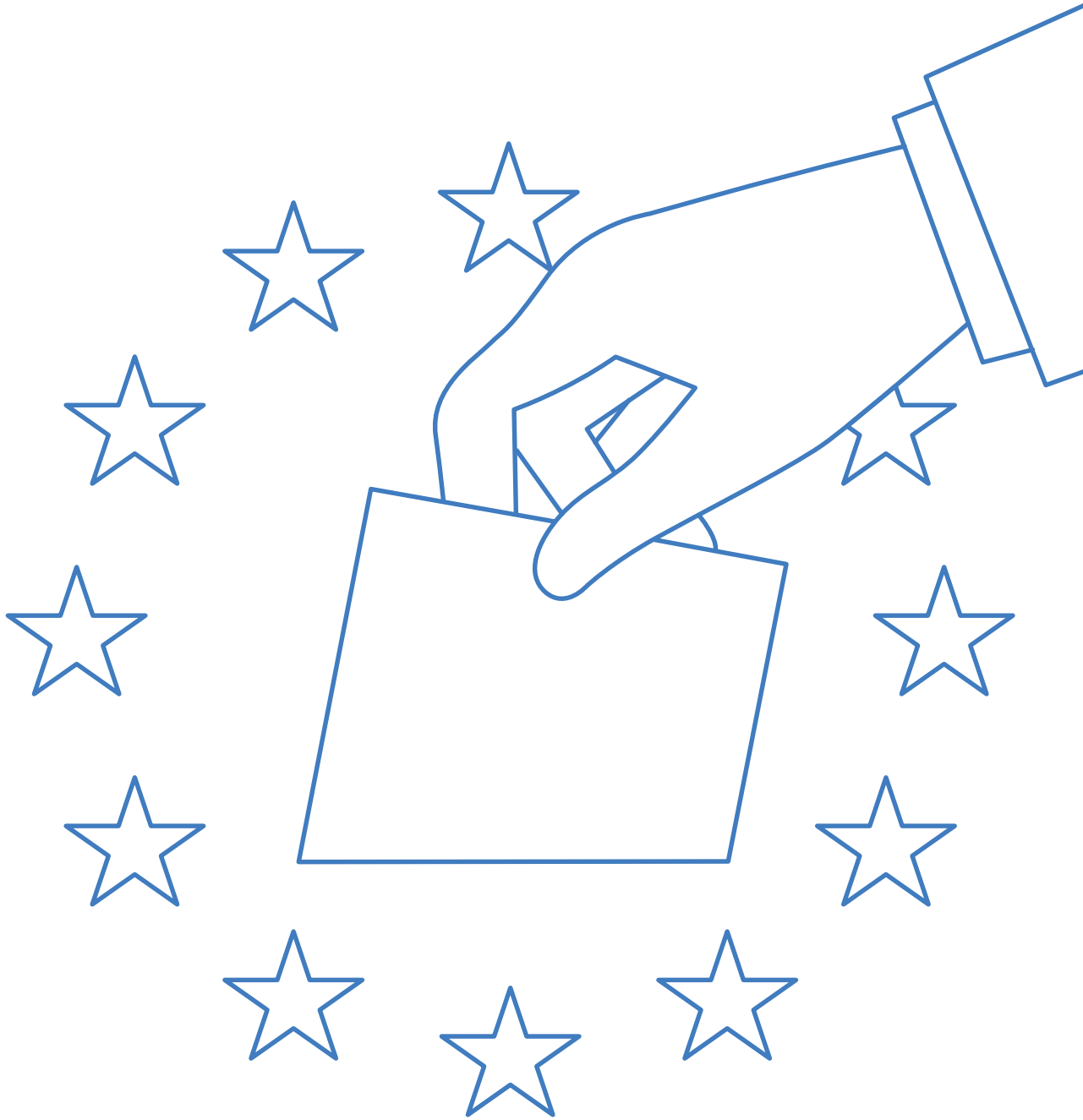




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**BEHIND THE BALLOT:
UNMASKING INFLUENCE
IN CZECHIA, SLOVAKIA,
AND POLAND'S EP RACES**



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Behind the Ballot: Unmasking Influence Narratives in Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland's EP Races

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With the June 2024 European Parliament elections approaching, certain political figures and manipulative forces within EU member states are trying to exploit current political, economic, and social upheavals.



One of the main goals of these actors is to turn the EU into a scapegoat, a convenient villain to be blamed for the struggles within member states while presenting themselves as the solution to these issues, promising to restore stability and prosperity.



This strategy is not new. It taps into deep-seated dissatisfaction with the EU and its integration process, blending long-standing grievances with current issues to give them a more immediate and relevant appeal.

Yet, there are also new trends emerging. Instead of advocating for exits from the EU (like 'Czexit' or 'Slovexit'), some now call for reforming the Union from within, suggesting a looser 'union of European nations' with greater national sovereignty.

Narratives surrounding Ukraine are shifting as well and new perspectives are arising. One such angle is the controversy surrounding Ukrainian grain being labeled as toxic, implying that the EU is putting Ukraine's interests ahead of the health and well-being of people in its member states.

INTRODUCTION

The upcoming elections to the European Parliament (EP) scheduled for June 2024 have come at a time when the Czech, Polish, and Slovak societies are grappling with complex issues such as the conflict in Ukraine, the climate crisis, energy concerns, economic challenges, and migration issues. Simultaneously, they are contending with the adverse effects of Russian aggression, including heightened polarization, uncertainties, economic hardships, and deliberate attempts to influence public opinion through manipulative narratives. This intricate web of malign content, propelled by the far-reaching influence of social media algorithms, has significantly influenced the information landscape in these countries. The role of national political actors in these circumstances has been pivotal; they have sought to leverage the prevailing chaos for political gain, further polarizing societies already in distress.

The EU, caught in these complex situations, has been unjustly blamed for various problems, a trend clearly seen in the recent Polish and Slovak elections. This scapegoating of the EU not only distorts the real situation but also threatens the upcoming EP elections. It has already been reflected in diminished trust in the EU, waning support for membership, and reduced optimism about the Union's future, with 63% of Eurobarometer respondents holding positive views.¹

With this barrage of challenges, the Czech, Polish, and Slovak societies must remain vigilant against manipulative narratives aiming to influence their votes. Such narratives can erode trust in democratic institutions and processes, polarize public discourse, and manipulate voters' perceptions of candidates and issues. Several studies indicate that previous European Parliament elections were targeted by both foreign and domestic disinformation campaigns. Given this trend, it's highly likely that the upcoming elections will face similar challenges. This background paper aims to lend assistance by providing a comprehensive overview of these narratives concerning the EP elections in the three countries. Drawing on lessons from past EP elections and keeping track of prevalent anti-EU narratives in 2023, this paper strives to enhance prebunking efforts prior to the forthcoming vote. It begins with a brief analysis of each country's stance towards the EU, exploring their evolving relationships with Brussels and the influencing factors. Then it examines the key narratives from the 2019 EP elections and maps out the EU-related issues that have emerged since early 2023. This comparison offers insights into the potential trends and themes for the upcoming 2023 EP elections.

CZECHIA: A DETERMINED FIGHTER AGAINST THE "BRUSSELS DIKTAT"

The Czech Republic's path to Euro-Atlantic integration after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, driven by the motto "Return to Europe," initially saw strong support for EU and NATO membership. By 2004, when the Czech Republic officially joined the EU, there was broad political and public consensus on the importance of EU membership.² However, over time, disillusionment grew as the perceived benefits of integration fell short of expectations. Various crises, inadequate EU communication, and anti-EU manipulative narratives fostered Euroscepticism, with a key narrative highlighting EU encroachment on Czech sovereignty.³ Prominent Czech politicians, including for-

mer Presidents Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman, former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, and right-wing Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) leader Tomio Okamura, portrayed the EU as an external adversary, exploiting this stance for political gain.⁴ This erosion of support has led to a decline in public backing for the EU, with only 44% of Czechs currently in favor, and growing pessimism about the EU's future.⁵ Key elements contributing to this declining belief in a bright future for the Union include concerns about rising prices, uncertainty surrounding energy supplies, and dissatisfaction with the domestic economic performance.⁶

¹ "Standard Eurobarometer 99 - Spring 2023 - European Union," <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3052>.

² Zuzana Kasáková, Vladimír Bartovic, Martin Buchtik et. al. Výzkum v oblasti vztahu obyvatel ČR k Evropské unii včetně jeho implikací pro komunikační strategie vlády ČR směrem k občanům ČR: Syntéza a doporučení. Praha: EUROPEUM, 2019, 1-2, https://www.vlada.cz/assets/evropske-zalezitosti/aktualne/Synteza_final.pdf.

³ Otto Eibl, "Co stojí za komplikovaným vztahem Čechů a Evropské unie?," Goethe Institut, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/jad/cs/the/new/21850177.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Mezi Čechy klesla důvěra v EU i vládu, ukázal unijní průzkum. Dál panuje silná obava kvůli inflaci - Česká televize," <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3582339-mezi-cechy-klesla-duvera-v-eu-i-vladu-ukazal-unijni-pruzkum-dal-panuje-silna-obava>.

⁶ Kateřina Mahdalová, "Češi jsou rádi v EU, pro mladá je czexit nemyslitelný," Seznam zprávy, May 27, 2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/fakta-cesi-jsou-radi-v-eu-pro-mlade-je-czexit-nemyslitelny-203799>.

All these elements combined create a favorable environment for actors spreading manipulative messages about the EU and the upcoming EP elections. To counter their efforts to deceive the Czech public and influence the election results, the following sections will offer an overview of

the manipulative narratives that dominated the Czech information space before the previous EP elections and those circulating throughout 2023 in preparation for the 2024 elections. Drawing both similarities and differences, the sections aim to enhance readers' vigilance and resilience.

The Most Popular Narratives Leading up to the 2019 EP Elections

Leading up to the 2019 European Parliament election campaign in Czechia, negative narratives about the European Union gained traction, fueled by declining support for the EU and persistent Euroscepticism within Czech society. These narratives portrayed the EU as an autocratic institution imposing rules on member states, infringing on their sovereignty, and eroding their national identities, particularly through migration. Additionally, the EU was depicted as ineffective and on the brink of disintegration.

Problematic online sources aligned with far-left and far-right political representatives, such as the Czech branch of Sputnik, provided platforms for parties like the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and the Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party. They criticized the EU for im-

posing decisions without member state consensus or respect for national sovereignty, often using terms like 'EU diktat' or 'Brussels diktat' and portraying EU elites as puppet masters. To counteract this perceived submissiveness, it was argued that Czechia should follow the example of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and assert its national interests, particularly in matters related to migration.⁷ The election was framed as a 'battle for Europe,' with patriotic politicians from parties like SPD positioned against perceived Euro-fanatic EU elites. Some even advocated for a potential Czech exit from the EU (Czexit), drawing parallels with Brexit (which was dubbed 'the withdrawal from the Eurotitanic'), as a response to perceived EU interference in national interests and sovereignty, whilst citing Brexit as an example of EU disintegration and dysfunction.⁸

Prominent EU-Related Narratives Leading Up to the 2024 EP Elections

The monitoring carried out for this section has revealed that the perception of the EU in the Czech Republic during 2023 has been negatively influenced mainly by the continued fallout from the war in Ukraine and a growing sense of distrust towards the government. These factors are also mirrored in the spread of anti-EU rhetoric in the online space. The monitoring covers the period from January 1, 2023, to October 1, 2023, and was

done using the Gerulata Juno analytical tool. This tool enabled a search for the top 50 Facebook posts with the highest interaction levels, containing keywords related to the EU in Czech language. Posts from mainstream media, state and EU institutions, as well as those expressing neutral or positive sentiments towards these keywords, as determined by Gerulata Juno's own sentiment analysis feature, were then excluded.

Criticism of the EU Becomes Tied to Criticism of the Czech Government

In contrast to the previous EP elections, narratives related to 'Brussels/EU diktat' now often intertwine criticism of the Czech government. They accuse the government of blindly following Brussels' orders without considering their impact on Czech citizens. This taps into the declining trust in both the government (30% trust, down from 45% in 2022) and the EU (44% trust, down from 51% in 2022) among Czechs.⁹ Manipulative actors have capitalized on this declining trust, which has been exacerbated by the political, economic, and social crises stemming from Russian aggression against Ukraine. With an increased focus on Ukraine-related issues and support for Ukrainian refugees, segments of Czech society feel neglected by their government, believing that it prioritizes European unity over the national interests and needs of Czech citizens.

For example, Tomio Okamura claims that the Czech government prioritizes Ukraine and EU orders over Czech citizens, likening their actions to collaboration with foreign

7 Miroslava Sawiris. European Elections in the V4: From disinformation campaigns to narrative amplification. Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2019, 9-11, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/european-elections-v4-disinformation-campaigns-narrative-amplification>.

8 Ibid.

9 "Mezi Čechy klesla důvěra v EU i vládu, ukázal unijní průzkum. Dál panuje silná obava kvůli inflaci – Česká televize," <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/3582339-mezi-cechy-klesla-duvera-v-eu-i-vladu-ukazal-unijni-pruzkum-dal-panuje-silna-obava>.

powers during WWII.^{10, 11} He criticizes the government for not halting the import of allegedly unsafe Ukrainian products, saying it favors EU interests over the well-being of Czech people.¹²

Declining Calls for 'Czexit'

2023 brought a notable shift in the discourse surrounding the EU in Czechia. **Calls for a 'Czexit' have receded, replaced by demands for EU reform.** While some, like the SPD and Odchod.eu, still advocate for leaving the EU, others, including Jindřich Rajchl of the PRO party, prefer to stay within the EU and work for change from within.¹³ This shift aligns with a poll by the Czech sociological institute STEM, indicating that 'Czexit' is no longer realistic, contrasting with the situation five years ago.¹⁴ Many people have since realized the importance of EU cooperation underscored by experiences such as vaccine procurement during the COVID-19 pandemic, Russian aggression in Ukraine, and Britain's post-Brexit economic challenges leading to regret among Britons.

A similar trend is seen among far-right parties across Europe. For instance, Alice Weidel, chairwoman of Alternative for Germany (AfD), criticized the EU's undemocratic nature at the party's congress. However, calls for Germany to leave the EU had limited support, and AfD's 2024 European Parliament election program no longer includes such proposals. AfD, along with parties like Jindřich Rajchl's PRO and the Slovak National Party (SNS) led by Andrej Danko, now focus on transforming the EU into a 'union of European nations.'¹⁵

Migration Resurfaces in the Discourse

Besides narratives portraying the EU as an autocratic organization, another recurrent theme from the 2019 EP elections, migration, has resurfaced for the 2024 elections. This time, the focus extends to Ukrainians, not just non-European migrants. Once again, the threat posed by migration is exaggerated to create a sense of urgency and to paint the EU and the Czech government as failures. The programme 'Aby bylo jasno,' depicts European migration policy as a massive failure, highlighting EU incompetence.¹⁶ Tomio Okamura similarly criticizes the EU's approach to migration, making it a key priority for his SPD party to counter mass migration and Islamization and protect the Czech Republic's European character against multiculturalism. He argues that the EU, in the pandemic, Green Deal, and migration, harms the Czech Republic and undermines national states.¹⁷ Okamura has also criticized assistance to Ukrainians, claiming it comes at the expense of Czech citizens.

War in Ukraine Remains Relevant but Through Different Avenues

The topic of Ukraine continues to feature in critical narratives about the EU, however, war fatigue is apparent in the information landscape, with the war mentioned as an

10 Tomio Okamura - SPD (@tomio.cz), "Důrazně protestujeme proti plánu Fialovy vládní pětikoalice okrást české důchodce," Facebook, March 1, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/179497582061065/posts/6488257077851719/>.

11 Tomio Okamura - SPD (@tomio.cz), "Musíme budovat silný suverénní národní stát a armádu, která bude bránit naše území a která nebude určená na zahraniční mise," Facebook, March 28, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/776585427165227/posts/787191812771255>.

12 Tomio Okamura - SPD (@tomio.cz), "Právě jsem podal písemnou interpelaci na premiéra Fialu ve věci," Facebook, August 7, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/776585427165227/posts/861568568666912>.

13 Jindřich Rajchl, "Evropská unie," Facebook, May 7, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/564289449029746/videos/1275454826732269>.

14 "Češi czexit nechťejí. Bez Evropské unie bychom dopadli jako Kaliningrad - STEM a EUROPEUM," <https://europeum.org/articles/detail/5663/e15-cz-cesi-czexit-nechteji-bez-evropske-unie-bychom-dopadli-jako-kaliningrad>.

15 Ondřej Houska, "Putin a brexit udělali EU opět velkou. Vystoupení z unie přestali prosazovat i populisté," Hospodářské noviny, August 9, 2023, <https://archiv.hn.cz/c1-67232100-putin-a-brexit-udelali-eu-opet-velkou-vystoupeni-z-unie-prestali-prosazovat-i-populiste>.

16 Aby bylo jasno (@abybylojasnocz), "Příliš málo na život a příliš mnoho na smrt! Umírají desetitisíce Slovanů! Zaznělo v parlamentu EU," Facebook, September 25, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/292262793305289/posts/331030222761879>.

17 Tomio Okamura - SPD (@tomio.cz), "Musíme budovat silný suverénní národní stát a armádu, která bude bránit naše území a která nebude určená na zahraniční mise," Facebook, March 28, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/776585427165227/posts/787191812771255>.

extension of other topics. Concerns about the quality and health risks of Ukrainian products in the EU have, for instance, gained attention recently. 'Aby bylo jasno' criticized the Czech government for not banning these products, accusing both the government and the EU of jeopardizing citizens' lives.¹⁸ Tomio Okamura even formally asked Prime Minister Petr Fiala to ban Ukrainian grain imports to the Czech Republic, as other member states had done, citing dire consequences for Czech citizens and farmers.¹⁹ Zuzana Majerová of the Trikolora party also supported this approach and criticized Czech Minister Nekula for not taking similar action.²⁰

The Green Deal as Another Platform for Claims of the 'Brussels Diktat'

In contrast to the declining interest in the Ukraine war, climate change and green policies remain popular narratives for manipulating public opinion on the EU. These narratives often target the European Green Deal, portraying it as another example of the 'Brussels diktat' and the Czech government's disregard for Czech needs. They exploit the current crisis and uncertainties stemming from the Ukraine war, framing EU green policies as a threat to economic stability. For example, the show 'Aby bylo jasno' criticizes the Green Deal as 'green madness' and a 'costly adventure,' aiming to instill fear of the unknown associated with green policies.²¹ Similarly, Tomio Okamura identifies ending the Green Deal as a priority for the SPD party, linking it to the current crises.²²

POLAND: WARY OF EXTERNAL FORCES

Poland joined the EU the same year as Czechia, in 2004, and has since been enjoying consistent public support of the union, which remains solid at 80% in 2023.²³ However, this contrasts with a growing Euroscepticism among the political leadership, especially from 2015 till the latest elections in October 2023. The ruling Law and Justice Party (PiS) clashed with the EU over various issues, aligning its stance with the protection of traditional Polish values against perceived external threats like liberalism, LGBTI+ rights, reproductive rights, and migration.²⁴ Criticism of the EU also involves claims of intrusion into national in-

terests, framing Poland as a victim of Brussels' meddling. While only 47% of PiS supporters believe the EU respects Poland's interests, 84% of opposition voters hold this view.²⁵

Considering Poland's resilience to Russian influence operations in its information space, domestic drivers have the most significant impact on public opinion toward the EU. Therefore, special attention to these factors, especially during elections when they are actively exploited for political gain, is crucial.²⁶

18 Aby bylo jasno (@abybylojasnocz), "Potraviny z Ukrajiny," Facebook, April 25, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/107836665045928/posts/260872056409054/>.

19 Tomio Okamura - SPD (@tomio.cz), "Právě jsem podal písemnou interpelaci na premiéra Fialu ve věci," Facebook, August 7, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/776585427165227/posts/861568568666912>.

20 Zuzana Majerová (@zuzanamajerova.cz), "TOHLE SI MUSÍTE POSLECHNOUT," Facebook, April 18, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/757197382429832/posts/77770003705903>.

21 Aby bylo jasno (@abybylojasnocz), "Příliš málo na život a příliš mnoho na smrt! Umírají desetitisíce Slovanů! Zaznělo v parlamentu EU," Facebook, September 25, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/292262793305289/posts/331030222761879>.

22 Tomio Okamura - SPD (@tomio.cz), "EU nepomáhá, ale škodí," Facebook, May 9, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/776585427165227/posts/810484800441956>.

23 Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse, "What's With the EU? Considerations After 15 Years of Polish Membership," The Warsaw Institute, May 22, 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/whats-eu-considerations-15-years-polish-membership/>.

24 Joanna Fomina, "The Unlikely Eurosceptics: the Undercurrent Anti-European Attitudes among the Young Poles and the Role of the Domestic Context," Polish Sociological Review 198. no. 2 (2018: 147). https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Joanna_Fomina/publication/323628500_sociological_review_polish_219817_The_Unlikely_Eurosceptics_the_Undercurrent_Anti-European_Attitudes_among_the_Young_Poles_and_the_Role_of_the_Domestic_Context/links/5aaf9c10f7e9badd9a3c4fd/sociological-review-polish-219817-The-UnlikelyEurosceptics-the-Undercurrent-Anti-European-Attitudes-among-the-Young-Poles-and-the-Role-of-the-Domestic-Context.pdf

25 Jacob Poushter, "Spotlight on Poland: Negative Views of Russia Surge, but Ratings for U.S., NATO, EU Improve," Pew Research Center, June 22, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/22/spotlight-on-poland-negative-views-of-russia-surge-but-ratings-for-u-s-nato-eu-improve/>.

26 Andrei Yeliseyev, Veronica Laputskaya et al, Major pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and their transmitters in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia, Prague: Association for International Affairs (AMO), 2023, <https://www.amo.cz/cs/posilovani-odolnosti-ceske-slovenske-a-polske-spolecnosti-pred-volbami-do-evropskeho-parlamentu-2024/major-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives-and-their-transmitters-in-poland-czechia-and-slovakia-2/>.

The Most Popular Narratives Leading up to the 2019 EP Elections

In the 2019 EP elections in Poland, anti-EU narratives similar to those in Czechia gained prominence. These narratives often intertwined with Poland's conflicts with the EU, such as the Article 7 procedure and the JUST Act. The latter, enacted by the US, was a central focus for the far-right party Konfederacja, opposing the restitution of Jewish property as mandated by the Act. They linked this perceived encroachment on Poland's sovereignty by the US to EU actions, fueling anti-American and anti-Western sentiments. This campaign culminated in a protest against the JUST Act in Warsaw.²⁷ The Independence March Association even created a petition to appeal to Donald Trump to repeal the JUST

Act, with the main slogan of the petition being: "Do you know that they [Jews] want to rob you?"²⁸

Not only the JUST Act but also the Jewish community became a target before the elections. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) identified a coordinated network of 803 Twitter accounts spreading anti-Semitic content. These accounts referenced Jews over 92,900 times in the year leading up to May 2019. They used hashtag tactics to disseminate disinformation about Jews in Poland, including false historical information, often using the hashtag #JewishTruth.²⁹

Prominent EU-Related Narratives Leading Up to the 2024 EP Elections

The major EU-related disinformation narratives in Poland are strikingly similar to the ones identified in the Czechia section of the report. The collection of disinformation cases published by the EUvsDisinfo website in the first half of 2023 show that the most popular Poland-related narratives speak about its aggressive plans towards eastern neighboring countries and question Poland's sovereignty due to its critical dependence on the EU. At times, the sovereignty-related theme discusses overdependence on Germany as the largest EU economy. A wide-spread modification of this narrative claims that Poland is ruled by the US and 'Anglo-Saxons' and that Washington uses Warsaw to undermine the EU. One June 2023 article by Sputnik Polska, part of the Russian news agency Sputnik, claimed that the US supports Polish ambitions for regional hegemony and a challenge to Germany.³⁰ Despite frequent divergences concerning the governing actor over Poland, disinformation-containing publications share a view on Poland's alleged incapacity to make sovereign decisions in key spheres.

Disinformation-spreading sources also tend to exaggerate the extent of the economic difficulties Poland is facing. The socio-economic problems in Poland are attributed to the EU's economic policies and Russia-related sanctions. In this context, normalization of relations with Russia has been portrayed – albeit more rarely lately as EU-Russia and Poland-Russia relations dramatically worsened – as critical for Polish national interests. This issue is often intertwined with historical argu-

ments. One May 2023 publication of Sputnik Polska alleged that Poland must restore Soviet monuments before sitting at the negotiation table with Russia.³¹ A growing number of Poland-related publications in disinformation-spreading sources portray Poland as a country with a highly polarized society and at risk of serious political destabilization.

Echoing the Czech case, EU-related disinformation narratives targeting Polish audiences are often related to migration and the war in Ukraine. To make the point that Warsaw is facing a complicated dilemma concerning its political development, one publication by the Russian RIA Novosti news agency uses disinformation narratives about Poland's aggressive intentions towards Ukraine and Poland's incremental loss of sovereignty to the EU.³² It claims that while Poland intends to exert control over western Ukraine, which allegedly would be easier if Ukraine were to gain membership in the EU, Germany and France would in this case demand the transformation of the EU into a supra-national state which would totally deprive Poland of sovereignty. The popularity of the migration topic remains high in the disinformation space with respect to manipulations and conspiracies about Ukrainian nationals residing in Poland as well as the issue of the EU's migrant relocation scheme. As the 2024 EP election approaches, it is most likely that the aforementioned narratives and topics, accommodated to the flow of events, will continue to constitute the disinformation playing field in Poland.

27 Ibid.

28 Chloe Colliver. Click Here For Outrage: Disinformation in the European Parliamentary Elections 2019. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2020, 15-17, <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/click-here-for-outrage-disinformation-in-the-european-parliamentary-elections-2019/>.

29 Ibid.

30 "Poland uses anti-German sentiments to achieve regional hegemony," EUvsDisinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-uses-anti-german-sentiments-to-achieve-regional-hegemony>.

31 "Poland must restore monuments to Soviet liberators to normalize relations with Russia," EUvsDisinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-must-restore-monuments-to-soviet-liberators-to-normalize-relations-with-russia>.

32 "Poland facing painful dilemma over Ukraine from European Reich," EUvsDisinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-facing-painful-dilemma-over-ukraine-from-european-reich>.

SLOVAKIA: GRIPPED BY FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN

In 2004, Slovakia joined the EU with a record 'yes' vote in an accession referendum, influenced by the desire for a better life and Western alignment in the post-Soviet era. Support for membership has remained relatively stable for years, though it recently dropped from 77% to 63%, partly fueled by anti-EU sentiment linked to the energy crisis.³³ In fact, 44% of Slovaks rated the EU response to the energy crisis negatively.³⁴

Still, Euroscepticism wasn't widespread until the migration crisis in 2015, which marked the first major conflict between

The Most Popular Narratives Leading up to the 2019 EP Elections

Like Czechia and Poland, Slovakia also saw a prevalence of negative narratives aimed at portraying the EU as a totalitarian institution infringing on national sovereignty. These narratives often called for a renewed focus on Slovak national interests, especially concerning migration, which gained significant attention in the lead-up to the elections.

Migration was presented as an existential threat to traditional values, culture, and religion in Slovakia, with the

Prominent EU-Related Narratives Leading Up to the 2024 EP Elections

The image of the EU in Slovakia during 2023 was influenced by key topics, including the war in Ukraine, military aid to Ukraine, and by efforts to identify perceived enemies, with attacks on sexual minorities and immigrants. Notably, Slovakia was in a period of campaigning for early parliamentary elections until the end of September, intensifying the toxic rhetoric among political and disinformation actors. The to-

Slovakia and the EU, centered on national interests and sovereignty. Not only fringe actors but also Slovak politicians began portraying the EU as interfering in domestic matters and dictating terms, leading to increased anti-EU disinformation and manipulative narratives. These narratives often depicted the EU as an accomplice in the migration situation, infringing on sovereignty and disregarding national interests.³⁵⁻³⁶ While most Slovak parties don't officially advocate leaving the EU, they call for EU reform that better accounts for national interests, reflecting the view of up to 60% of Slovaks who believe member states should have more power.³⁷

EU implicated in its promotion. Despite Slovakia's minimal involvement in the 2015 migration crisis and low asylum-seeker numbers in 2017 and 2018, alarmist messages and conspiracy theories abounded. For example, a viral post implied the EU operated like a totalitarian regime, suggesting a conspiracy involving political elites and the media. It blamed the EU for the negative consequences of migration.³⁸

pics detailed below were identified by monitoring done via the CrowdTangle analytical tool, covering the period from January 1, 2023, to October 1, 2023. This approach enabled the identification of Facebook posts with the highest interaction levels that contained keywords related to the EU in Slovak. Posts from mainstream media, state, and EU institutions were excluded from this analysis.

Support for Ukraine paints a target on Slovakia's back

In discussions concerning Ukraine, narratives circulated claiming that toxic grain from Ukraine was entering Europe. Politicians like Milan Uhrík, leader of the far-right Republic party and MEP, falsely alleged that the EU was forcing citizens to consume toxic grain, portraying Brussels as a dictatorship that did not allow member states to make local decisions.³⁹

33 "Ako vidia Slováci budúcnosť Európy a čo hovoria na členstvo v EÚ? - Zastúpenie Európskej komisie na Slovensku," <https://slovakia.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/ako-vidia-slovaci-buducnost-euro-py-co-hovoria-na-clenstvo-v-eu-pozname-vysledky-noveho-prieskumu-2022-01-28-sk>.

34 Miro Kern, "Ľudia na Slovensku sú najskeptickejší v EÚ a neveria ostatným, ukazujú prieskumy. Krajina sa podľa nich ubera nesprávnym smerom," Denník N, March 21, 2023, <https://dennikn.sk/3293316/ludia-su-najskeptickejsi-v-eu-a-neveria-ostatnym-ukazuju-prieskumy-slovensko-sa-podla-nich-ubera-nespravnym-smerom/>.

35 Marek Rybář and Peter Spáč, "The March 2016 parliamentary elections in Slovakia: A political earthquake," *Electoral Studies* 45, no. 1 (2017): 153-156.

36 Karen Handerson, "Euroscepticism and the 'Missing Left': The Slovak Case Study," *Czech Journal of Political Science* 98, no. 3 (2017): 229-232. <https://czechpolsci.eu/article/view/34943>.

37 Katarína Ihnatová, Pavol Štrba, "Takmer polovica Slovákov neverí, že členstvo v EÚ je dobrá vec. Sme na chvoste," *Aktuality*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/h7XmgIz/takmer-polovica-slovakov-neveri-ze-clenstvo-v-eu-je-dobra-vec-sme-na-chvoste-prieskum/>.

38 Miroslava Sawiris. *European Elections in the V4: From disinformation campaigns to narrative amplification*. Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2019, 24-26, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/european-elections-v4-disinformation-campaigns-narrative-amplification>.

39 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrík), "Brusel Slovákom v podstate odkázal: "Držte hubu a to toxické obilie z Ukrajiny jedzte!," Facebook, May 11, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044386691134/posts/850333869789495>.

Similar rhetoric was also echoed by the SMER - SSD party, with chairman Robert Fico claiming the EU was punishing member states for protecting citizens from contaminated Ukrainian food. These narratives contributed to growing apathy towards Russian aggression and opposition to the EU.⁴⁰

Additionally, there were claims of plans to involve the Slovak Armed Forces in the EU Assistance Mission to Ukraine. Uhrík used this to raise fears of Slovakia's involvement in the war.⁴¹ In a similar manner, in April 2023 he presented the EU's alleged efforts to "make Slovakia a military corridor for US tanks and a target for Russian missiles".⁴² The post was part of a broader narrative about the allegedly abusive policy of the EU towards Slovakia, which supposedly makes Slovakia a target for Russia and is not intended for peace. Fico also depicted the EU as becoming a military tool of the US, advocating for a return to sovereign policies and relations with various countries, including Russia and China.⁴³

These messages contributed to growing apathy toward the Ukraine conflict, affecting perceptions of responsibility. Only 40% of Slovaks viewed Russia as the aggressor, while 34% blamed the West, and 17% held Ukraine responsible. A majority believed that providing military aid to Ukraine risked provoking Russia and moving closer to war.⁴⁴

The EU's green policy is allegedly used to destroy agriculture and the car industry

Throughout the year, narratives aimed at discrediting the EU's green policies and the Green Deal gained prominence. Claims suggested a secret EU effort to promote insect consumption over meat.⁴⁵ Milan Mazurek of the Republic party criticized this idea as 'psychopathic' and an attempt to restrict food choices.⁴⁶ The European Commission refuted claims of secret insect additives and highlighted myths about the Farm to Fork Strategy, part of the Green Deal addressing food security.⁴⁷ Despite stringent food labeling rules,⁴⁸ a poll in August 2023 revealed that nearly a third of Slovaks feared insects secretly entering their food.⁴⁹

These narratives also distorted the Nature Restoration Law, portraying it as EU pressure on farmers to plant wild weeds in fertile fields.⁵⁰ This was framed as eco-fanaticism,⁵¹ poten-

40 Robert Fico (@robertficosk), "UŽ STAČILO S DŮVODOM "LEBO UKRAJINA", UŽ TREBA OCHRAŇOVAŤ SLOVENSKO!," Facebook, April 14, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044229289610/posts/800938318057137>.

41 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrík), "Tvrdo odmietame návrh Uznesenia vlády na vyslanie príslušníkov Ozbrojených síl SR do asistenčnej misie EÚ pre Ukrajinu," Facebook, February 23, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5687686271342064>.

42 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrík), "Európska únia predstavila svoj plán príprav pre vojnu na východe a Káčer chce trvalé rozmiestnenie armád NATO na Slovensku," Facebook, April 12, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=166978226288346>.

43 Robert Fico (@robertficosk), "JE DESIVÉ, DO AKEJ ZÁVISLOSTI OD USA SA EURÓPSKA ÚNIA DOSTALA," Facebook, March 21, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044229289610/posts/786615999489369>.

44 Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová et al. GLOBSEC Trends 2023. Bratislava: GLOBSEC, 2023, <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202023.pdf>.

45 Matúš Blažek, "Podľa prieskumu sa až tretina Slovákov obáva tajného pridávania hmyzu do potravín. Európska komisia tvrdenia odmieta," Infosecurity.sk, August 29, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/domace/podla-prieskumu-sa-az-tretina-slovakov-obava-tajneho-pridavania-hmyzu-do-potravin-europska-komisia-tvrdenia-odmieta/>.

46 Milan Mazurek · Republika (@MilanMazurek.Republika), "CHCÚ do nás TLAČIŤ HMYZ," Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/100044498826847/posts/897209685105651>.

47 Európska komisia, "MÝTUS: Stratégia EÚ "Z Farmy na stôl" nás tlačí do jedenia hmyzu," August 14, 2023, https://slovakia.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/mytus-strategia-eu-z-farmy-na-stol-nas-tlaci-do-jedenia-hmyzu-2023-08-14_sk.

48 Matúš Blažek, "Podľa prieskumu sa až tretina Slovákov obáva tajného pridávania hmyzu do potravín. Európska komisia tvrdenia odmieta," Infosecurity.sk, August 29, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/domace/podla-prieskumu-sa-az-tretina-slovakov-obava-tajneho-pridavania-hmyzu-do-potravin-europska-komisia-tvrdenia-odmieta/>.

49 "Tretina Slovákov sa obáva, že sa do ich jedla môže tajne dostávať hmyz: Odvolávajú sa na zákon o nových potravinách, kde je reč aj o hmyze," RTVS, August 12, 2023, <https://spravy.rtvs.sk/2023/08/tretina-slovakov-sa-obava-ze-sa-do-ich-jedla-moze-tajne-dostavat-hmyz-zahrna-ich-totiz-zakon-o-novy-ch-potravinach/>.

50 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrík), "Nové nariadenie z EÚ: Musíme pestovať bodliaky namiesto pšenice," Facebook, July 18, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1227971271936785>.

51 Natália Csikosová, "Republika zavádza o novom návrhu zákona EÚ o obnove prírody. Verejnosť stráši rastom cien potravín," Infosecurity.sk, August 13, 2023, <https://infosecurity.sk/fact-checks/republika-zavádza-o-novom-navrhu-zakona-eu-o-obnove-prirody-verejnost-strasi-rastom-cien-potravin/>.

tially reducing crop productivity and raising food prices.⁵² In reality, the law aims to prevent ecosystem collapse and mitigate climate change and biodiversity loss, with flexibility in implementation.⁵³

Sporadic messages criticized the push for electric vehicles (EVs) in the EU's plan to ban internal combustion engine cars by 2035. Critics like Milan Uhrík argued against emissions reductions,⁵⁴ claiming EVs would be unaffordable.^{55, 56} However, existing internal combustion engine cars can still be used after 2035. Some also argued that EU legislation is driven by ideology, not facts.⁵⁷

The EU should have acted more strictly against immigrants

Migration became a prominent topic for negative narratives against the EU. Critics accused the EU of inviting migrants into member states. Milan Uhrík called for a tougher EU response to illegal migration, criticizing the use of boats to transport migrants.⁵⁸ Members of the far-right ĽSNS party claimed that European NGOs, funded by Soros, were behind illegal migration. They alleged these NGOs manipulated the system to help migrants obtain refugee status.⁵⁹

Negotiations on the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum were labeled as 'treasonous'.⁶⁰ Critics also accused the EU of forcing member states to redistribute migrants under the guise of 'compulsory solidarity' and penalizing those who refused.⁶¹ Slovak MEPs who supported the pact were criticized, and Robert Fico of SMER - SSD called the redistribution 'nonsense,' linking it to Soros and President Čaputová.⁶²

Sexual minorities served as a target of attacks again

Misleading narratives circulated also about the European Certificate of Parenthood, which aims to protect parents' and children's rights in different types of families across EU states. Uhrík and Mazurek misinterpreted the certificate,⁶³ claiming it would allow unconventional family structures and attacks on the traditional form of family.⁶⁴

52 "M. Uhrík o novom nariadení EÚ: Musíme pestovať bodliaky namiesto pšenice," SK Správy, July 19, 2023, <https://skspravy.sk/slovensko/politika/m-uhrik-o-novom-nariadeni-eu-musime-pestovat-bodliaky-namiesto-psenice/>.

53 "Zákon o obnove prírody: Europoslanci prijali pozíciu na rokovania s Radou," Európske noviny, July 12, 2023, <https://europske.noviny.sk/2023/07/12/zakon-o-obnove-prrody-europoslanci-prijali-poziciu-na-rokovania-s-radou/>.

54 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), "Brusel rozhodol!," Facebook, July 14, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1360505388072300>.

55 Ján Kecskés · Republika (@Jan.Kecskes), "AKO SALAMABANDRA SCHIZOFRENÍK HEGER HAZARDUJE S PRACOVNÝMI MIESTAMI NA SLOVENSKU," Facebook, March 28, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/538996630774672/posts/896825921658406>.

56 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), "V EÚ sa odhlasovalo, že od roku 2035 už normálne nové auto nekúpite," Facebook, February 16, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/445260620296824/posts/802406961248853>.

57 Alex Richter, "Nemecká firma zažaluje EÚ za zákaz áut so spaľovacím motorom," Zem a Vek, October, 6, 2023, <https://zemavek.sk/nemecka-firma-zazaluje-eu-za-zakaz-aut-so-spalovacim-motorom/>.

58 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), "Bez servítky v EÚ," Facebook, July 12, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044386691134/posts/885626652926883>.

59 Miro Heredoš (@heredos), "NELEGÁLNU MIGRÁCIU RIADIA EURÓPSKE MIMOVLÁDKY," Facebook, September 21, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1288796621809541>.

60 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), "Tomuto sa vraví vlastizrada," Facebook, October 15, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=845718873713670>.

61 Milan Mazurek · Republika (@MilanMazurek.Republika), "POZOR! OPĀŤ nám sem chcú natlačiť nelegálnych cudzincov!," Facebook, May 26, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044498826847/posts/865383548288265>.

62 Robert Fico (@robertficosk), "A VY STE KDE BOLI, PÁN ÓDOR, UČITEĽ NA SOROSOVEJ UNIVERZITE, KEĎ MAĎARSKÝ A POĽSKÝ PREMIÉR ZABLOKOVALI NEZMYSELNÉ ZÁVERY SUMMITU EÚ O POVINNÝCH KVÓTACH A POKUTÁCH ZA ICH NEDODRŽANIE?," Facebook, June 30, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/401400371344269/posts/842138197270482>.

63 Milan Mazurek · Republika (@MilanMazurek.Republika), "EÚ útočí už aj na manželstvo a rodinu!," Facebook, March 29, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=892920295157961>.

64 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), "EÚ pripravuje nový "rodný list". Bude umožňovať zápis aj troch rodičov," Facebook, September 4, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044386691134/posts/912796653543216?fbclid=IwAR1Xmb2v3u7i8GxliY7C6o8HPqmSoVMCyjeOL-D8127C-1yoYLr4g-Rs8ag>.

The Istanbul Convention was another topic, with Uhrík objecting to its gender-inclusive language and linking it to EU dictatorship. He argued that the EU was imposing non-traditional family norms on Slovakia, dictating that “there is no mother or father, but there is parent 1 and parent 2, and that the same child can be born by two women or even two men”.⁶⁵ In August, there was criticism of the EU’s response to Hungary’s child protection law.⁶⁶ Mazurek insinuated that the EU protected pedophiles, misrepresenting Hungary’s law.^{67, 68}

Supporters of the far-right party pushed the idea of Slovexit

The “Slovexit” narrative too gained attention during the year, particularly promoted by the far-right Kotleba People’s Party Our Slovakia. In videos, they claimed that the EU is destroying Slovakia’s sovereignty,⁶⁹ but also Slovakia’s agriculture and environment,⁷⁰ economy and transport,⁷¹ finance,⁷² culture and education,⁷³ health,⁷⁴ and is controlling migration⁷⁵ at the same time. Despite these accusations, the campaign did not garner widespread support. **Nevertheless, skepticism toward the EU is on the rise in Slovakia, with a significant portion of the population expressing negative perceptions and some believing the country would be better off outside the EU, according to a Eurobarometer survey from March 2023.**⁷⁶

65 Milan Uhrík · Republika (@ing.milan.uhrik), “M. Uhrík v EÚ: Že dve ženy môžu porodit’ do isté dieťa?,” Facebook, February 15, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=737343341093240>.

66 Milan Mazurek · Republika (@MilanMazurek.Republika), “ŠIALENÉ, čím sa EÚ chváli...,” Facebook, August 8, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100044498826847/posts/90911163915503>.

67 The controversial Hungarian law, he said, “protects children from the risk of contact with pedophiles and prohibits the depiction of obscenities and the rainbow agenda of gender transition and similar topics in children’s programs and in broadcasts for young people...” The so-called “Child Protection Act”, which was adopted in Hungary in 2021 was originally aimed at strengthening penalties for child abuse. However, later amendments were added to prohibit the “promotion of homosexuality” to children under the age of 18.

68 Michaela Ružičková, “Maďarský boj proti Európskej únii, „ochrana“ tradičných a kresťanských hodnôt: témy rezonujúce aj v maďarsko-slovenskom informačnom priestore,” Infosecurity.sk, September 23, 2021, <https://infosecurity.sk/studie/madarsky-boj-proti-europskej-unii-ochrana-tradicnych-a-krestanskych-hodnot-temy-rezonujuce-aj-v-madarsko-slovenskom-informacnom-priestore/>.

69 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 7: Ako EÚ ničí našu suverenitu,” YouTube, September 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdhftTgTgeI>.

70 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 1 - Ako EÚ ničí naše poľnohospodárstvo a životné prostredie,” YouTube, September 13, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6u6dejjCgw>.

71 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 2 - Ako EÚ ničí naše hospodárstvo a dopravu,” YouTube, September 19, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KXSNUQ7WME>.

72 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 3 - Ako EÚ ničí naše financie,” YouTube, September 22, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAnCOQDy_kE.

73 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 4: Ako EÚ ničí našu kultúru a vzdelanie,” YouTube, September 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVhlm6LQf8>.

74 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 5: Ako EÚ ničí naše zdravie a o pandemickej zmluve,” YouTube, September 21, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRDwitkLLIY>.

75 Rádio Kompas (@radiokompas9081), “SLOVEXIT č. 6: Ako EÚ riadi migráciu,” YouTube, September 29, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U-35CJzonsU>.

76 “Národný prieskum Eurobarometra: väčšina Slovákov nechce budúcnosť krajiny mimo EÚ,” Zastúpenie Európskej komisie na Slovensku, March 27, 2023, <https://slovakia.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/narodny-prieskum-eurobarometra-vacsina-slovakov-nechce-buducnost-krajiny-mimo-eu-2023-03-27-sk>.

CONCLUSION

As the June 2024 European Parliament elections approach, we are witnessing an exploitation of the current political, economic, and social upheavals by certain political figures and manipulative actors with converging agendas. One of the main aims is to turn the EU into a scapegoat, a convenient villain to be blamed for the struggles within member states. This is not a random act; it is a calculated move, closely aligned with public opinion polls that indicate growing dissatisfaction with the EU's handling of the energy crisis, the commitment to supporting Ukraine, and the EU's broader vision for its member states.

These actors also tap into frustrations over the perceived neglect of local problems, with the war in Ukraine often cited as a distraction. By casting the EU as the adversary, they provide a target for people's grievances, whether real or perceived. Simultaneously, they present themselves as the solution, the champions of national interests over the detached EU elites, promising to restore stability and prosperity.

This approach is not new. It builds on longstanding dissatisfactions with the EU and its integration process, repackaging old grievances with contemporary issues to make them more relevant and urgent. For example, narratives about the 'Brussels diktat' are being revived in the Czech

Republic, where the government riddled by waning public trust is portrayed as the extended hand of EU oppression. In Poland, the focus is on over-reliance on the EU and Germany, amid recent tensions. In Slovakia, the EU's migration policies are criticized anew due to reinstated border checks. In both Czechia and Slovakia, the EU's green policies, particularly those related to electromobility and combustion engines, are also again under scrutiny.

However, there is also a shift in strategy. Instead of advocating for exits from the EU (like 'Czexit' or 'Slovexit'), some now call for reforming the Union from within, suggesting a looser 'union of European nations' with greater national sovereignty. Ukraine-related narratives are also evolving. While the war remains a topic to be exploited, new angles are emerging, like the controversy over Ukrainian grain being labeled as toxic, suggesting the EU prioritizes Ukraine over the health and well-being of the population in its own member states.

These narratives all pivot on the dichotomy of us versus them, familiar versus unfamiliar, and internal versus external forces, playing into the current climate of crisis and uncertainty. The underlying message is a call for stronger national interests against what is portrayed as an autocratic and overbearing EU.

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