individual political actors according to their value framework—that is, whether they supported or questioned anti-pandemic measures and broader government responses to the pandemic. The data show a clear dominance of critical ("AGAINST") narratives, which generated a significantly higher level of interaction than supportive posts. The most striking example is Ľuboš Blaha, whose communications generated a total of more than 14.4 million interactions, almost all of which came from content rejecting pandemic measures. This extreme imbalance points to an extraordinary ability to mobilize audiences through emotional, polarizing, and often confrontational narratives that achieve high viral potential in the online environment. A similar trend can be observed with Milan Mazurek (2.95 million interactions) and Tomáš Taraba (1.79 million interactions), whose communication was almost exclusively in opposition to official measures. Both can be classified among the most successful disseminators of critical narratives, who were able to effectively mobilize their supporters through social networks and create an anti-government framework for interpreting the pandemic. Peter Pellegrini occupies a special place, whose posts (1.36 million interactions) were more balanced in terms of topic—approximately half of his communication was moderate or supportive in nature, which is also reflected in his balanced position between the "FOR" and "AGAINST" camps. His communication style suggests an effort to maintain credibility with a wider audience, without stronger ideological distinctions. On the other hand, representatives with predominantly supportive communication – Veronika Remišová (371,000 interactions), Richard Sulík (391,000), and Igor Matovič (281,000) – achieved significantly lower effectiveness. Although their posts were factual and

rational in nature, in an environment of highly polarized discourse, they generated less response than content based on criticism and conflict. Overall, the results confirm that in the online environment, communication "against the measures" had a significantly higher mobilizing effect than posts appealing to responsibility or trust in institutions. This trend corresponds to the broader phenomenon of political communication during crises, where emotionally charged and oppositional narratives achieve greater audience engagement than rational and moderate forms of discourse.

4 Discussion

The results of this study clearly show that social networks – especially Facebook – played a crucial role in political communication during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way political actors interacted with the public, with social networks becoming the primary communication channel, especially for rapid and strategy-oriented communication. Social platforms, especially Facebook, enabled politicians to immediately inform the public about measures, build trust, and mobilize support, but also to polarize and spread conflicting narratives. There has been a significant shift in discourse towards personalization, with leaders playing a prominent role and new political entities with innovative approaches becoming active. The research confirmed that Slovak political actors made intensive use of social media not only to communicate about the pandemic, but also to polarize society, build their own legitimacy, and spread or refute disinformation.

The findings correspond with research published in international literature, according to which crisis communication by politicians on social networks is characterized by speed, personalization, and often dramatization of events. At the same time, the low credibility of social networks as a source of information, which has also been identified in previous domestic and foreign studies, is confirmed. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the spread of conspiracies and hoaxes, in which actors played the role of a so-called "megaphone" for disinformation. Disinformation and conspiracy theories were widely accepted and disseminated by the public, with well-known personalities constituting a minority of sources but generating a significant amount of disinformation. The study confirmed the existence of an "infodemic" – an excessive amount of information, not all of which was accurate. The study confirmed the existence of an "infodemic" – an excessive amount of information, not all of which was accurate. The massive increase in the use of the internet and online media in Slovakia led to increased consumption of news, but also caused problems with finding reliable sources.

The pandemic provided an opportunity to reinforce populist discourse; political leaders—especially from the opposition—often used the crisis to criticize the government's management and dramatize the situation. Such discourse reinforced the polarization of society and spectacularized the failures of scientific and institutional capacities. Populism was identified in the research in narratives dividing society into antagonistic groups, which led to a further deepening of tensions.

It turned out that narratives related to anti-pandemic measures, vaccination, and testing dominated the thematic spectrum, generating the highest number of posts and interactions. These areas also showed the highest level of controversy, as they brought together attitudes supporting institutional crisis management with skeptical or openly dismissive attitudes. In terms of interactions, the most successful narratives were those that questioned the legitimacy of the measures or presented them as a restriction of personal freedom.

In terms of actors, it was confirmed that the highest level of communication activity and effectiveness was achieved by representatives associated with the then opposition or anti-system attitudes, especially Ľuboš Blaha, Milan Mazurek, and Tomáš Taraba. Their posts made up a significant part of the overall discourse on the pandemic and were characterized by a high number of interactions, which shows their ability to reach audiences through simple, confrontational, and mobilizing narratives. These patterns are in line with theories of populist communication and crisis exploitation, which argue that populist and anti-system actors tend to reframe technocratic or health-related issues into moral conflicts between "the people" and "the elites". By amplifying narratives that question the legitimacy and proportionality of anti-pandemic measures, Slovak opposition and fringe actors used Facebook to contest expert authority and government competence, reinforcing polarization in a context of fragile institutional trust. On the contrary, actors with predominantly supportive communication—such as Igor Matovič, Veronika Remišová, and Richard Sulík—remained within the official framework of the pandemic in terms of subject matter, but their posts had a significantly lower reach and audience engagement.

An analysis of the ratio between communication "FOR" and "AGAINST" anti-pandemic measures confirmed a clear trend: critical, dismissive, and polarizing rhetoric clearly prevailed in the online environment, generating higher interactivity. This confirms the well-known dynamics of social networks, where emotional and conflictual content generates more attention than facts or moderate statements.

Research has shown that a high level of interaction—i.e., comments, shares, and likes—is a significant indicator of reach. From a practical point of view, however, it is important to realize that a high number of interactions does not automatically mean greater qualitative impact on public opinion, which is in line with the recommendations of methodological approaches in the social sciences. Crisis communication was marked by insufficient content

regulation by Facebook, which allowed the spread of false information without emphasis on fact-checking.

 A comparison with foreign research shows that the Slovak situation had specific characteristics—high fragmentation of the political scene, increased personalization, and a significant shift of discourse to the online space. This trend is in line with global changes in political communication, but its impact in Slovakia was amplified by the pandemic and concurrent social crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Slovakia significantly accentuated the importance of Facebook and other social networks as tools not only for informing citizens, but also for political struggle, polarization, and the dissemination or refutation of disinformation. The study enriches this issue and existing research on political communication during crises on three interconnected levels. From a theoretical perspective, it advances the narrative approach to crisis communication by empirically demonstrating how political narratives may not only function as frames of interpretation, but also as mobilizing tools that intensify polarization, particularly in contexts marked by low institutional trust. Methodologically, the study combines qualitative narrative analysis with quantitative measures of communication effectiveness, operationalized through interaction metrics. The systematic categorization of narratives and the integration of frequency and engagement data provide a replicable approach for analyzing large-scale social media datasets. Empirically, the study documents how opposition and anti-system actors disproportionately shaped the online discourse through emotionally charged and confrontational narratives, which proved significantly more effective in generating user engagement than pro-government or expert-oriented communication. These findings enrich the literature on crisis communication by offering evidence from a Central European case and highlighting the structural vulnerabilities of digital public spheres during crisis situations.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for crisis communication strategies that explicitly anticipate politicized narratives on social media and respond to their emotional and identity-based appeal. Public authorities and fact-checking initiatives should complement factual corrections with communication that addresses fears about freedom, control and institutional failure. Future research could extend this approach through comparative designs across crises, platforms or countries, and by combining narrative analysis with survey data on attitudes and trust.

Conclusion

The analysis showed that the highest level of communication activity and interaction was achieved by opposition figures or regular critics of the political system. Their communication often contained elements of populism, simplification of complex issues, and

appealed to voters' emotions. Government representatives, on the other hand, were less intense in their communication, and their messages were predominantly informational and defensive in nature. During the pandemic, political actors who were able to respond more quickly to the mood of the audience, worked with emotions, and were able to adapt their rhetoric to the logic of the digital environment gained the upper hand in the Slovak online space.

Among the narratives monitored, those related to anti-pandemic measures, vaccination, and testing were the most prominent in terms of both the number of posts and the number of interactions. Other narratives monitored, such as those related to the origin of the disease or its treatment, were less prominent. We can therefore conclude that narratives related to the personal experiences of citizens dominated. Critical and negative attitudes prevailed in all monitored categories. A limitation of this study is its focus on Facebook communication and publicly available posts by political actors, which means that it may not cover the entire breadth of political discourse or informal communication with voters on other platforms. Future research could extend the analysis to other social networks, including visual and video content, and also pay attention to the reception of narratives by different types of audiences. There is also potential for analyzing the effectiveness of specific anti-pandemic communications among different age and socio-economic groups in the longer term.

Based on the analysis of political narratives on social networks during the COVID-19 pandemic, the creation and implementation of crisis communication in the context of public policy should be conceived as a transparent and consistent process. Providing clear and timely information to the public reduces uncertainty and helps build trust in state institutions. Effective communication also requires systematic cooperation with expert institutions and independent fact-checkers, which improves the quality of public debate and reduces the risk of spreading misinformation or conspiracy theories in times of crisis. The results suggest that, in order to promote the relevance and cultivation of public discourse, it would also be appropriate to establish rules for communication by political actors on social networks with the aim of limiting the spread of controversial or manipulative content and contributing to strengthening the accountability of public actors in the online space.

Moreover, the study's findings underscore that a key prerequisite for an effective societal response to such crises is media literacy among citizens, including the ability to critically process news from social media. Increasing media literacy is an essential part of preventing the spread of disinformation and promoting the mental well-being of the population in times of information overload. In this area, we also recommend legislative and self-regulatory measures targeting large platforms, which should make clear commitments to limiting harmful and misleading content.

Taken together, the findings contribute to broader debates on political communication, populism and disinformation. They show how health-related crises can be reframed into conflicts over freedom, trust and institutional legitimacy, and how opposition and anti-system actors exploit Facebook's affordances for emotional, conflict-driven framing. The study also demonstrates that integrating narrative categories with sentiment and engagement indicators is a useful strategy for future research on digital politics and hybrid information threats.

These outcomes can serve as a starting point for formulating public communication strategies in future crisis periods. In this context, it is worth noting that communication by coalition actors supporting anti-pandemic measures proved to be less effective. The obvious explanation is that on social networks, the negative views presented by opposition actors had a greater impact because their authors emphasized emotion. Opposition actors had a greater impact mainly because they spread their messages in an environment that is not sufficiently regulated and in which disinformation or polarizing narratives spread faster than official messages. These findings open up a discussion about effective crisis communication, which should also include the issue of social media administrators' responsibility for content regulation and support for fact-checking tools. The results of the study thus also highlight the broader social importance of critical thinking and media literacy, not only during the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, but also in other times of crisis.

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