

Press release

Slovaks able to make a qualified choice at the ballot box despite some disinformation efforts

Bratislava, 24 March 2020 – Slovak voters had ample information to make a qualified choice during the 29 March parliamentary elections, the final report by MEMO 98 found. The public service broadcaster RTVS failed to live up to its obligations but was substituted by private media. While television remains to be the principal source of political information, Facebook’s role in the campaign was significant. Manipulative narratives and deceptive videos were disseminated on Facebook also by politicians, thus becoming part of the main political discourse. Read more about these findings in the report titled *The media coverage of 2020 Slovak elections*.

Public service was provided mainly by private media

“It is of concern that when various disinformation narratives pollute the information environment prior to elections, we cannot rely on an unbiased Slovak public broadcaster which would be a reliable source of information,” said Rastó Kužel of MEMO 98 which has focused on the media coverage of elections globally for the last two decades. According to Kuzel, RTVS failed to live up to its obligations as public service broadcaster, and its legal commitments to remain unbiased were compromised by its support to parties of the then ruling coalition. The support was demonstrated both in the amount of time devoted to the government and the SNS party as well as in the manner of the presentation. Not only did the party of the former speaker of the parliament Andrej Danko, SNS, receive special attention in the news programs, but it was also the most frequently invited guest in the RTVS’s discussion program *O 5 minút 12*.

“Fortunately, some private media have been providing information which is important for the democratic character of the country, such as systematically pointing out the danger of fascism. At the same time, these media have provided robust independent and critical reporting, thus holding authorities to account” opined Ivan Godársky of MEMO 98. Given the discussion programs as well as multimedia formats, compounded by analytical reporting of several online media, Slovak voters had ample information to make a qualified choice at the ballot box during the recent elections.

Facebook as the phenomenon of the campaign

Facebook most likely significantly contributed to the change in the campaign dynamics with the video of the OĽaNO movement titled *Right now outside the villa of ex-minister Počiatek in the French Riviera*, which had more than 1,6 million views. There were other OĽaNO videos which were among the posts receiving most interactions.

On the other hand, Facebook did not manage to oversee the proper and uniformed implementation of the rules designed to enhance the transparency of political advertising and the application of its Community Standards. Establishing the special fact-checker a few days prior to elections did not help to reduce the amount of the problematic content on the platform.

While the problematic advertisements of the SMER-SD party were banned by Google, they continued to run uninterrupted on Facebook. While Facebook banned pro-LSNS-Kotlebovci party pages of the Kulturblog platform as well as a few other pages supporting the party, they reacted very promptly and reappeared on Facebook the very next day.

Growing influence of social media produced more manipulative content, which was spread in a coordinated fashion

The growing influence of social media brought with itself also more unverified and manipulative information, which confirmed users in their pre-existing prejudices. Social media and information manipulation are considered a growing threat for election integrity also abroad. It is clear that the situation in Slovakia is very similar.

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