

# Does hatred rule political communication on social media? How do politicians talk about the EU on Facebook, and how do their followers react?

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN 1801-3422)

Vol. 18, No. 4

DOI: 10.2478/pce-2022-0021

**Abstract:** *This paper focuses on the communication of four Slovak political leaders about the European Union's agenda on Facebook and their followers' interactions. As cognitive authorities of their followers, politicians directly impact public perception of current news by providing their own opinions and views. The paper studies the politicians' followers' engagement through manual qualitative sentiment analysis. The results suggest that while moderate Facebook users who support the EU are not active and do not show their support openly, users who condemn the EU express their negative sentiments regardless of the politician's sentiment in the post. If a politician praises the EU, the followers criticise it. If a politician criticises the EU, followers agree with them. That leads us to the conclusion that social media dynamised the concept of cognitive authority.*

**Key Words:** *Facebook, social media, political communication, EU, cognitive authority*

## I. Introduction

In the first quarter of 2022, 307 million Europeans used Facebook daily. Politicians are among them because they discovered the power of social media long ago. They keep in touch with their electorate, inform their followers, mobilise them and spread news and opinions. However, to achieve their goals, politi-

cians must build active digital followership that reacts to the politicians' posts (Keller et al. 2018). They need as many reactions to the post as possible to reach more Facebook users (Karlsen – Enjolras 2016). Then they can become what is called 'cognitive authorities' and impact their followers' opinion shaping.

Some studies have already been conducted focusing on politicians' activity on social media (Tumasjan et al. 2010; Karlström – Pettersson 2011; Bene 2017; Bossetta et al. 2017). Sampling dates are usually in pre-election times and during campaigns, but politicians also use social media during more quiet times. Besides that, most studies investigated entire social media activity, which is instrumental to understanding the politicians' engagement with followers. These studies work with extensive data and analyse them quantitatively. However, in this paper, I tried to confirm whether we can study partial topics in politicians' engagement with their followers. The goal is to qualitatively analyse the precise patterns of engagement and opinions shared in the comments. Since Brexit precedently opened the possibility of exiting the European Union and COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the role of the EU, I focused on the political communication about the EU on Facebook and the reactions of politicians' followers.

As one of the countries with the lowest trust in the EU, Slovakia is the country of interest. According to the latest Eurobarometer from Spring 2021, trust in the European Union and its institution in Slovakia is at the third-lowest level. Forty-three percent of the Slovak population trusts the European Union, seven percentage points lower than the previous Eurobarometer in Winter 2020/2021. The paper tries to confirm whether the general public's sentiment matches the sentiment in politicians' social media communication towards their followers. Conducting a sentiment analysis manually on a smaller amount of data and analysing them qualitatively, I tried to answer the research questions:

1. How do the selected politicians talk about the EU? Is it positively, negatively or does their attitude depend on the topic?
2. How do the followers react to the politicians: with the same or opposing sentiment? Do the followers agree or disagree with the politicians?

## II. Theoretical Background

A politician can be our cognitive authority, defined as 'someone who knows something we don't know' (Wilson 1983). Cognitive authorities are trustworthy and shape our social reality. If we share opinions and values with them, we avoid cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, we can also choose whom not to trust. Cognitive authority can be negative when we negate everything someone says just because we do not consider the person or institution trustworthy.

How do we decide whether someone is or is not our cognitive authority? First, it might be a performance rule according to which I need to see positive results of a person's work. For example, it can be a doctor who has cured many

patients (Wilson 1983: 24), or a politician who kept their pre-election promises. Second, it might be same-mindedness: a decision to trust someone based on our previous knowledge. We compare new information with information we already have, and if it does not cause dissonance, we trust it. It is common even though we risk trusting someone who is not right but who only shares the same biases and false theories as we do (Goldman 2010: 11). Cass Sunstein (2001, 2017) defined this phenomenon as echo chambers, and at first, he was talking about the entire internet. Internet users could choose which information to receive and which to avoid. He argues that readers of traditional printed newspapers could also decide not to read the story they did not like, but at least they saw it and realised something was there. On the internet, users had more opportunities to look only for information which agreed with their previous beliefs. Later he also studied the phenomenon on social media, but here it is essential to mention another factor: algorithms on Facebook. Pariser (2011) calls it filter bubbles. Because of the algorithms which choose content shown to the social media user based on their past activity, the user will not get diverse information.

These phenomena are sometimes called selective exposure when people expose themselves only to same-minded information because their goal is not to broaden their minds but reinforce their opinions. Somewhat less studied is selective avoidance, which refers to avoiding information that challenges our opinions (Parmelee – Richard 2012: 109). Both can be harmful to democracy because exposing oneself only to same-minded ideas and avoiding diverse ideas cannot produce a well-informed society, which is crucial in every democracy. However, both phenomena are prevalent on social media, even among politicians' followers who, we might assume, are interested in politics and therefore have substantial knowledge to distinguish between trustworthy and biased information (Petty – Cacioppo 1986). However, the more engaged a person is, the more polarised their opinions (Gunther 1992: 151).

We can engage with cognitive authorities on social media. They have become a massive part of our lives, and some users looking for news rely on social media more than traditional media. Social media are free to access and publish. Of course, politicians can pay a lot of money to be more visible on social media, especially during election campaigns. However, the main idea here is that social media are free for followers. Because of this fact, we do not have to exclude a group of followers who do not want to or cannot buy a subscription to online newspapers and discuss political topics in the comment section. Besides that, social media are also attractive to politicians for being a direct channel to voters without journalists editing the content. Followers feel more engaged with the politicians too, if they can talk directly to them, even though we know that many politicians have whole teams to manage their social accounts. Politicians can engage with voters, publish their opinions and views, spread information or even broadcast press conferences and speeches (Highfield 2016: 123).

Social media are attractive because of their interactivity. Users can agree or disagree with the Facebook post and its author. They can like, share or comment, depending on their motivation. Previous studies (Macafee 2013; Heiss – Schmuck – Matthes 2018) showed that liking a status results from presentational motivation only and requires little effort. However, one like can lead to another and maybe to hundreds or thousands more, leading to political consequences because the number of likes shows the post's popularity (Margetts et al. 2016). Commenting results from social interaction motivation, and it involves the risk of further polemics. Sharing results from information-sharing motivation and shows your network that something is worth reading in your opinion. Nevertheless, followers' activity makes a difference in successful social media communication. The more likes, shares or comments, the more visible the post is. Higher visibility can help spread the message to a broader audience and reach people who otherwise do not follow politics (Vaccari 2016). It can lead to social media success and broaden the electorate.

The followers' reactions can show how many consider the politician a cognitive authority and follow them to expose themselves to the same-minded information. Golbeck and Hansen (2011) tried to find out whether people follow politicians with the same or opposing views, but on Twitter, and they found out that 66 percent of users follow politicians who 'mostly share (their) political views'. Only 4 percent follow politicians who 'mostly hold political views that oppose (their) own'. These followers might follow the politician to get contrasting opinions. However, they might also consider him a negative cognitive authority: they follow him because they do not trust him and want to criticise him. The remaining 30 percent followed both same-minded and opposing politicians, and they seem more interested in getting different information.

By analysing politicians' opinions about the EU and the reaction of their followers, we might be able to find out the support of the EU in the general public even though the representativeness of the social media users might endanger the results. According to Bossetta, Segesten and Trenz (2017: 64), Facebook users' demography is more diverse than Twitter's and better represents the general public. They studied engagement with European politics through social media. They chose to focus on Twitter and Facebook because they are the most widely used social media platforms for political communications (Instagram and YouTube mainly fulfil the entertainment role). They found four significant differences between these two social media platforms, one of them being user demography. First, they argue that Facebook has a massive audience worldwide, with numbers many times higher than Twitter. Because of its enormity, Facebook can reflect offline demographics more accurately. Secondly, Twitter is dominated by English-speaking countries, and thirdly, Twitter users are more interested in politics (Bossetta – Segesten – Trenz 2017: 64). That makes them not a representative sample because not all society is politically educated. By

studying the comments of Facebook users about the EU on politicians' posts, we can better understand that part of the society which needs to be better educated about politics. Only in a politically educated society can democracy thrive.

### **III. Methodology and procedure of analysis**

When selecting the cognitive authorities, I was looking for two Slovak governmental and two oppositional politicians active on Facebook, with wide followership, from different parties, and with different views about the EU. I used the results of the research (Králíková et al. 2020) conducted before the parliamentary election in 2020 about the Euroscepticism of parties on the scale from hard Eurosceptics to euro-federalists, which helped me choose politicians with different views about the EU. I selected the then prime minister of the Slovak Republic, Igor Matovič, leader of the OĽaNO party which has mixed emotions towards the EU; his predecessor Peter Pellegrini, a former member of the Smer-SD party, now leader of his new party Hlas (The Voice) which has a tendency to prefer national views to international but without hard criticism of the EU; a soft Eurosceptic Boris Kollár, speaker of the National Council of the Slovak Republic of the Sme Rodina party, whose most significant criticism of the EU relates to migration quotas; and hard Eurosceptic Marián Kotleba, leader of the ultra-right, Neo-Nazi party ĽSNS-Marián Kotleba who thinks Slovakia has become 'a colony of the West', with the EU trying to 'destroy us economically and socially'. Marián Kotleba repeatedly asked his followers to sign the petition to leave the EU. During the first time in 2016, all significant media informed the public about starting the petition's signatures collection. However, we never heard about it getting enough signatures. Then he urged people to sign the petition again during this study's data collection period. We still don't have any information about whether it's gotten enough signatures.

As a social media platform, I chose Facebook since it is the most popular platform used by politicians and the public in Slovakia and its users are more diverse than Twitter (Bossetta – Segesten – Trenz 2017). I collected all cognitive authorities' Facebook posts that mentioned the EU from 1 August 2020 to 31 October 2021 and conducted a sentiment analysis. It's a technique used for business purposes to analyse consumers' preferences, but it is also helpful for political and social scientists. For example, it was studied as an election results prediction technique (Tumasjan et al. 2010; Jungherr et al. 2011; Wang 2017; DiGrazia et al. 2013). In 2017, Safiullah et al.'s research (2017) showed a significant relationship between social media and the number of seats won by a political party. I used this technique to code politicians' sentiments about the EU: positive or negative. First, I read the Facebook post mentioning the EU; I checked the context and the then-current social and political situation. Then, in the coding sheet, I assigned -1 for posts with negative sentiments and 1 for

posts with positive sentiments. There was no need to use the number 0 for coding neutral posts, as all the posts bore either positive or negative sentiments. Nor did I find ambivalent posts in which it would be challenging to decide the emotionality of the post. The politicians were clear about their stances towards different issues. I coded it manually, even though sentiment analysis can be done automatically on extensive samples. For this research, the data was limited since politicians talk about the EU only when something is happening. Nevertheless, manual coding allows the researcher to read all the content and understand the data qualitatively.

I coded the number of likes, comments and shares to study the followers' reactions. Regarding the sentiment in the comments, if a follower agrees with the post's author, I coded number 1 as the same-minded view. A same-minded view means that if the politician introduces a negative sentiment about the EU, his follower agrees with him and shows negative feelings towards the EU or positive feelings towards the negative opinion of the politicians. When the politician shows positive feelings about the EU, his followers must show either positive feelings towards the EU or towards the politician's positivity to be coded as a same-minded comment. On the contrary, if a follower disagrees with the post's author, I coded -1 as the opposing view. If the politician shows negative sentiment about the EU, his followers must show either positive feelings towards the EU or negative feelings towards the politician's negativity. If a politician shows positive feelings about the EU, his followers must react with negative feelings about the EU or negative feelings about his positivity towards the EU. Neutral comments were coded with the number 0. Those were off-topic comments which did not mention the EU at all. The results should show whether the particular politician is a positive cognitive authority for most followers (they agree with him) or a negative cognitive authority (they do not trust him).

I prepared the coding schedule as explained by Bryman (2012: 298–304). The coding schedule is multidimensional. At the first level, I collected the basic data:

| Post ID | Post | Main topic | URL | Emotionality | Number of likes | Number of shares | Number of comments |
|---------|------|------------|-----|--------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------|
|         |      |            |     |              |                 |                  |                    |

Since users can react with seven different emotions when clicking on the Like button, the other level of coding schedule recorded the numbers of each emotion given to the post:

| Like | Love | Take care | Haha | Wow | Sad | Angry |
|------|------|-----------|------|-----|-----|-------|
|      |      |           |      |     |     |       |

I recorded the number of same-minded, opposing and off-topic comments. I did not record the comments under the comments.

| Same-minded comments | Opposing comments | Off-topic comments |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
|                      |                   |                    |

The coding manual is simple since most data coded is numbers:

|   |
|---|
| <p><b>Post ID</b><br/>Created by combining the initials of the politician (the first letter of his name followed by the first letter of his surname), slash (/), date of publishing the post (day-month-year)</p> <p><b>Main topic</b><br/>Euro funds<br/>COVID-19 (pandemic, vaccines, etc.)<br/>Climate change<br/>Migration to the EU countries<br/>Belarus/Alexander Lukashenko<br/>Russia/Vladimir Putin<br/>Information about upcoming negotiations or those which are currently underway<br/>Information about the finished meeting or results of negotiations or summit<br/>Criticism of the EU<br/>Leaving the EU<br/>Praise of the EU<br/>Other</p> <p><b>Emotionality</b><br/>1 – positive<br/>0 – neutral<br/>-1 – negative</p> |
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#### IV. Results: Four politicians, four different communication models

During the data collecting period, Igor Matovič posted thirty-five posts related to the EU; Boris Kollár posted eight, Peter Pellegrini nine and Marián Kotleba eleven. In the case of Boris Kollár, Peter Pellegrini and Marián Kotleba, all the posts were selected for further analysis of followers’ sentiment. However, in the case of Igor Matovič, a special category was needed. Five of the thirty-five posts mentioned the European Union, but the interaction between him and his followers was missing since nobody mentioned the EU in the comments. These five posts bore significant information about how Igor Matovič talks about the EU and were later analysed as his communication about the EU. However, since no comment mentioned the EU, posts were excluded from the likes analysis based on the presumption that the likes were also related to another topic, as were the comments. In this context, it is essential to highlight that we cannot be



sure about the intention of likes in any posts nor those included in the analysis of followers' sentiments. For this reason, likes analysis is only subordinate to the analysis of the comments.

Contrary to Igor Matovič, Peter Pellegrini did not post almost anything directly related to the EU agenda. Usually he only mentions the EU somewhere at the end of the post about something else. Still, his followers reacted to the EU, in some cases even aggressively. Peter Pellegrini has built an image of a politician who wants Slovakia to be a part of the EU but wants to cooperate with Russia too.

Boris Kollár and Marián Kotleba are both far-right politicians (with Marián Kotleba being ultra-right), and they spoke about the EU with negative emotionality. They both enjoyed more same-minded comments than Igor Matovič or Peter Pellegrini. Igor Matovič and Peter Pellegrini who were often attacked and heavily criticised. For a part of their followers, they are negative cognitive authorities. It is not the case for Marián Kotleba and Boris Kollár, who seem to be followed by people who trust them and consider them positive cognitive authorities.

## **Igor Matovič**

As mentioned earlier, a new category was added in the case of Igor Matovič. In five posts he mentioned the EU, but not a single comment reacted to the EU. Three of those posts were about the COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V. with a hidden message about the inability of the EU to provide enough vaccines and the inability of the EMA to approve Sputnik V. quickly. For example:

*I thank those who understand my decision to ensure the Russian vaccine Sputnik V. in addition to the insufficient amount of vaccines contracted by the European Union. It is a vaccine of high quality that can help us save thousands of human lives.<sup>1</sup>*

Or another example:

*So let's make it clear – if anyone wants us to wait with the contract until after the EMA registration when all the manufacturer's capacities are hopelessly sold out by the end of the year... they actually don't want any Sputnik V. in Slovakia... and they want us to continue to rely only on exceptionally late deliveries of vaccines contracted through joint EU procurement. They want us to suffer in lockdowns and from needless deaths for weeks and months more.<sup>2</sup>*

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1 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221568035242698>

2 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221516794121702>



One post was about vaccines donated from France, where Igor Matovič said he understood that all the members of the EU had problems acquiring enough vaccines, and he appreciated the help from France.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the previous three posts about the Russian vaccine Sputnik V., this post about France was very mild and understanding towards the EU. Similarly, in the last of those five posts, he talked about celebrating the V4 project, which should not be an alternative to the EU but a part of the EU.<sup>4</sup>

These posts showed the unclear stance of Igor Matovič towards the EU and his ability to adapt his narrative about the EU to current needs. Three posts are an illustration of negative emotionality towards the EU. In the context of the vaccine campaign of the EU, criticised by Igor Matovič as being too slow, he is indirectly accusing the EU of ‘needless deaths’ and ‘lockdowns’. To compare it with positive emotionality about the EU, we have to choose from the other posts, which were also selected for analysis of the likes and comments. For example, in one post, he informed followers about a finished video summit with the EU leaders concluding:

*We have just finished the video summit with the EU leaders... mainly about the vaccines, mutations, measures. I thanked Ursula von den (spelling mistake in her name in his post, not in the paper's transcription) Leyen for the excellently conducted negotiations with the manufacturers... with a note that nowadays, even many Eurosceptics are probably happy that we are a part of this great European project.*<sup>5</sup>

This positive emotional post about the EU was published before Igor Matovič secretly bought the Sputnik V. vaccines without waiting for the EMA to approve it. He was similarly positive about the EU in October 2020, informing his followers that the EU wants to ‘take the Slovak way’ regarding the whole country’s COVID-19 testing, a highly unpopular measure in Slovakia. Even though the EU never told the members to test the whole population on COVID-19 as Slovakia did, Igor Matovič praised the EU as a project itself at the same time when his measure was a topic at the EU summit. Among neutral posts were those in which he informed his followers about ‘the current summit’ or his flying to Brussels for the summit, sometimes supplemented with a photo.

These findings supported the Králiková et al. (2020) research conducted before the parliamentary election in 2020 about the Euroscepticism of parties on the scale from hard Eurosceptics to euro-federalists, according to which Igor Matovič’s party OĽaNO had mixed emotions about the EU. The party’s members are divided on the question of the EU, with a part of them supporting the EU

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3 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221584235007682>

4 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221488783421452>

5 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/igor.matovic.7/posts/10221279171261279>

and another part of them condemning the EU. Igor Matovič's narrative proves that he, as a party leader, does not care what his legislators think about the EU because he does not have a clear stance either. Igor Matovič seems to relate his sentiments about the EU not with the agenda of the EU itself but with his agenda, his own successes and failures, and his role in the information about the EU. If the EU compliments him, as in the case of the whole country's COVID-19 testing, he praises the EU as a great project. If the EU does not do what Igor Matovič wants, as was the case of approving Sputnik V vaccines, he criticises the EU.

In the other 30 posts selected for further analysis of likes and comments, Igor Matovič received, on average, 3,953 likes per post. Posts were shared on average 163 times, with 854 comments per post on average. Igor Matovič served as prime minister of the Slovak Republic from 21 March 2020, until his resignation on 30 March 2021, and he assisted in EU summits. Therefore, he had first-hand information he could have shared on Facebook with his followers. He is a regular Facebook user with several posts a day. However, he often says the same thing in two or three posts. For example, on 10 December 2020, he posted five posts about the EU in 24 hours, repeating himself.

Regarding emotionality, Igor Matovič was more positive about the EU than negative. However, his posts with negative emotionality were more engaging for his followers. The four posts bearing negative emotionality got, on average, 5,976 likes per post, reaching as high as 12,000 likes for one post. On the other hand, the 21 posts bearing positive emotions got 3,655 likes per post on average. Most of the comments were off-topic, but out of those related to the EU, the number of comments opposing Igor Matovič's emotionality was three times higher than those agreeing with him. Followers oppose him significantly more in the comments when he is negative about the EU. When Igor Matovič speaks positively about the EU, 17.38 percent disagree with him, while when he speaks negatively about the EU, 48.83 percent disagree with him. His negative emotionality posts are more engaging, but not to agree with him, to disagree with him.

Facebook users can show their emotions also through emoticons when giving likes, but the data collected for this study showed that the likes known by the symbol of the thumbs-up is still the most widely used. Interestingly, even though followers generally react with more likes to posts with negative than positive emotionality, there is no big difference in using various emoticons when reacting to posts with positive and negative emotionality. For example, followers clicked on Love, known by the heart symbol, in 6.09 percent of all likes given to the posts bearing positive emotions and in 5.42 percent of all likes given to the posts bearing negative emotions. The most significant difference is in the emoticon Angry, for which usage on posts with negative emotionality was almost double compared to positive posts: followers used it in 3.52 percent of all likes given to the posts bearing positive emotions and in 6.32 percent of all likes given to the posts bearing negative emotions.

The followers' engagement depended significantly on the topic. Igor Matovič posted about the pandemics of COVID-19, euro funds, climate change, migration, Belarus and Alexander Lukashenko's regime; he informed followers about the upcoming negotiations and kept them posted during and after the talks. His posts included all the coding manual's topics except Russia (in the analysis of likes and comments) and Leaving the EU. All the topics except for the Criticism of the EU were mostly positive. It does not mean all the posts on a particular topic had a positive sentiment. It means that there were more positive posts than negative ones. It is more evidence of Igor Matovič's ability to change his narrative according to his current needs. Nevertheless, the least engaging topic for his followers was migration and Belarus / Alexander Lukashenko. On the contrary, these topics were highly engaging for the followers of far-right and ultra-right politicians. On the other hand, the most popular among the followers was criticism of the European Union, meaning posts in which Igor Matovič criticised the EU, as mentioned earlier, mainly because followers wanted to oppose him.

### ***Peter Pellegrini***

I selected eight posts for further analysis since Peter Pellegrini does not post much about the EU. He prefers national interests to those of the international community and a strategy he calls 'all four cardinal points'.<sup>6</sup> This means that Slovakia should work with the EU as well as with Russia. Even in the posts mentioning the EU, he usually shows little sentiment towards the Union compared to Igor Matovic. Still, there were no neutral posts. Even though the sentiment was hidden in context or showed only slightly, it was there. For example, he expressed solidarity with Austria in one post after the terrorist attack in Vienna in November 2020. He wrote, 'The fight against terrorism is one of the basic security challenges of the EU, and I see the terrorist attack in Vienna as an attempt to intimidate us.'<sup>7</sup> In the context of the post and the situation, this post bore positive sentiment toward the EU because he highlighted the European Union's role in the fight against terrorism. Hiding the positive sentiment was typical in his posts. The same was apparent in some posts with negative sentiment. For example, the post about a Slovak citizen's death in Belgium said, 'Friends, in connection with the tragic death of Slovak citizen Jozef Chovanec, I am very concerned about the information coming from Belgium.'<sup>8</sup> He described Brussels as incompetent in solving the situation. He added that he sent a letter

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6 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=561011424887118>

7 Available here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1789882221179174&id=403027089864701](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1789882221179174&id=403027089864701)

8 Available here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1735005783333485&id=403027089864701](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1735005783333485&id=403027089864701)

to the president of the European Parliament, David Sassoli, to pay attention to the case. Nevertheless, in other negative posts, he was more straightforward. For example:

*TENDENTIOUS VISITS FROM BRUSSELS ARE UNACCEPTABLE! The MEPs' visit to Slovakia to evaluate the level of the rule of law and democracy ended in a fiasco. They turned their backs on the truth. They ignored the meeting with the opposition, and they listened only to the government that confused justice with political revenge with a blatant attempt to manipulate investigations and create a police state. In addition, the Head of the Delegation expressed support for the government, and it is clear that such behaviour undermines people's confidence in European institutions. We consider such visits by MEPs to be unnecessary, biased, and it will be best for Slovakia if they quickly pack their bags and leave. We consider it unacceptable and unnecessary to slander Slovakia and give us advice when the Belgian police murdered an innocent Slovak citizen.<sup>9</sup>*

Peter Pellegrini got 3,694 likes per post on average. Posts were shared on average 178 times, and there were 584 comments per post on average. Posts with positive emotionality received more likes and were more commented on than posts with negative emotionality. While positive emotionality posts received, on average, 5,212 likes per post and 811 comments per post, negative emotionality posts received 2,177 likes per post and 357 comments per post. There was no significant difference in the prevalence of various emoticons in the case of posts with negative and posts with positive emotionality. The percentage of almost all emoticons was similar except for Sad. Posts with positive emotionality received 5.36 percent of Sad emoticons, and posts with negative emotionality got 0.03 percent of Sad emoticons. This result seems to go against the basic logic, but the analysis of the comments also showed that his followers disagree with his positive feelings about the EU. They are angry about it or – as we can see in the emoticons – sad.

Typically, Peter Pellegrini posts about events were not mentioned in the coding manual since they were considered less important, for example, the aforementioned terrorist attack in Vienna. Of the topics in the coding manual, one post was about the EU funds, one was about Russia and one was criticism of the EU. All three bore negative emotionality towards the EU. His followers reacted extensively to posts classified as Other, even though they were just empty words concerning the EU. For example, the post where he expressed solidarity with Austria after a terrorist attack was very engaging for his followers. Peter Pellegrini showed positive emotionality towards the EU, but his followers criticised the EU in the comments. This is a repeating pattern in Peter Pellegrini's posts.

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9 Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=384181883155272>

The numbers show that when Peter Pellegrini talks positively about the EU, most of his followers comment off-topically, and only a few comments express the same positive feelings about the EU. On the other hand, more than 7 percent oppose him, expressing negative feelings about the EU. However, when Peter Pellegrini talks negatively about the EU, more than 27 percent of his followers agree with him and express the same negative feelings about the EU.

In general, positive posts were more engaging, and even though in the comments followers did not agree with Peter Pellegrini's positive feelings about the EU, these posts received more than double the number of likes compared to posts with negative emotionality. There was no significant difference in sharing positive and negative posts. Neither was a significant difference in various emoticons available for giving a like.

### ***Boris Kollár***

All seven posts selected for further analysis bore negative emotionality towards the EU. Boris Kollár's opinion about the EU is unequivocal. The biggest issue for him is the liberal values the EU honours. He, on the contrary, spreads racist and homophobic views. For example, he shared a picture of the EU flag with text in the middle of the circle of stars: 'Ema has a burka. Mother is a father. Greta is right. Ahmed is at home here. Oh, we are doing fine.'<sup>10</sup>

It was a caricature of a text used by children to learn to read. He attacked Muslim women, LGBTI people, environmental activists (Greta Thunberg) and refugees fleeing war in Syria or Afghanistan (because Ahmed is not at home in Slovakia, according to Boris Kollár). In another post dedicated to the government's plans to reorganise the healthcare system, he said:

We cannot, just because of the commitment to Brussels, cancel access to healthcare in the regions when we do not know the situation. I go to those regions regularly and visit all those hospitals, and I will talk to those people. And then I am willing to support the draft law that will address this reform.<sup>11</sup>

The post was about the Slovak healthcare system, but he took the opportunity to attack the EU, blaming 'the commitment towards Brussels' for issues in the Slovak healthcare system.

Boris Kollár received 516 likes per post on average, 77 shares per post on average and 187 comments per post on average. It would be much less without one extremely engaging post for his followers: the EU flag with racist and homophobic text. This post was shared 336 times, it got 718 comments and 1,493

<sup>10</sup> Available here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2951329665188089&id=1464024763918594](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2951329665188089&id=1464024763918594)

<sup>11</sup> Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/BorisKollarOfficial/posts/411553196994963>

likes, of which 653 were standard Thumbs-up and 418 were Haha. In general, his followers usually use the classic Thumbs-up or Haha emoticon when he tries to be funny on Facebook. On average, per one post, 67.1 percent of the likes were classic Thumbs-up, 16.4 percent were Haha emoticons and the third most popular was the Angry emoticon with 5.5 percent. It is essential to realise that these Haha emoticons were on posts with negative sentiments about the EU and, in many cases, racist and homophobic views, which sounds dangerous for the EU's liberal values.

The sentiment is evident from the comments. Of all the comments, 76.7 percent were off-topic, 22.3 percent were same-minded and only 0.9 percent were opposing. His followers used language similar to Boris Kollár and were similarly hateful. For example, we can find comments saying that 'the EU is a criminal pact based on the project of the Nazi Walter Hallstein, who used to work on Hitler's project'<sup>12</sup> or that 'Europe needs the same gun laws as the USA, and then they in Brussels will stop with this bullshit'.<sup>13</sup> Of the topics described in the coding manual, Boris Kollár wrote posts about Migration, Criticism of the EU and Others. All of them bore negative sentiment, with Migration and Criticism of the EU being more engaging for the followers than Others.

## **Marián Kotleba**

Marián Kotleba is an ultra-right politician. He celebrates the First Slovak Republic, a client state of Nazi Germany during World War II, and president Jozef Tiso, who collaborated with Germany in the deportations of Jews. He spreads racist views, mainly about the Roma people. He despises sexual minorities. He is often described as a neo-Nazi, even though he denies it. His stance toward the European Union is crystal clear, and all eleven posts selected for further analysis had negative emotionality towards the EU. He received 1,278 likes per post on average, 380 shares per post on average and 231 comments per post on average, with predominantly the same sentiment as his own. Marián Kotleba's speech is hateful and raw, often vulgar. For example:

*The representatives of the European Union must really take something very strong. It is said that a new long-term migration plan and an even division between solidarity and responsibility. STOP! We can never let the euromadmen destroy our beautiful Slovakia, and it doesn't matter whether it's by making us accept migrants whom we don't need here at all or because of the covid-19 projects or other world-dominating reasons! We cannot forget that even though corona is the topic number one nowa-*

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<sup>12</sup> Available here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2951329665188089&id=1464024763918594](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2951329665188089&id=1464024763918594)

<sup>13</sup> Available here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=2926909424296780&id=1464024763918594](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2926909424296780&id=1464024763918594)



*days, madmen in the Union have not given up on their plans to destroy the identity of European countries through massive crowds of migrants! We shall be alert, and we shall watch closely the steps of current Matovič's government, which tries to present itself as a conservative government, but in reality, it is a euro-celebrating government!!! We reject the Union that only wants to dictate to us and forbid us! We reject the Union that wants to melt us in the boiler of multiculturalism! We refuse to commit national suicide!*<sup>14</sup>

His followers react similarly. Of the four politicians, Marián Kotleba received the highest proportion of Angry emoticons, reaching 8.95 percent of all likes in general. It is a lot considering that the classic Thumbs-up is still the most widely used (in the case of Marián Kotleba, the classic Thumbs-up reached 82.36 percent of all likes). Regarding the comments, 77.32 percent were off-topic, 2.9 percent opposed his negative sentiment and 19.58 percent were same-minded in their hatred towards the EU. For example, when he launched a petition for Slovakia to leave the EU, he asked his followers to sign it in one post on Facebook. They predominantly agreed with his negative feelings about the EU and commented that the EU is 'a dictator' or 'a posthumous child of the SS'.<sup>15</sup>

Topically, he posted about leaving the EU. Besides that, he defended the regime of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, and he criticised the migration policy of the EU or vaccination against COVID-19 since he is convinced vaccines are health and life-threatening and COVID-19 is a 'project'. The most engaging for his followers was the post about the regime of Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko. It is slightly influenced by the fact that many of his followers despise NATO as well as the EU.

## **Discussion**

At the beginning of the data collection (12 January 2022), Peter Pellegrini had the highest number of followers on Facebook (313,532), followed by Igor Matovič (281,015). Two more extremist politicians had a smaller followership, starting with Boris Kollár (145,525) and ending with Marián Kotleba (47,212). The numbers seem to favour Igor Matovič and Peter Pellegrini. However, it does not reflect followers' activity or sympathies with the politicians. Using the number of likes, shares and comments per post on average for every politician and calculating likes, shares and comments per follower per 10k posts, Figure 1 shows the disproportion of followers' activity. Marián Kotleba, although followed by the smallest number of followers, gets the most attention from them

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<sup>14</sup> Available here: [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=150838816700427&id=103101388140837](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=150838816700427&id=103101388140837)

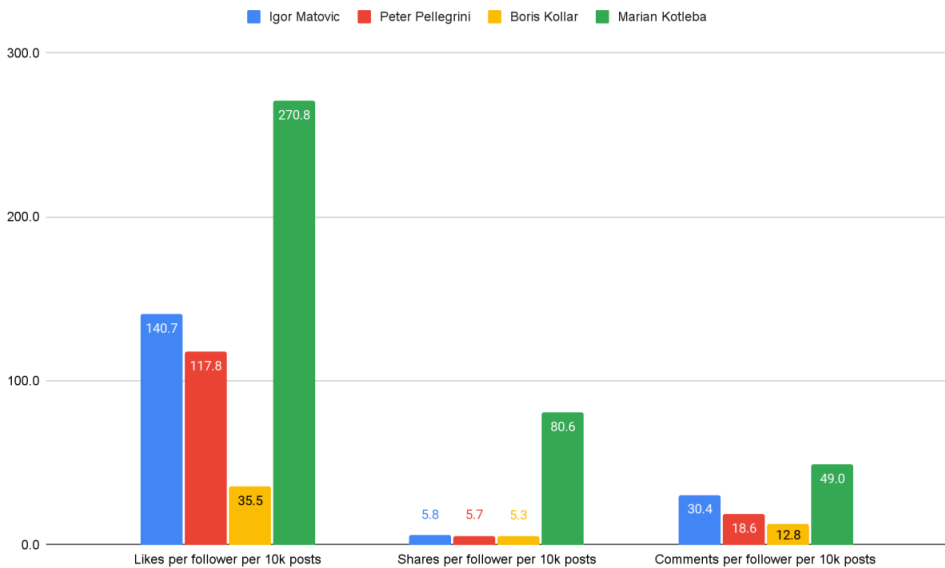
<sup>15</sup> Available here: <https://www.facebook.com/Kotlebaofficialfanpage/posts/367072905105176>



because, proportionally, they are the most active among the four studied cognitive authorities' followers.

Marián Kotleba received almost double the average number of likes per post as Igor Matovič, who was the second most liked politician. Marián Kotleba also had the highest proportion of shares. Sharing means spreading the news, called word of mouth. Studies have shown that it can significantly influence political preferences (Parmelee – Bichard 2012: 214). While Marián Kotleba had 80.6 shares per follower per 10k posts, the other three politicians oscillated between 5.3 and 5.8 shares per follower per 10k posts. The difference in comments was not that significant, but Marián Kotleba's Facebook posts were the most commented on from the four politicians selected for this study. Interestingly, Boris Kollár, even though he is also on the far right of the political spectrum like Marián Kotleba (although not that far), is not as liked, shared or commented on as Marián Kotleba. On the contrary, his followers are the least engaged. It might be interesting for future studies to analyse what makes the difference. One point that stood out in this research as a difference between Marián Kotleba and Boris Kollár was obvious from emoticons used by followers when giving likes.

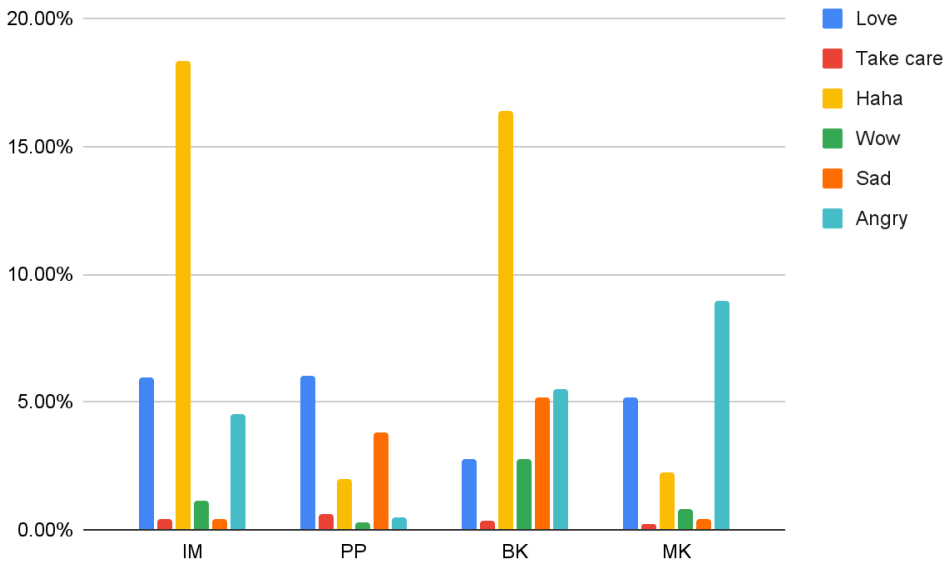
**Figure 1: Number of likes, shares and comments per follower per 10k posts for Igor Matovič, Peter Pellegrini, Boris Kollár and Marián Kotleba.**



Boris Kollár, as well as Igor Matovič, received a high proportion of Haha emoticons because they tend to write funny posts, often joking or being ironic. On the other hand, Marián Kotleba received the highest proportion of Angry emoti-

cons among all of the subjects, which is not surprising following his hateful, vulgar and aggressive speech. Marián Kotleba rarely jokes; if he does, his jokes are very spiteful. The hatred is more present in Marián Kotleba's posts than in Boris Kollár's posts which might be the reason for the higher engagement of Marián Kotleba's followers than Boris Kollár's. But it does not change the fact that the Haha emoticon in Boris Kollár's posts might represent negative sentiment. When Sandoval-Almazan and Valle Cruz (2020) used sentiment analysis on Facebook in the Mexican pre-election period, they admitted that identifying the sentiment of the Haha emoticon was challenging. Their research concluded that Haha emoticons expressed negative sentiment in the posts where Sad and Angry emoticons were prevalent. In Boris Kollár's posts, the percentage of Sad as well as Angry emoticons was double the percentage of the Love emoticons. On the contrary, in Igor Matovič's posts, the prevalence of the Love emoticons to Angry was apparent and to Sad emoticons very significant (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Percentage of different like emoticons for posts of Igor Matovič (IM), Peter Pellegrini (PP), Boris Kollár (BK) and Marián Kotleba (MK) on average per post without the classic Thumbs-up.**



Similarly to Igor Matovič, Peter Pellegrini also received a high proportion of Love emoticons. They tend to conclude the post by showing their efforts or achievements, and followers might reward them with Love. These numbers indicate positive sentiment in likes for Peter Pellegrini and Igor Matovič's posts. However, it is not the case in the comments in which followers expressed nega-

tive sentiment towards politicians' views in a significantly higher proportion than in Boris Kollár and Marián Kotleba's cases. The percentage of off-topic comments is almost the same for all politicians. However, while the percentage of same-minded comments (sharing the same sentiment as the politician about the EU) oscillated between 5 and 8 percent on average in Igor Matovič and Peter Pellegrini's posts, the numbers for Boris Kollár's and Marián Kotleba's posts were running around 20 percent (see Figure 3).

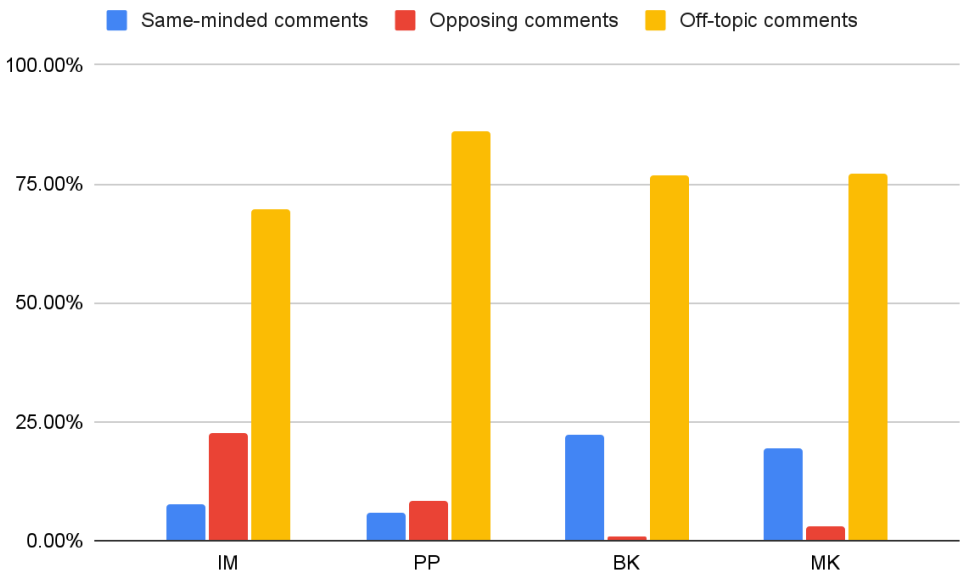
Two conclusions could be made. First, because of the difference in sentiment in likes and comments, followers who agree with Igor Matovič and Peter Pellegrini give them likes, while followers who disagree with them comment on their posts. According to previous studies, negative emotionality increases likes (Heiss – Schmuck – Matthes 2018: 14). This was true in Igor Matovič's case but not Peter Pellegrini's. His positive posts received more than double the number of likes compared to posts with negative emotionality. In the comments, followers agreed with him more on negative posts than positive ones. We might assume that Peter Pellegrini's followers who agree with his positive sentiment about the EU give him likes, while followers who disagree with his positive sentiment about the EU criticise the EU in the comments. On the other hand, Igor Matovič's followers tend to defend the EU when Igor Matovič criticises it, and they do not tend to criticise it when Igor Matovič praises it.

Secondly, followers in the comments agree significantly more with Boris Kollár and Marián Kotleba than with Peter Pellegrini and Igor Matovič because of their extremism. It is evidence of selective exposure when Facebook users follow a politician with the same-minded opinions because they want to expose themselves to ideas approving their views. According to Golbeck and Hansen (2011), 66 percent of followers follow (but on Twitter) politicians who support their views. However, selective exposure makes one's views more extreme (Moscovici – Zavalloni, 1969; Myers – Lamm, 1976; Sunstein, 2003). It might explain why extremist politicians have more same-minded followers: they have grown more extreme by following those politicians. Data collected for this paper suggest that moderate followers who mainly support the EU are not actively showing their support on Facebook, while users with negative views of the EU express their sentiment more often.

These followers who openly express their negativity about the EU tend to react to topics that can be highly emotional. For instance, COVID-19 pandemics, including vaccines against COVID-19, were engaging for Igor Matovič's followers but even more for Marián Kotleba's followers. Even when bearing in mind that Igor Matovič's posts about the Russian vaccine Sputnik V. bore negative emotionality towards the EU, positive emotionality in his posts about the pandemics was still prevalent. On the contrary, in the case of Marián Kotleba, the emotionality was negative in all the posts about the pandemics, mainly because of his harsh anti-vaxxer stance. We can see the same pattern in the

topic of migration or Belarus and the regime of Alexander Lukashenko. While Igor Matovič condemned Lukashenko's regime, Marián Kotleba condemned the intervention of the EU and NATO. While Igor Matovič received in posts about Belarus on average 85.21 likes on average per post, Marián Kotleba got 594.34. The negativity, hatred and spreading of fear are more engaging than condemning dictatorship.

**Figure 3: Percentage of same-minded, opposing and off-topic comments on average per post for Igor Matovič (IM), Peter Pellegrini (PP), Boris Kollár (BK) and Marián Kotleba (MK).**



## V. Conclusion

Social media dynamised the concept of cognitive authority. Politicians are more visible than ever and can interact with their electorate daily. Becoming a cognitive authority might be more accessible, but, on the other hand, so is losing the role of cognitive authority. However, we can see a difference between more modest politicians' followers and more extremist politicians' followers. Far-right (Boris Kollár) and ultra-right (Marián Kotleba) politicians are positive cognitive authorities. Followers with extremist views tend to follow their leaders more devotedly and openly express their support. Their views are polarised, and since they expose themselves only to reinforcing information provided by far and ultra-right politicians, they become even more extremist. Followers of more modest politicians on the political spectrum are not that interested in

engaging. Rarely do they show support for the politicians, and more often they criticise them. Negativity and hatred produce positive cognitive authorities on Facebook, while moderation and positive emotions create a space for criticism and produce negative cognitive authorities with whom followers do not agree.

Social media offers an environment where we can study followers' reactions to politicians. Social media are free to access and publish. The sentiment analysis can help understand public opinions even though it is hard to generalise the results. For example, according to Eurobarometer from Spring 2021, 43 percent of the Slovak population trusts the EU, while on Facebook most comments bear negative emotionality toward the EU. This means people who support the EU do not actively express their support on Facebook.

To sum up, the results do not necessarily mean that Peter Pellegrini and Igor Matovič are not positive cognitive authorities for many voters, while Boris Kollár and Marián Kotleba are. The results might suggest that while extremist voters express their sentiment on Facebook, moderate voters do not. However, understanding the views of those who are active on Facebook can help prepare an educational programme about politics and the EU based precisely on the needs of those who lack the information. Then, in a well-informed society, democracy can thrive.

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