



Slovak female politicians and journalists on Facebook

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MEMO 98

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1. Introduction

The monitoring was conducted retroactively and focused on the period from 3 May 2021 till 1 May 2022. For twelve months, we focused on how prominent women politicians and journalists were treated on Facebook. We focused on prominent women politicians from across the political board representing parties from the ruling coalition and the opposition as well as those that did not make it to the parliament but have public support demonstrated in the public opinion polls. The criteria for choosing women journalists included possession of a public Facebook account (public page or publicly accessible personal profile), and the number of followers. The research was carried out using public data provided by Facebook—as the most popular social media platform in Slovakia using the CrowdTangle tool, which allows access to verified profiles, public pages and groups (for Facebook). As CrowdTangle only tracks public content and does not monitor private personal profiles or private groups, we focused primarily (10 out of 11 monitored accounts) on public pages (accounts) and groups.

The goal of our monitoring was to evaluate the use of online gendered and sexualized disinformation as well as anti-West, and anti-American sentiments or coordinated campaigns against 11 prominent politicians and journalists and to find out if the attackers are at the same time connected with those spreading pro-Kremlin narratives.

2. Executive summary

There are 32 women in the Slovak Parliament which represent the highest representation of women in the legislature thus far, but this number represents only 21.3 per cent of the total composition (150 members of the parliament – National Council of the Slovak Republic). Only 29 women were elected in the 2016 parliamentary elections. In the Slovak cabinet of 16 ministers, only three are women (in 2016 there were initially 2 out of 15 ministers and after the reconstruction of the cabinet in 2018 there were 5 female ministers). There are no legal or voluntary special measures for promoting the participation and representation of women in place. Such statistics explain why Slovakia ranks 24th among 27 EU countries in the 2021 Gender Equality Index by the European Institute for Gender Equality. Only Romania, Hungary and Greece fared worse.

The monitoring found that prominent women politicians and journalists were targeted by several actors who were also spreading pro-Kremlin narratives. Gender-based abuse had potential to affect our research subjects, with abusers using sexist comments to discredit the victims of their abuse and from a more general perspective to discourage women from being involved in politics and public discourse.

The Slovak female politicians have been frequently mistreated on social media with abusers using very abusive language, commenting on their appearance and/or personal qualities rather than their policies or work. For example, **the Slovak**

president Zuzana Čaputová was targeted by several different actors, ranging from political parties to disinformation portals with close links to extremist parties. Same as in the past, a manipulated picture of her accompanied with an anti-Semitic and anti-American text appeared on social media in which she was ridiculed for her physical appearance by a known extremist with close links to the Republika party. Also, during the monitoring period, she was targeted by the non-parliamentary Slovak Movement of Resurgence (*Slovenské hnutie obnovy*) which does not hide its sympathy for the fascist wartime Slovak state; it is oriented towards Euroscepticism and demands Slovakia's departure from Euro-Atlantic structures.

The monitoring also found that the president was targeted by the Facebook pages of outlets known for spreading disinformation, including *Inenoviny.sk*, *Informacie bez cenzury* and others. Importantly, outside of the monitoring period, Ľuboš Blaha, the MP of a former ruling SMER-SD party, who, along with the party chairman Robert Fico and other party members, has been regularly insulting the president on his Facebook account, can no longer disseminate specific claims against her (that she is a traitor, an American agent, an agent of a foreign power or that she is controlled by the United States of America), as well as publishing and disseminating false information that the president has committed specific crime (the crime of treason). By the court decision from 24 March 2022, he was ordered to refrain from publishing and spreading such false claims. At the same time, the court ordered him to remove these claims from dozens of his Facebook posts.

The monitoring also revealed that her strong and outspoken stance concerning democracy values, pro-European and transatlantic direction of Slovakia, as well as her very consistent and supportive position concerning the rule of law and pursuit of the justice (alongside a *Denník N* journalist Monika Tódová, in particular) made her extremely visible target for all those affected.

When it comes to other subjects of our monitoring, it is important to mention **Ms. Irena Bihariová**, the current chair of non-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia Party, who has been targeted both for her appearance as well as the fact that she is of the Roma origin. In 2020, she won a lawsuit against the extremist Kotlebovci-ĽSNS party which distributed its party newspaper all over Slovakia with her photo and an announcement that she was a "gypsy fanatic" who received thousands of euros in subsidies from a former Education Minister Lubyova and went to schools to push a "degenerate agenda" on children. The monitoring found that Ms. Bihariová was targeted by Slovenské hnutie obnovy as well as other pro-Kremlin actor such as politician Eduard Chmelár, disinformation portals Hlavné správy and Hlavný denník (which were both blocked by the Slovak National Security Authority a few days after the Russian invasion to Ukraine based on the amended legislation).

The member of the European Parliament (Renew fraction) **Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová** was harassed due to her physical appearance (hair style) and became a target of a cyber-attack on her Facebook account with some 60,000 followers which was temporarily disabled by hackers (on 11 January 2022). The monitoring found that Ms. Ďuriš Nicholsonová was targeted by Ľuboš Blaha, Artur

Bekmatov (Zem a Vek disinformation portal contributor), former politician and openly pro-Russian academician Eduard Chmelár, disinformation portals *Kulturblog*, *Informácie bez cenzúry* and others.

The Slovak women journalists have been targets of dehumanising, vulgar and sexist attacks, including by politicians, particularly those who have been subjects of their investigative reporting. The Denník N journalist **Monika Tódová**, in particular, has been repeatedly the target of sexist insults and attacks by politicians from the SMER-SD party, with the vice-chair of the party Dubos Blaha going as far as calling on her to publish an "obscene video from her bedroom", when she wrote about the secret recordings from the former Prosecutor General's Office. Covering topics related to the corruption and organized crime-like practices of the previous government, she publicly acknowledged receiving threats and hate messages with attackers wishing her to end up as Ján Kuciak, who was murdered in 2018, or calling her a Soros girl as well as commenting on her physical appearance. During the monitoring period, Ms. Tódová was mainly targeted by Ľuboš Blaha, Milan Uhrík (the chairman of the anti-system Republika party, newly established as a splinter from an extremist Kotlebovci-ĽSNS party), Eduard Chmelár, Martin Daňo and his Ginn portal (a controversial youtuber) and others.

Another prominent journalist **Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová** complained about receiving similar messages which prompted her to stop using her Facebook account (she continues using her Instagram account) on 17 December 2021.

3. Background

In our analysis, we focused on how female politicians and journalists are treated on social media, especially in the context of their work activities. Our monitoring focused primarily on Facebook and Instagram, as these are the most popular social media in Slovakia. We used Meta's automated data analysis tool CrowdTangle, as well as the Gephi program, which we used to do a more detailed analysis of the social networks, and also data visualization (SNA). The eleven-month observation period provided enough data and data to analyse in more detail the way in which our female politicians and journalists are approached on Facebook and Instagram.

Internet and social media platforms in Slovakia

Based on a report issued annually by Kepios Pte. Ltd., there were 4.91 million internet users in Slovakia in January 2022, an internet penetration rate of 90.0% of the total population. The same report states that there were 4.06 million social media users in Slovakia in the same period, which is approximately 74.4% of the total population.

Kepios also reports that the number of social media users in Slovakia will increase by 30,000 (+0.7%) between 2021 and 2022. Data published in Meta's advertising feeds available to Kepios shows that Facebook had 2.60 million users in Slovakia at the beginning of 2022, which is about 47.6 percent of the total population. However,

it should be mentioned that Facebook limits the use of its platform to those aged 13 and over, so it should also be pointed out that in 2022, 55.0 percent of the "eligible" audience in Slovakia uses Facebook. Women made up 52.9 percent of Facebook's advertising audience in Slovakia, while men made up 47.1 percent.

In terms of YouTube users, according to Kepios, YouTube had 4.06 million users in Slovakia. This figure means that YouTube's advertising reach in 2022 was equivalent to 74.4 percent of Slovakia's total population at the beginning of the year (in January 2022, YouTube ads reached 82.6 percent of the total internet user base in Slovakia, regardless of age). At that time, 51.0 percent of the YouTube advertising audience in Slovakia was female and 49.0 percent was male.

According to the same report, Instagram had 1.55 million users, which meant that Instagram's advertising reach in Slovakia at the beginning of the year was equivalent to 28.4% of the total population. Like Facebook, Instagram limits the use of its platform to those aged 13 and over, so it is worth mentioning that in 2022, 32.8 percent of the "eligible" audience in Slovakia used Instagram, with 54.2 percent of Instagram's advertising audience made up of women and 45.8 percent of men.

As for Twitter, it had 193.6 thousand users in early 2022, according to Kepios, which was 3.5 per cent of the total population. Like Facebook and Instagram, Twitter limits the use of its platform to those aged 13 and over, so it is worth mentioning that in 2022, 4.1 percent of the "eligible" audience in the country used Twitter.

4. Findings

4.1 Women politicians

Zuzana Čaputová

The Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová was targeted by several different actors, ranging from political parties to disinformation portals with close links to extremist parties. On 1 March 2022, a public demonstration in Nitra organized by the SMER-SD party in connection with 1 May festivities saw a crowd riled up by the party Vice-chair Ľuboš Blaha chanting sexual slurs against the president. The video of the incident was widely shared on social media prompting a critical reaction from several politicians as well as receiving both local and international publicity. Interestingly, Monika Beňová, a SMER-SD party member and Quaestor of the European Parliament stood behind Blaha the whole time when he led the crowd in the obscene chant against Zuzana Čaputová. While Beňová later apologized, she refused to admit that either the SMER-SD leader Robert Fico or Blaha had resorted to slurs.

It should be mentioned that this incident was not a one-time event but rather a result of a long-term negative campaign from Blaha and other SMER-SD party members against the head of state. Both Blaha and Fico have been regularly insulting the president on their Facebook accounts, with Blaha no longer being able to

disseminate specific claims against her (that she is a traitor, an American agent, an agent of a foreign power or that she is controlled by the United States of America), as well as publishing and disseminating false information that the president has committed specific crime (the crime of treason). By the court decision from 24 March 2022, he was ordered to refrain from publishing and spreading such false claims. At the same time, the court ordered him to remove these claims from dozens of his Facebook posts.

Same as in the past, a manipulated picture of the president accompanied with an anti-Semitic and anti-American text appeared on social media in which she was ridiculed for her physical appearance by a known extremist with close links to the Republika party. From the [list](#) of pro-Kremlin actors compiled by the [Gerulata Technologies](#), she was targeted by the non-parliamentary Slovak Movement of Resurgence (*Slovenské hnutie obnovy*) which does not hide its sympathy for the fascist wartime Slovak state; it is oriented towards Euroscepticism and demands Slovakia's departure from Euro-Atlantic structures.

The monitoring also found that the president was targeted by the Facebook pages of *DAV DAV*, and other outlets known for spreading disinformation, including *Inenoviny.sk*, *Informacie bez cenzury* and others.

[Figure 1]

Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word 'Čaputová' in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).

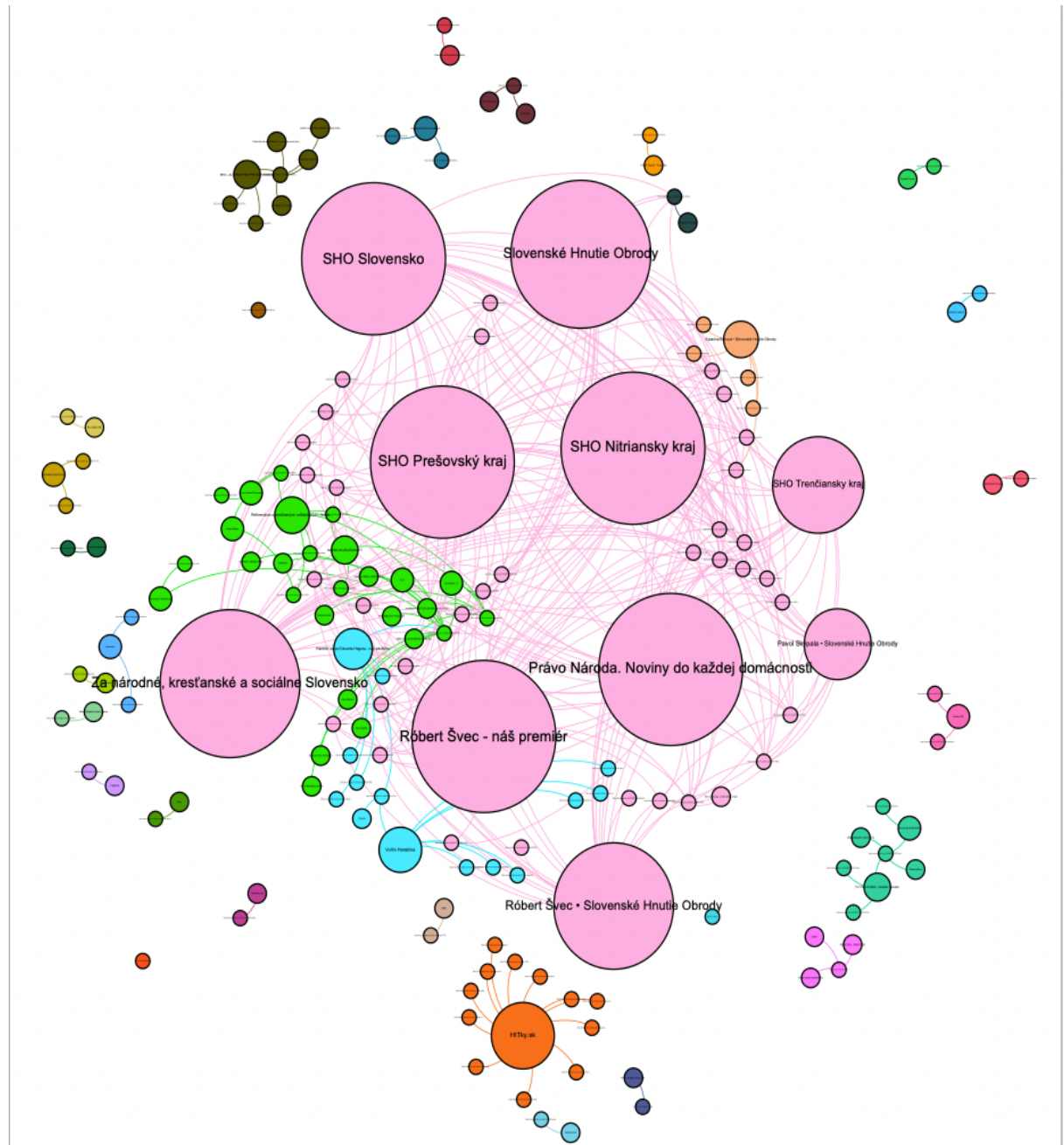


Figure 1 shows where the key word Zuzana Čaputová appeared on Slovak Facebook public accounts and groups as well as their overall activity (the size of the nodes is determined based on the number of posts and interactions, whereas the edges are the lines that connect the nodes). In addition, the network chart shows which groups (nodes) shared content most frequently with each other.

Irena Bihariová

When it comes to other subjects of our monitoring, it is important to mention Ms. Irena Bihariová, the current chair of non-parliamentary Progressive Slovakia Party (she recently declared that she will not anymore run for the Chair position in the upcoming party convention that is to take place later in May 2022), who has been targeted both for her appearance as well as the fact that she is of the Roma origin. In 2020, she won a lawsuit against the extremist Kotlebovci-ĽSNS party which distributed its party newspaper all over Slovakia with her photo and an announcement that she was a "*gypsy fanatic*" who received thousands of euros in subsidies from a former Education Minister Lubyová and went to schools to push a "degenerate agenda" on children. The monitoring found that Ms. Bihariová was targeted by *Slovenské hnutie obnovy* as well as other pro-Kremlin actor such as politician Eduard Chmelár, disinformation portals *Hlavné správy* and *Hlavný denník* (which were both blocked by the Slovak National Security Authority a few days after the Russian invasion to Ukraine based on the amended legislation).

Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word 'Bihariová' in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).

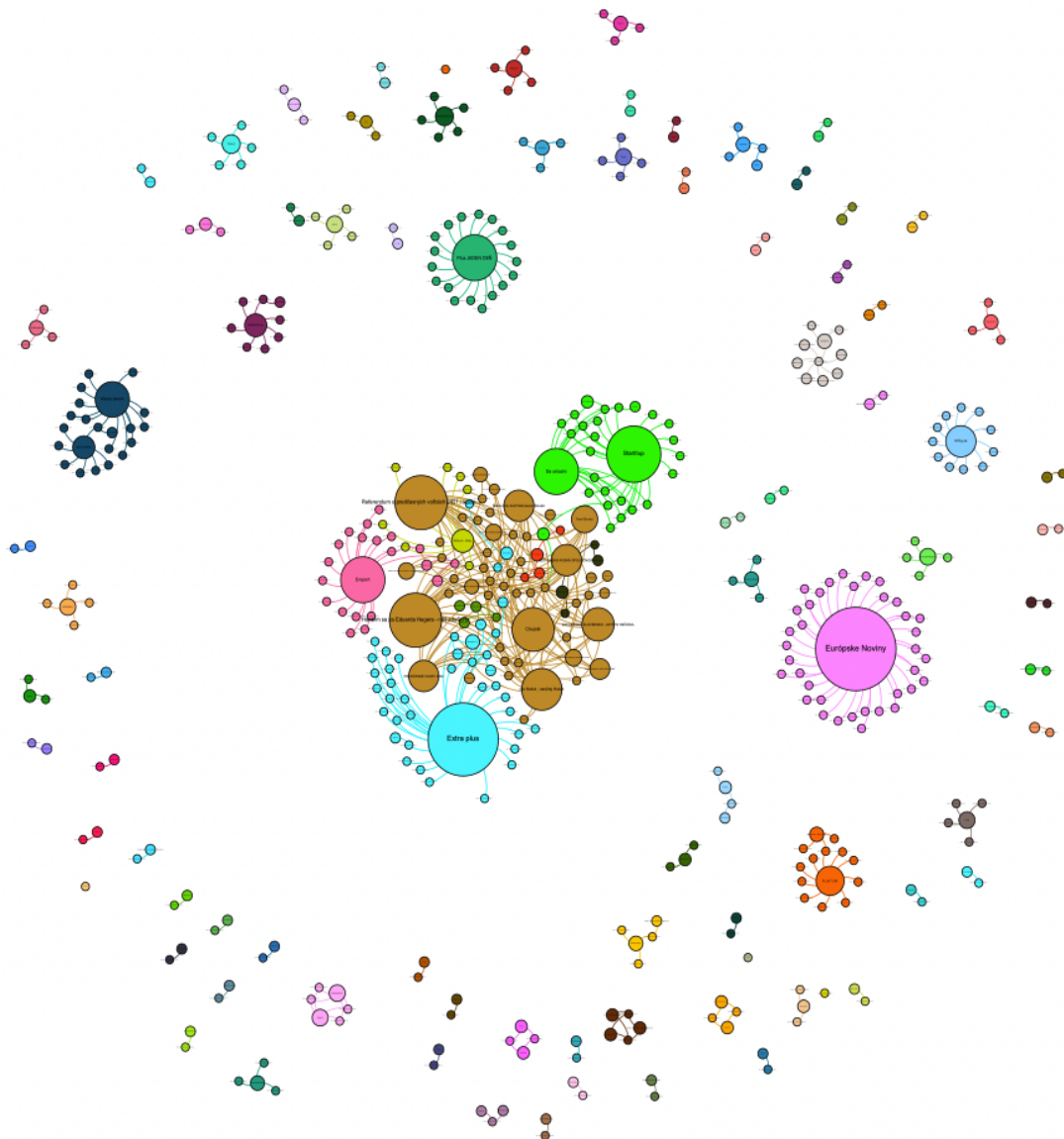


Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová

The member of the European Parliament Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová was harassed due to her physical appearance (hair style) and became a target of a cyber-attack on her Facebook account with some 60,000 followers which was temporary disabled by hackers (on 11 January 2022). The monitoring found that Ms. Ďuriš Nicholsonová was targeted by Ľuboš Blaha, Artur Bekmatov (Zem a Vek disinformation portal contributor), former politician and openly pro-Russian academician Eduard Chmelár, disinformation portals *Kulturblog*, *Informácie bez cenzúry* and others.

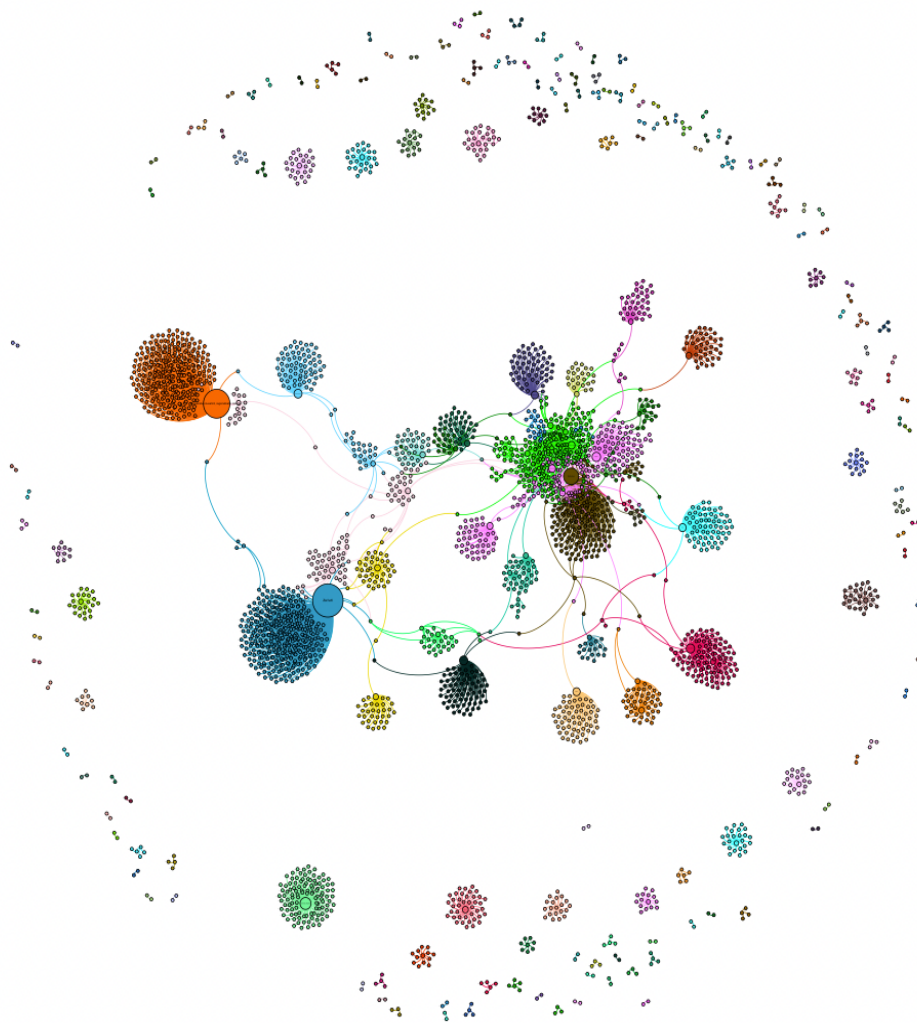
[Figure 3]

Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word 'Ďuriš Nicholsonová' in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



[Figure 4]

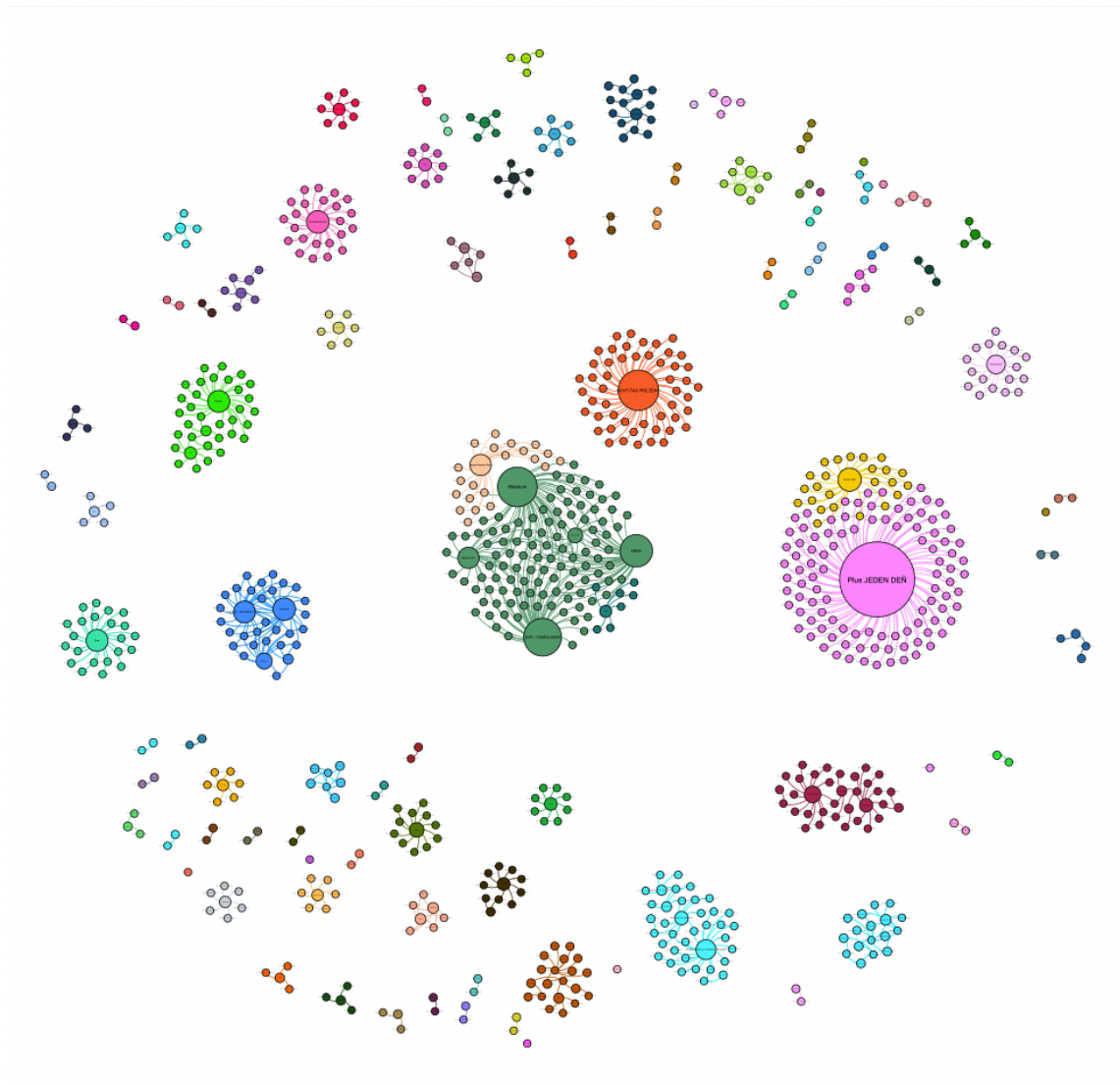
Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word ‘Remišová’ in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Monika Beňová

[Figure 5]

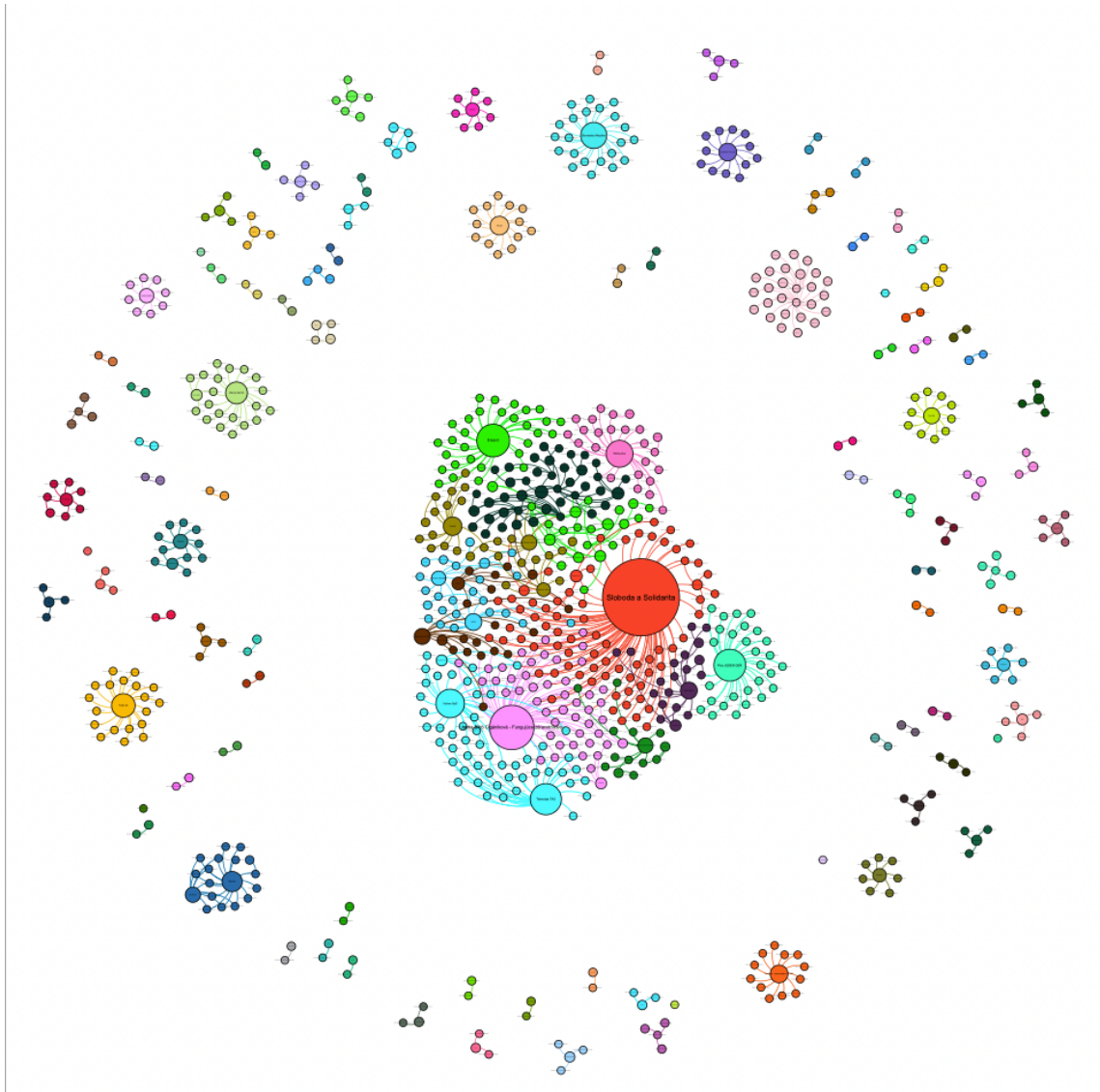
Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word 'Beňová' in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Jana Bittó Cigániková

[Figure 6]

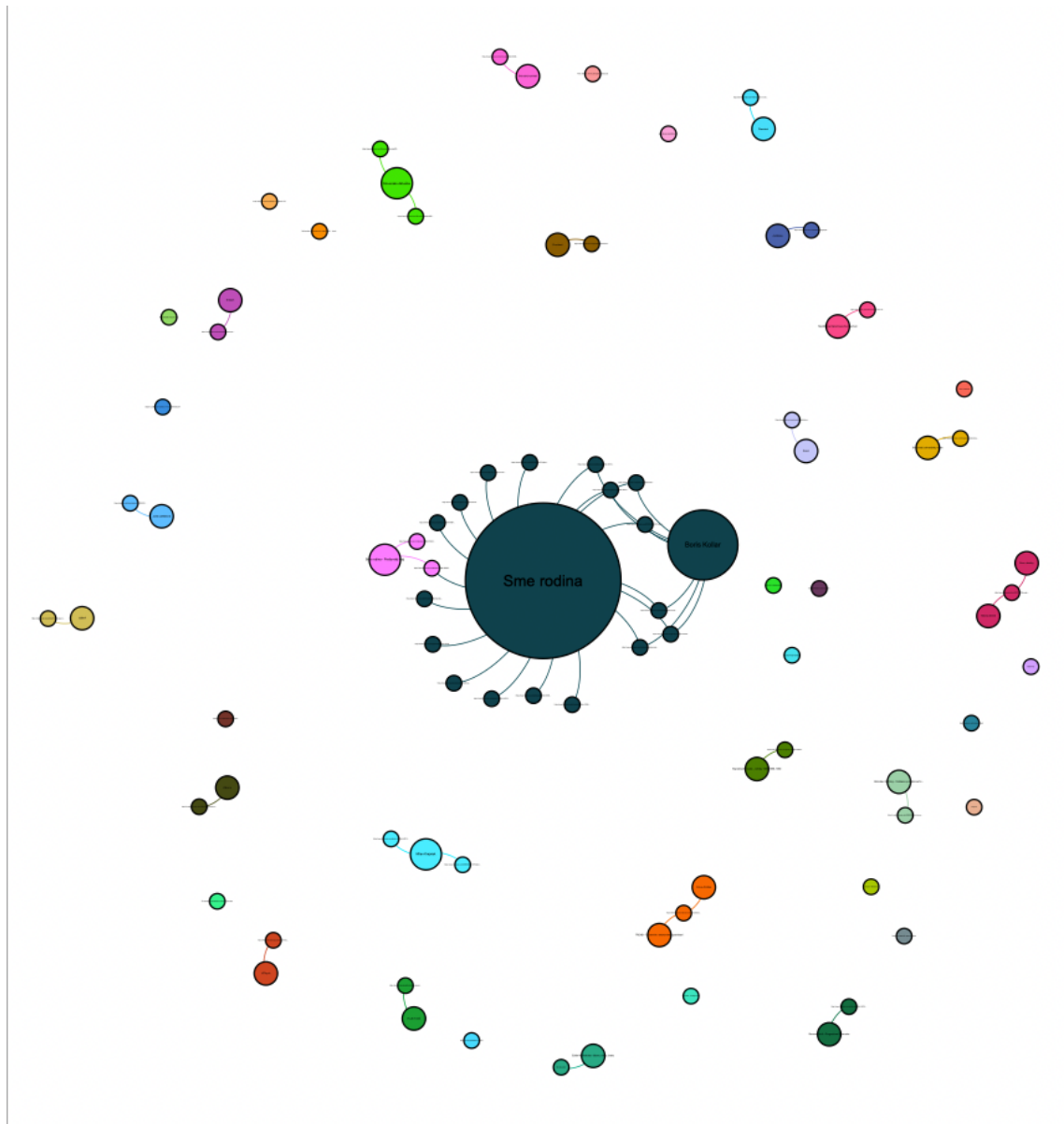
Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word ‘Bittó Cigániková’ in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Petra Krištúfková

[Figure 7]

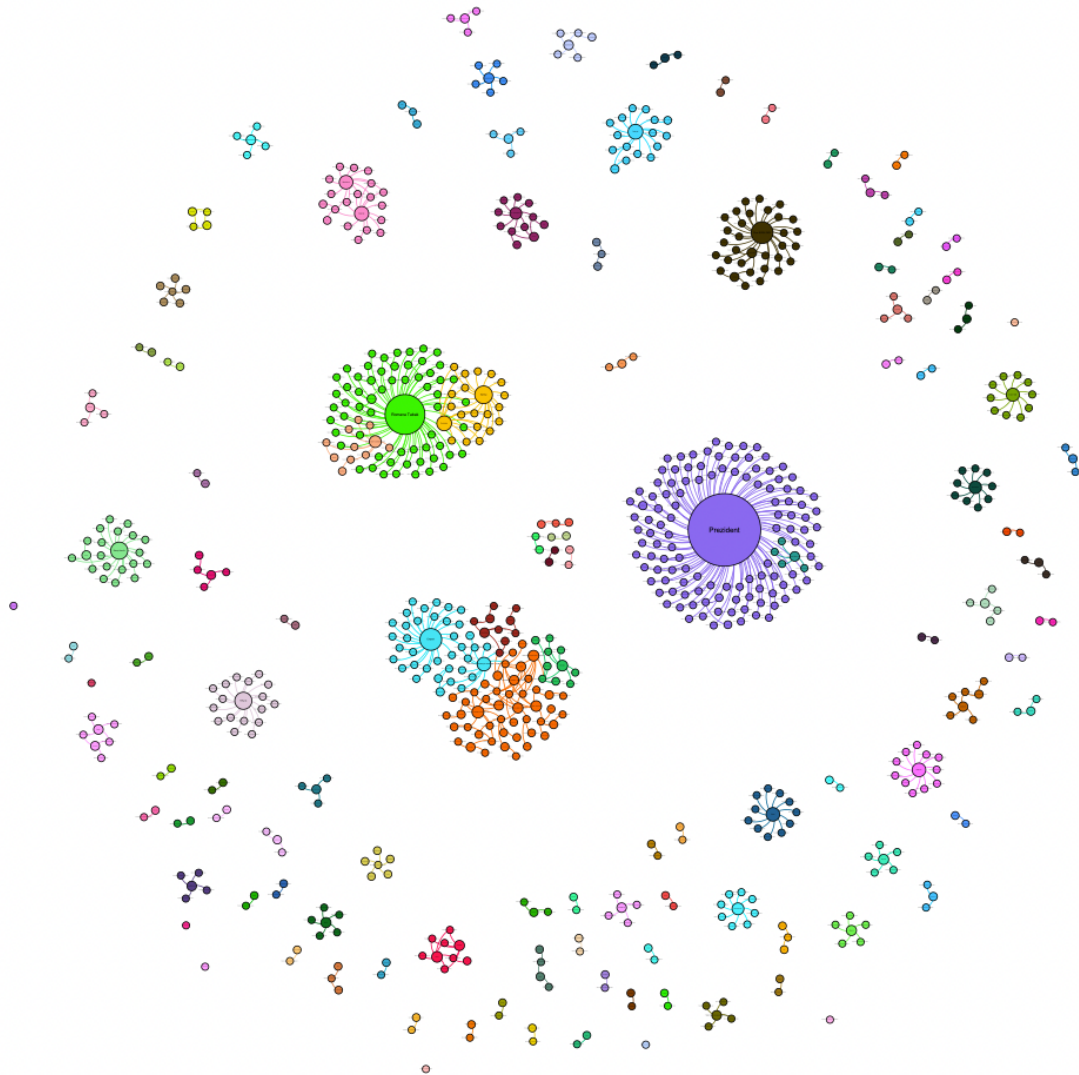
Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word 'Krištúfková' in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Romana Tabak

[Figure 8]

Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word ‘Tabak’ in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Denisa Saková

There was not enough data for the network map.

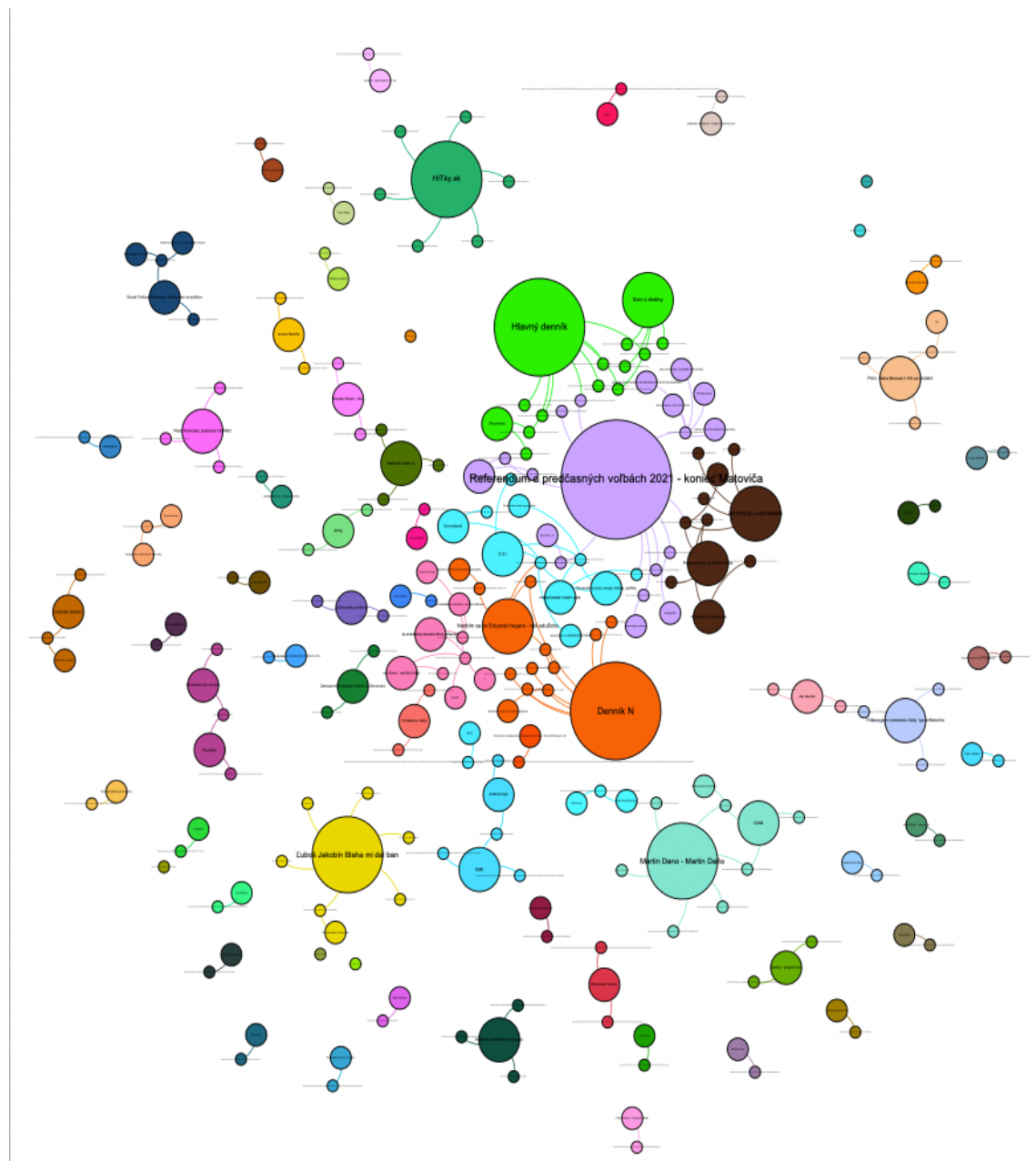
4.2 Women journalists

Monika Tódová

The Slovak women journalists have been targets of dehumanising, vulgar and sexist attacks, including by politicians, particularly those who have been subjects of their investigative reporting. The Denník N journalist Monika Tódová, in particular, has been repeatedly the target of sexist insults and attacks by politicians from the SMER-SD party, with the vice-chair of the party Ľuboš Blaha going as far as calling on her to publish an "obscene video from her bedroom", when she wrote about the secret recordings from the former Prosecutor General's Office. Covering topics related to the corruption and organized crime-like practices of the previous government, she publicly acknowledged receiving threats and hate messages with attackers wishing her to end up as Ján Kuciak, who was murdered in 2018, or calling her a Soros girl as well as commenting on her physical appearance. During the monitoring period, Ms. Tódová was mainly targeted by Ľuboš Blaha, Milan Uhrík (the chairman of the anti-system Republika party, newly established as a splinter from an extremist Kotlebovci-ĽSNS party), Eduard Chmelár, Martin Daňo and his *Ginn* portal (a controversial youtuber) and others.

[Figure 9]

Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word ‘Tódová’ in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová

Another prominent journalist Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová complained about receiving similar messages which prompted her to stop using her Facebook account (she continues using her Instagram account) on 17 December 2021.

In her farewell post she pointed out towards several alarming tendencies as core reasons, including pro-Russian trolling, behind her withdrawal:

"I'm uninstalling Facebook, I won't be here. I'm not saying never again in my life, because I may need to support a fundraiser or use my voice for something important. But I won't be actively here anymore. Nor read comments, statuses, messages. Nothing.

Because I can't. I've gotten to the point that this space is doing a disservice to my mental health. I'm being accosted by MPs, politicians, some influential and some completely irrelevant people, and I'm not giving it anymore. It has been really hard for me for the last week and I refuse to participate anymore in a space where anybody rubs their mouths in the mouths of scientists, doctors, journalists, hygienists, just normal, decent people. Everybody here is outdoing each other to see who is more loaded, who insults who more. And it's not just the domain of anonymous people with Russian flags anymore. Public figures are also playing in the big leagues here.

I get crazy messages, from being a poor, sold-out Soros slut to really disgusting descriptions of who is going to rape me. The whole political debate here has been decimated to shallow wannabe witty or aggressive comments. And there is very little professional discussion here anymore.

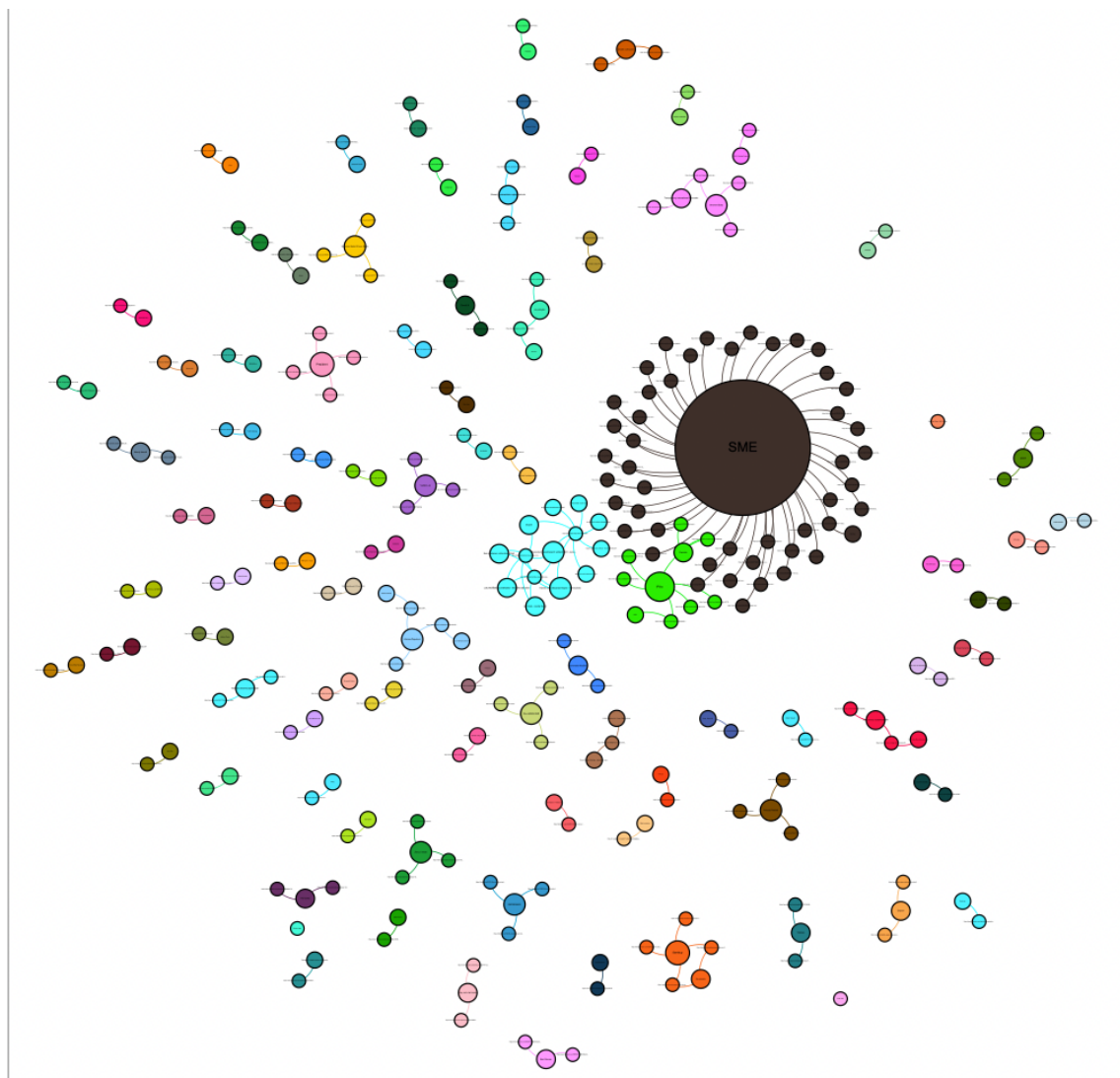
Journalists have to put up with more. But there have to be limits somewhere. For me, it's at the point where I start to look around on the street, and worry if some switched-on person is going to attack me. When I have so much heckling and stress that I find it difficult to get out of bed in the morning. I'm not feeling well right now, I'm having anxiety, and I'm a really cheerful character of a fairly resilient type. So I'm cleaning up the most toxic parts - starting with this psycho-place. I'm keeping my fingers crossed, especially for doctors with a scientist - Peter Sabaka, for example, is now facing the nastiness, and all this with 24 hour covid services. I admire how he is handling it, and his family.

So I'll see you on Instagram, or you can email me. The only thing I'll really miss are the statuses of Tomas Bella and Konstantin Cikovsky. Maybe you guys could consider your own column in the minute by minute ❤️.

Have a nice, hate-free weekend everyone."

[Figure 10]

Network map tracking the occurrence and spread of the key word 'Kovačič Hanzelová' in Slovak Facebook Pages/Groups (3 May 2021 through 1 May 2022).



Annex 1. Methodology

The quantitative analysis focused on all the posts generated by monitored entities during the monitoring period. The Facebook metadata, such as the number of posts and interactions (reactions, comments and shares), was obtained with the assistance of CrowdTangle. As CrowdTangle only tracks public content, and does not include private personal profiles or private groups, we focused only on public pages/accounts and groups. Although we understood that it would be interesting to research private groups and profiles, especially in connection with the topic of online violence against women, scraping data from private accounts and groups involves various ethical concerns that have to be addressed, not least the nature of consent, properly identifying and respecting expectations of privacy on social network sites, and data anonymization prior to public release, all of which require sufficient time and resources.

Monitored actors

- 9 Facebook public pages of women politicians
 - Zuzana Čaputová, President
 - Romana Tabak, OĽaNO (Prime minister party)¹
 - Petra Krištúfková, Sme rodina (ruling party)
 - Jana Bittó Cigániková, SaS (ruling party)
 - Lucia Ďuriš Nicholsonová, former member of SaS, MEP/Renew
 - Veronika Remišová, Za ľudí (ruling party, Chair)
 - Monika Beňová, Smer-SD, MEP/SD (opposition)
 - Denisa Saková, Hlas-SD (opposition)
 - Irena Bihariová, PS (non-parliamentary party)
- 2 Facebook profiles (verified, regular)²
 - Zuzana Kovačič Hanzelová, SME daily (its online edition)
 - Monika Tódová, Denník N daily

Network mapping

We used an open-source network mapping tool, Gephi, to track the spread of key words within groups or pages on CrowdTangle. Network mapping with Gephi allowed us to see in which groups our key words received most interactions, and which groups/pages shared the key words the most frequently.

It was also possible to use network graphs to identify:

- which accounts shared certain URLs most frequently;
- which URLs were shared most often between those accounts;
- which accounts shared content most frequently with each other (e.g. were clustered together).

Definitions:

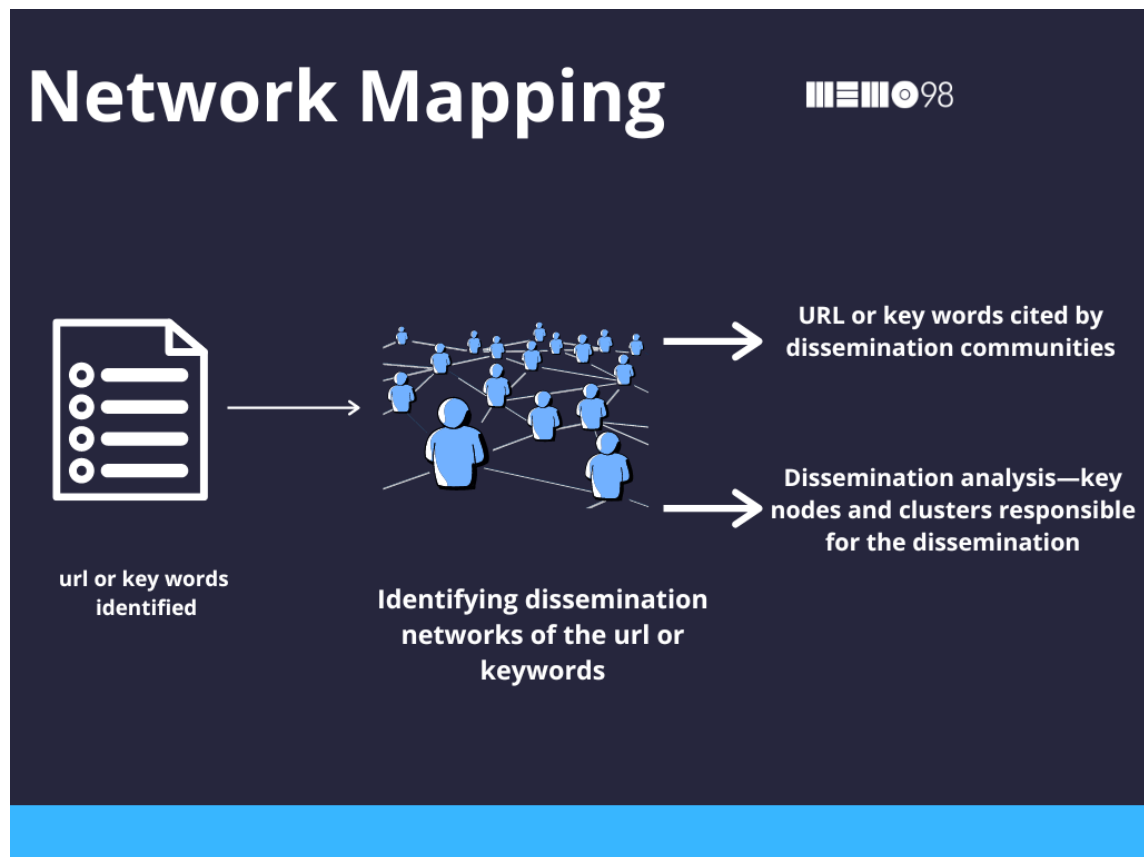
Nodes are the circles and dots in a network map. In our case, nodes are both accounts and links. **Edges** are the lines that connect the nodes. In our case, the edges are the connection

¹ On 4 May she was expelled from the OĽaNO's parliamentary fraction as a consequence of her abstaining during the vote concerning the extradition for prosecution of former prime minister Robert Fico.

² For this type of profiles the CrowdTangle does not provide data on video views.

between the entity and the URL that it shared. It is not possible to determine whether the interactions were organic or created by bots or which users posted links to groups.

[Figure 11]
Network mapping with Gephi and CrowdTangle



Annex 2. Glossary of terms

Social media:

Web- or mobile-based platforms that allow for two-way interactions through user-generated content and communication. Social media are therefore not media that originate only from one source or are broadcast from a static website. Rather, they are media on specific platforms designed to allow users to create (generate) content and to interact with the information and its source.

Facebook profile, page and groups:

A [profile](#) is a place on Facebook where anyone can share information about herself/himself. A profile is needed to [create a page](#) or help manage one. [Pages](#) are places on Facebook where artists, public figures, businesses, brands, organizations and nonprofits can connect with their fans or customers. When someone likes or follows a page on Facebook, they can start seeing updates from that page in their News Feed. You must have a profile to create a [group](#) or to help manage one. [Groups](#) are a place to communicate about shared interests with certain people. You can create a group for anything—your family reunion, your after-work sports team, your book club—and [customize the group's privacy settings](#) depending on who you want to be able to join and see the group. When you join a group on Facebook, you start seeing content from that group in your News Feed.

CrowdTangle:

A Facebook tool to help understand, analyse and report on what is happening across social media. It is used to follow public content across Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, and to compare the performance of public accounts over time. It is also used to track referrals and find wider trends to understand how public content spreads on social media. CrowdTangle only tracks publicly available posts.

Interactions:

CrowdTangle defines interactions as the total number of reactions (like, love, care, haha, wow, sad, angry) shares and comments on a Facebook post.

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