

Analysis
of political
narratives
on TikTok
during the
2024 election
campaign



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Key findings

Mapping out the Croatian political sphere on TikTok

We were able to map out the scope of Croatian politics on TikTok - the first endeavor of its kind. We found the presence of 11 relevant political parties, as well as 32 national politicians. Political parties include the center-right ruling party HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union), the social democrats SDP (Social Democratic Party), the greens Možemo (We Can), the far-left Radnička fronta (Worker's front), the social conservative Most (Bridge), and the far-right Domovinski pokret (Homeland Movement). Notable politicians include the Prime Minister and HDZ president Andrej Plenković, the leader of SDP Peđa Grbin, the leader of Radnička fronta Katarina Peović, the coordinator of the Možemo party Sandra Benčić, the parliament representatives from Most Marin Miletić and Nikola Grmoja, and the leader of Homeland Movement Ivan Penava. Therefore, the analysis shows that TikTok contains a variety of top-down Croatian political narratives, from far-left to far-right.

When it comes to user generated political content, we mapped out 33 TikTok accounts. These range from unofficial support pages for political parties and politicians, additional dissemination pages for politicians, meme pages, anti-system and conspiratorial pages, and educational/informative accounts. Most of the content of these unofficial accounts reposted politician statements, showing that a TikTok Croatian bottom-up political perspective is not as prevalent as the top-down one.

Our politics, not theirs

Observed politicians and political parties can be divided into three groups: HDZ as the ruling party, the pro-democratic and pro-EU mainstream opposition to HDZ, and the national sovereign and anti-EU alternative scene. HDZ based its political narratives on a democratic, pro-EU position, highlighting the improvements that the EU and HDZ brought to Croatia. Notably, the language and tone used in TikTok campaign do not match the usual social media communication style of HDZ (a [denigrating, insult-ridden discourse against all opposition parties](#)). The second group is defined by a pro-EU and pro-democratic narrative based on an anti-HDZ identity, which highlights the rampant corruption caused by HDZ's government as the main issue. The last group represents politicians and political parties that base their narratives on the criticism of the political mainstream, defined by populism, anti-corruption principles, national sovereignty, conspiratorial beliefs, and anti-EU tones.

An apparent lack of disinformation, despite the ruling party being caught in spreading falsehoods...

The deep dive into the published content from politicians and political parties revealed a lack of disinformation during the national parliament election campaigns. Despite a singular case of purposeful and deliberate disinformation spreading - notably coming from the ruling party HDZ, [which took a statement](#) from the Croatian President Zoran Milanović out of context - there were no registered disinformations by relevant Croatian fact-checkers in this time frame.

...but also an influx of conspiratorial and anti-democratic narratives

On the flip side, conspiratorial and anti-democratic political narratives ran rampant during the electoral campaign. They dominantly came from nationalistic, anti-globalistic, and far-right politicians and political parties, such as Domovinski pokret, Most, Pravo i pravda, and Odlučnost i pravednost, whose politicians criticised the EU and its politics, disseminating anti-LGBT, anti-migrant, anti-Bruxelles, anti-vaxx, and anti-establishment narratives marred in conspiracy theories. Notable examples are the Great Reset, and the Great Replacement conspiracy theories, which point to the presence of a coherent anti-globalistic and anti-EU worldview on Croatian political TikTok accounts.

TikTok popularity does not equal electoral success

A comparison of TikTok audience metrics and the electoral results reveals that being popular on TikTok does not translate into electoral success. Five out of the ten politician/political party accounts with the highest post count did not enter the Parliament (Radnička fronta, Katarina Peović, Mate Lukić, Ivan Pernar, and Ava Karabatić). Additionally, the same happened to three out of the ten politician/political party accounts with the most followers (Ivan Pernar, Ava Karabatić, and Karolina Vidović Krišto). Notable examples include Ivan Pernar, a populist politician who cultivated the largest support community (149.691 followers) and had the highest number of video plays, and Ava Karabatić, a reality TV star with the highest post count.

The foreign enemy never sleeps!

International conflicts and politicians were rarely the focus in the analyzed posts, with only a handful of politicians ever mentioning anything related to Vladimir Putin, the Ukraine-Russian war, or the Israeli-Palestine war (Ava Karabatić, Možemo, Mislav Kolakušić). However, the EU and Brussels were frequently seen by Domovinski pokret and Most as enemies of the people due to their “desire to push their political agenda, narratives, and goals into national politics”.

One-sided forays into the enemy zone

An interesting behavioral aspect of users that comment on TikTok posts was detected. In both official and unofficial political account posts, right-wing users were more likely to comment on account posts opposite of their political beliefs. These comments were predominantly negative, criticising the work of the political parties and politicians that made the post, while claiming that their party would win. The same was not the case with left-wing oriented users, who mostly commented support for accounts that shared their values. Therefore, the (far) right-wing users have a tendency to breach their political safe spaces, voyaging to “hostile” areas in order to patrol and criticise.

Posts in numbers

The 76 observed TikTok accounts had 2.259 posts - 1.313 posts by politicians/political parties (58.06%), and 946 by unofficial political accounts (42.94%). Thus, official political content slightly prevailed over the citizen-made one. Looking at user engagement, these posts accumulated a total of 458.431 reactions, 26.188 comments, 9.895.803 video plays, and 129.839 shares. Official accounts had 229.338 user reactions (50.02%), 18.749 user comments (71.15%), 5.769.273 video plays (58.30%), and 65.848 post shares (50.71%). Unofficial ones had 229.093 user reactions (49.98%), 7.439 user comments (28.85%), 4.126.530 video plays (41.70%), and 63.991 post shares (49.29%). These numbers reveal that unofficial political accounts almost matched the overall user engagement of official accounts (except for user comments), despite having a lower number of posts.

Summary of evidence based policy suggestions

Improving monitoring of online political campaigns

Due to the use of social media in election campaigns, the SEC should, alongside monitoring campaign costs, place more emphasis on their digital content. Gong suggests that it monitors digital campaigns more proactively, sanctioning politicians/political parties for breaching election rules.

Greater transparency of social media electoral campaigns

Data on the usage of social media accounts by politicians and political parties remains underreported. This information can be obtained only by manually collecting data, or using hard-to-get tools. Gong recommends that the State Electoral Commission obliges political parties and politicians to timely provide publicly available, machine-readable reports on the usage of their official social media accounts during the electoral campaign. These reports should differentiate statistics for each social media platform which they use, containing follower count change and the post count during the electoral campaign period. In addition, these reports should contain a list of posts for each social media account, their content, post metrics (likes, shares, comments, total views), and post link.

Obligatory cataloging of political candidates' official social media accounts

In order to improve transparency of politicians' and political parties' social media accounts, from which they communicate with citizens, Gong proposes that the State Electoral Commission creates guidelines for electoral advertisement, through which they would oblige political candidates to deliver information on their official social media accounts, with links. Additionally, Gong recommends that other institutions and public bodies follow suit. For instance, the official website of the Croatian Parliament contains personal pages for all elected representatives, with personal information such as their education, date of birth, etc. Missing from it is a list of official social media accounts which they use, which would be helpful for monitoring their political communication.

Protecting children and minors

Observed TikTok content reveals anti-democratic, conspiratorial, and bigoted communication, which easily reaches underaged users. Also, evidence of manipulating children for political gains was found. Gong suggests that the relevant national bodies, especially the Ombuds-woman for Children, react more proactively, in order to sanction those responsible and prevent the manipulation of minors.

Regulating democratically dangerous narratives

Gong insists that the Croatian national regulator for Digital Security Act, HAKOM, should, in preparation for its introduction into Croatian legislature, actively monitor social media, and observe if electoral campaigns comply to the DSA and its electoral guidelines, which seek to suppress inauthentic behavior, deep fake content and non-transparent influencers. All this leaves room for foreign influence on the electoral process, which cannot be countered by a single body. Therefore, HAKOM should also establish coordination with other relevant national regulatory and monitorial bodies, in order to work together towards the prevention of foreign influence on digital platforms.

Introduction

With three rounds of elections set to take place by the end of 2024 (parliamentary, EU parliamentary, and presidential elections), Croatia is faced with an extremely important year for liberal democracy. Notably, citizens are gathering at election polls to give support to politicians and political parties three times under economic, international, and political uncertainty, fear, danger, and change. On a national level, Croatia is faced with strong inflation, numerous corruption scandals, and a sudden influx of foreign workers. On an international level, its citizens are witnessing two deadly wars, while the entire EU is experiencing the rise of far-right, eurosceptic, and anti-globalistic¹ political options, which threaten its stability and political direction.

It is in these haphazard conditions that politicians communicate political narratives, showcasing their visions of what states and society can and should look like in order to gain electoral support. Therefore, electoral campaigns are prone to clashing, as these different political narratives interact with one another. This creates room for divisive rhetoric and even disinformation spreading, swaying and manipulating public opinion, and jeopardizing free and fair elections. Such situations often occur on social media platforms, with frequently mentioned concerns about concealed political advertising, AI-generated “deepfakes”, and foreign interference. Such concerns have prompted EU initiatives to safeguard democratic principles in the digital age, yet adequately addressing these threats in specific contexts requires an evidence-based approach.

Out of all the social media platforms, TikTok is known as the fastest growing social media platform preferred by younger users, yet political communication on this platform remains insufficiently researched in the SEE. For instance, political ads are officially banned from the platform; however, TikTok does not seem to be actively monitoring users to prevent promoting political messages in paid ads. It is for this reason that the analysis works to identify polarising narratives and potential disinformation associated with parliamentary elections in Croatia, contributing to a better understanding of how platforms like TikTok are used to specifically target younger voters in political communication, and help detect risks associated with reinforcing existing biases and polarising communities. The results of the analysis will serve as the foundation for a set of policy suggestions directed at national policy stakeholders. These policy suggestions aim to improve the regulation of online political campaigns, raising awareness of the risks to democracy and election integrity posed by unregulated political communication on social media platforms. They are listed in the conclusion of the analysis.

1 By anti-globalistic, we refer to statements against both globalist actors, and globalistic politics and trends.

Methodology

The primary research goal is to collect and analyse political narratives on TikTok, the fastest-growing social media platform preferred worldwide by users between the ages of 16 and 24, before and during the parliamentary elections in Croatia. Therefore, the analysis focuses on political content on TikTok created by politicians and political party accounts (official sources, or top-down political narratives), and regular accounts that share political content (unofficial sources, or bottom-up political narratives). The analysis contains a systematic overview of existing TikTok accounts of politicians and political parties (election candidates), while also deploying a quantitative content analysis to categorise political topics present in the analysed TikTok content and determine their frequency and political nature.

In order to capture electoral political content, the research focuses on content published between March 1st - April 24th 2024. Since the Croatian parliamentary elections were held on April 17th 2024, with the official campaign lasting from March 30th to April 16th, this time frame gives an ample amount of pre-election content, while also including a week of post-election content, in order to capture politicians' and political parties' reactions to the election results. The research seeks to determine how the topics inside the observed posts are approached, and discern which pose a threat to liberal democracy. Thus, special attention is given to polarising narratives (associated with questioning membership in the EU/NATO, Russian aggression towards Ukraine, relations with neighbouring countries), and narratives that undermine the integrity of elections (disinformation narratives aimed at manipulating voters). A separate segment of the analysis is dedicated to the analysis of any misinformation/disinformation found on political accounts, including those targeting politicians or those related to specific topics, focusing on content, topic, and targets. Reports by relevant Croatian fact-checkers (Faktograf, Lupiga) are used to determine whether electoral content is considered disinformation.

To detect, extract, and prepare relevant content, an external contractor - [LetsData](#)² - was hired. Initially, the researchers explored TikTok, using hashtags and searching for politicians' and political parties' names to find official political accounts. These same hashtags and keywords were then used to uncover unofficial political accounts - defined as accounts whose content was predominantly of a political nature. They are seen as potential sources of citizen, bottom-up political narratives, which can influence TikTok users. This initial list was given to the external contractor, who used AI tools to further monitor TikTok, collecting data and gathering it into the analytics database Elastic. This gathered data was available to researchers, who searched, queried, visualized, and exported the data, which made analysing the content possible. Through this method, 76 accounts were processed, gathering a total of 2.259 posts during the selected time frame - 1.313 posts were made by politicians and political parties, while 946 were made by unofficial political accounts.

2 LetsData is an AI start-up company that helps organizations identify communication risks and opportunities. It allows one to follow topics in the news and social media, gathering data on a dashboard for in-depth analysis.

The analysis is separated into two parts. The first maps out the existing official and unofficial political accounts on Tiktok, noting their posting activities, popularity, and other interesting insights. The second part focuses on exploring the political narratives within the gathered posts, noting the frequency of individual topics, the ways in which they are talked about, and detecting pro-democratic and anti-democratic narratives. It also includes an overview of the disinformation, noting the account that spread it, and the content of said disinformation.

Results

Mapping out the TikTok political sphere

Our investigation into the Croatian political sphere on TikTok uncovered a total of 76 profiles - 43 official political accounts, coming from political parties and politicians, and 33 unofficial accounts, coming from citizens. Across the 76 observed TikTok accounts, there were a total of 2.259 posts - 1.313 posts were made by politicians and political parties (58.06%), while 946 were made by unofficial political accounts (42.94%). Looking at user engagement, these posts accumulated a total of 458.431 reactions, 26.188 comments, 9.895.803 video plays, and 129.839 shares. Thus, official political content slightly prevailed over citizen made political content.

Looking at user engagement, these posts had a total of 458.431 reactions, 26.188 comments, 9.895.803 video plays, and 129.839 shares. Regarding official accounts, they had 229.338 user reactions (50.02%), 18.749 user comments (71.15%), 5.769.273 video plays (58.30%), and 65.848 post shares (50.71%). Moving on to unofficial accounts, they had 229.093 user reactions (49.98%), 7.439 user comments (28.85%), 4.126.530 video plays (41.70%), and 63.991 post shares (49.29%). These numbers reveal that despite having a lower number of posts, unofficial political accounts almost matched the overall user engagement of official political accounts, except for the number of user comments. The full table of post count and user engagement can be found in the appendix of the analysis.

Posting habits and account metrics

Focusing on official political accounts, we found 11 TikTok accounts belonging to political parties, and 31 TikTok accounts belonging to politicians. These political parties included the center-right ruling party [HDZ](#) (Croatian Democratic Union), the social democratic party [SDP](#) (Social Democratic Party), the green party [Možemo](#) (We Can), the far-right [Domovinski pokret](#) (Homeland Movement), the far-left [Radnička fronta](#) (Worker's Front), and the social conservative [Most](#) (Bridge). As for politicians' TikTok accounts, we detected the presence of various politicians across the political spectrum - these include far-right politicians ([Mate Lukić](#), [Stipo Mlinarić](#), [Karolina Vidović Krišto](#)), eurosceptic conservatives ([Nikola Grmoja](#), [Miro Bulj](#), [Mislav Kolakušić](#)), far-left communists ([Katarina Peović](#)), the center-right (prime minister [Andrej Plenković](#)), liberal-center ([Dalija Orešković](#)), the progressive liberal greens ([Sandra Benčić](#)), as well as the social democratic left ([Mirela Ahmetović](#)).

By observing their posting habits and user engagement, we detected clear differences between politicians and political parties. Some official political accounts were noted for high numbers of published posts, while other users seldom used their TikTok accounts. The accounts with the highest number of posts included [Ava Karabatić](#) (125 posts, 9.54% of official account posts), a TV reality star who entered the electoral race as an independent politician, only to become a candidate for Ivan Pernar's Party, [Ivan Pernar](#) (98 posts, 7.48%), a populist and anti-system politician, Možemo, the green party (81 posts, 6.18%), Mate Lukić (65 posts, 4.96%), and the social conservative party Most (65 posts, 4.96%). Interesting to note is the fact that out of the ten official political accounts with the highest number of posts, five represented established political

parties, two represented previously elected politicians (Katarina Peović, a communist, and [Marin Miletić](#), Most politician and religious anti-vaxxer), and three represented outsider politicians (Ava Karabatić, Ivan Pernar, and Mate Lukić, a far-right politician). As for the official political accounts with the lowest number of posts, these included Sandra Benčić (3 posts), Dalija Orešković (4 posts), [Ivica Puljak](#) (5 posts), [Martina Vlašić Iljkić](#) (6 posts), and [Ivica Todorić](#) (6 posts).

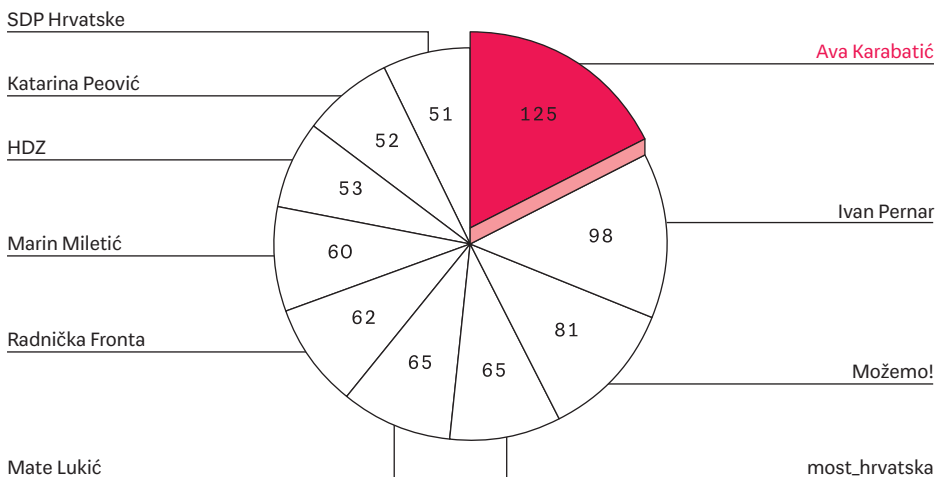


Figure 1: The 10 official political accounts with the highest number of posts

Looking at the follower count of official political accounts, a different set of prominent politicians and political parties is revealed. By noting the number of followers of each official political account, Ivan Pernar was shown to be the most popular politician on TikTok (149.691 followers), followed by prime minister Andrej Plenković (38.760 followers), Mislav Kolakušić (36.311 followers), Marin Miletić (17.356 followers), and Ava Karabatić (14.180 followers). Compared to the posting frequency, the follower count reveals that individual politicians are more popular than political parties. While five political party accounts were included in the highest post count list, only two were included in the highest follower count list (Možemo and HDZ). As for the official political accounts with the lowest number of posts, notable mentions include [Socijaldemokrati Hrvatske](#) (133 followers), [Martina Vlašić Iljkić](#) (187 followers), [Davor Bernardić](#) (285 followers), [Radnička fronta](#) (352 followers), and [Predrag Fred Matić](#) (401 followers).

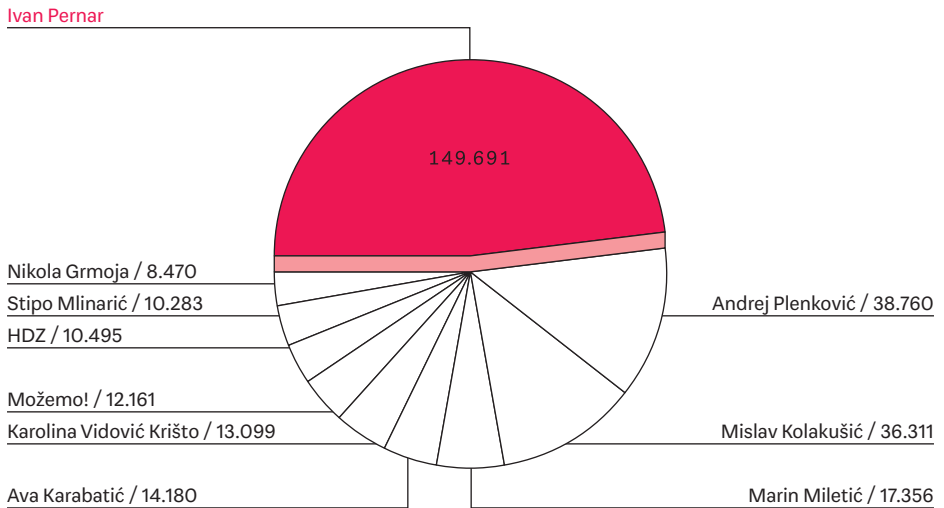


Figure 2: The 10 official political accounts with the highest follower count

Based on these results, TikTok represents an important asset and tool for politicians and political parties, and one that they do not ignore. There is a strong presence of official political accounts of different political stances, that make the effort to consistently post political content for Croatian TikTok users. However, more interesting is the fact that alternative and outsider politicians represent the most dominant TikTok political accounts, with the highest post numbers and follower counts. This insight reveals that these politicians, who often lack official political party support, party infrastructure, and traditional media presence, use TikTok as a tool to bypass media gatekeeping, and reach a wider audience. Regardless of this fact, it is important to note that there is a disparity between the most popular and active official political accounts, and the electoral success on the Croatian parliamentary elections. A comparison of TikTok audience metrics and the electoral results reveals that being popular on TikTok does not translate into electoral success. Five out of the ten politician/political party accounts with the highest post count did not enter the Parliament - Radnička fronta, Katarina Peović, Mate Lukić, Ivan Pernar, and Ava Karabatić. Additionally, the same happened to three out of the ten politician/political party accounts with the most followers - Ivan Pernar, Ava Karabatić, and Karolina Vidović Krišto. Therefore, being popular and active on TikTok is not enough to guarantee electoral success.

Next, we move on to unofficial political accounts, representing citizen accounts dealing with politics. In a sense, they are grassroots accounts that inhabit the Croatian political sphere of TikTok. Out of the 33 found accounts, the analysis again uncovered the presence of a diverse number of accounts. These included 17 support/criticism accounts for politicians and political parties (notably SDP, Možemo, Ivan Pernar, Možemo, Most,

Mislav Kolakušić, and Karolina Vidović Krišto), six informative accounts (which presented curated news, and guides on how to vote), four meme accounts, dedicated to satirizing politics, and six anti-system accounts, dedicated to opposing the nature of the Croatian political system.

Clear differences were detected among unofficial political TikTok accounts, after observing the post and follower counts. Notable unofficial political accounts include [Ne Možemo](#) (108 posts, 11.41% of the total post count), an anti-Možemo account which frequently criticises its politicians, [KingInvictusOfficial](#) (103 posts, 10.88%), an fringe informative channel, [Zagreb Istok Bez Cenzure](#) (82 posts, 8.66%), another anti-Možemo account, [Jan Klasinc](#) (71 posts, 7.50%), a meme page which satirises politics, especially HDZ, and [fenomentastic](#) (65 posts, 6.87%), a support account for Most. It is interesting to note that in the ten unofficial accounts with the highest post count, two of them were based heavily on criticising and opposing the Možemo party. The unofficial political accounts with the least amount of posts included [Duke of Croatia](#) (1 post), [Croatian Nationalist](#) (2 posts), an anti-migrant account, [ZA DOMOVINU](#) (3 posts), a support account for Domovinski pokret, [PolitikaVibez](#) (4 posts), a support account for Možemo, and [Superizborna godina](#) (6 posts), an informative account with election guidelines.

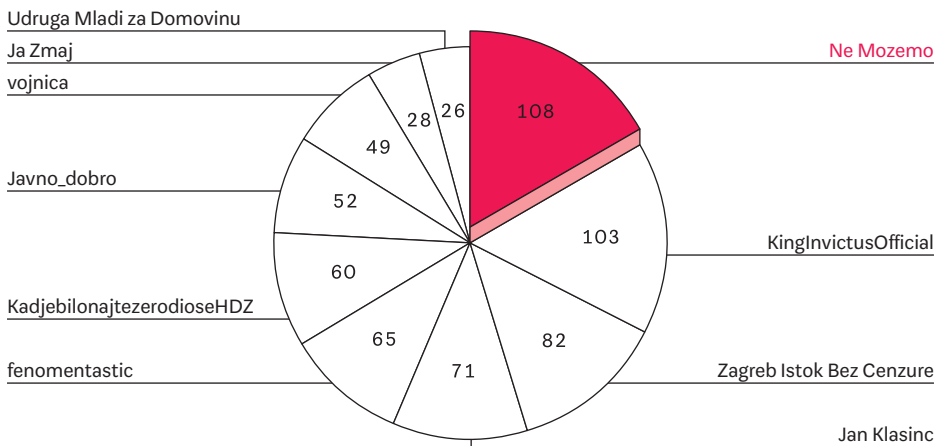


Figure 3: The 10 unofficial political accounts with the highest number of posts

Compared to official political accounts, the unofficial ones had similar post frequency among its top ten most active accounts. However, significant difference was found in the follower count, with unofficial accounts having an overall lower number of followers. Among the unofficial political accounts with the highest follower counts were [politika za gen Z](#) (10.506 followers), a support account for progressive-liberal female politicians, KingInvictusOfficial (9.571 followers), Ne Možemo (6.853 followers), Fenomentastic (5.933 followers), and [Mladi za Karolinu i OIP](#) (4.698 followers), a support account for Karolina Vidović Krišto. The unofficial political accounts with the lowest follower count include [CRO-politico](#) (76 followers), an anti-SDP and anti-Možemo account, Superizborna godina (122 followers), an informative account focused on electoral information, [Dezinformacije i izbori](#) (196 followers), another informative account focused on raising awareness on disinformation, PolitikaVibez (211 followers), a Možemo support account, and [Razmontiranje](#) (219 followers), a satirical account dedicated to making fun of the political opposition.

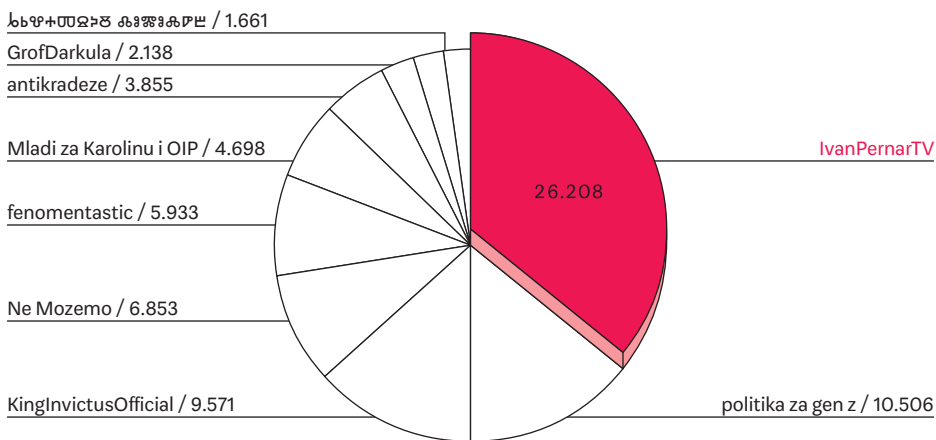


Figure 4: The 10 unofficial political accounts with the highest follower count

A notable aspect of unofficial political accounts is that they create new content less frequently (with a few accounts being the exception, such as GrofDarkula, [crotrad-wave](#), and Jan Klasinc), opting rather to share snippets of politician speeches, statements, and news articles. Therefore, the unofficial political accounts of TikTok do not provide a bottom-up view and sentiment of politics, but rather act dominantly as additional disseminators of top-down political narratives. Lastly, the analysis revealed an interesting behavioral aspect of users that write comments under TikTok posts. In both official and unofficial political account posts, right-wing oriented users were more likely

to post under accounts that were opposite of their own political beliefs. These comments were dominantly negative in nature, criticising the work of the political parties and politicians in question, while claiming that their party will win. The same was not the case with left-wing oriented users, who mostly posted support in accounts that shared their ideals. Therefore, the right-wing users, notably those belonging to the far-right, have a tendency to breach their political safe-zones and spaces, voyaging to “hostile” areas in order to patronise and criticise others.

Analysis of political narratives

The second half of the analysis focuses on political narratives found in the collected TikTok content. By detecting the topics found in individual posts of both official and unofficial political accounts, the analysis reveals the frequency of specific topics, as well as the political narratives which are contained within. Additionally, by monitoring the work of prominent Croatian fact-checking organisations, we noted any and all disinformation which was published during the analysed time frame.

Official political accounts

Regarding the official political accounts, a total of 665 topic references were detected, with the most prevalent ones being self promotion (86 references), criticism of the ruling party (60 mentions), anti-migrant sentiment (57 references), voter mobilisation (56 references), social policy advocating (56 references), and anti-corruption stances (55 references). The most infrequently mentioned topics were Putin appreciation (2 references), discussions on international conflicts (4 references), promotion of Fascist gestures (7 references), and criticism of the Croatian President Zoran Milanović (10 references).

The politicians and parties that communicate these topics can be divided into three groups - HDZ as the pro-EU and pro-democratic ruling party (predominantly focusing on topics of self-promotion, social policy advocacy, criticism of Croatian president), the pro-democratic and pro-EU mainstream opposition to HDZ (referring to topics of self-promotion, criticism of ruling party, voter mobilisation, opposing corruption), and the national sovereign and anti-EU alternative scene (mainly oriented to topics of ruling party criticism, anti-migrant sentiment, emphasis of national sovereignty, and anti-LGBT, EU, and elite sentiments). HDZ based its content on a democratic, pro-EU position, highlighting the improvements which the EU and HDZ brought to Croatia.³ The second group (SDP, Možemo) is defined by a pro-EU and pro-democratic narrative, based on an anti-HDZ identity, which highlights the rampant corruption as the main issue. The last group represents those politicians and political parties which base their narratives on the criticism of the political mainstream, defined by populism, anti-corruption principles, national sovereignty, conspiratorial beliefs, and anti-EU tones. The full list of topics, alongside the frequency of their appearance, a short description, and

3 Notably, the used language and tone of the TikTok campaign does not match the usual social media communication style which HDZ uses, which is a denigrating, insult-ridden discourse against all opposition parties.

the most prominent accounts that mentioned them, can be found in the following table:

Table 1: Frequency of political topics among official political accounts

Topic	Frequency	Description	Prominent accounts
Self-promotion	86	Promoting party and/or politician successes, hard work, and popularity. Listing reasons why they could govern Croatia, and why voters should vote for them. Frequent usage of political spots.	HDZ, SDP, Možemo
Criticism of ruling party	60	Explicit criticism of HDZ, its ministers, and its prime minister Andrej Plenković. Notable examples are that they are ruining Croatia and its people by clinging to power, and that they allow rampant corruption to spread across all societal sectors. Criticised by almost all political parties.	SDP, Možemo, Most, Ivan Pernar, Domovinski pokret
Anti-migrant sentiment	57	Negative perception of the rising number of migrants in Croatia. Claims that they are ruining the work conditions of domestic workers (economic position), and that they are rapidly changing the societal structure (cultural position). Comes from the sovereignistic political parties.	Mate Lukić, Nikola Grmoja, Domovinski pokret, Most, Marin Miletić, Mislav Kolakušić
Mobilising voters	56	Attempts to motivate and mobilise voters to participate in the elections. Highlighting the voters' power to make a difference, and decide on the direction of the state.	Možemo, SDP, Ava Karabatić, Stipo Mlinarić
Advocating social policies	56	Emphasising the need for social public policies implementation, in order to raise the quality of life in Croatia. Dominantly focused on education, health, worker rights, wages, and social security.	HDZ, SDP, Možemo
Opposing corruption	55	Criticising rampant systemic corruption in Croatia, especially in independent institutions. Declaring one's anti-corruption stance, and promising investigations. Comes from the political opposition, focused on the ruling party HDZ.	SDP, Možemo, Most, Karolina Vidović Krišto, Nikola Grmoja
Emphasising national sovereignty	41	Prioritising national sovereignty, and the need for national interests to prevail over globalistic ones. Focused on protecting national border integrity, and making sure that laws and policies favour the nation. Present in the national sovereign and alternative political sphere.	Mate Lukić, Marijan Pavliček, Marin Miletić, Most, Mislav Kolakušić

↓

Topic	Frequency	Description	Prominent accounts
Anti-globalist sentiment	40	Negative portrayal of globalist institutions and elites, which push their own „insidious“ interests and goals onto national governments and societies. Politicians who follow their directions are seen as „traitors“ which follow „their politics, not ours“. Present in the national sovereign and alternative political sphere.	Marin Miletić, Nikola Grmoja, Domovinski pokret, Mislav Kolakušić
Anti-LGBT sentiment	36	Highlighting the dangers of gender politics and LGBT rights for the traditional family structure. Focused on the fear that these narratives will „corrupt“ children, and on a rejection of „parent 1, parent 2“ concept. Present in the national sovereign and alternative political sphere.	Mate Lukić, Ivan Pernar, Domovinski pokret
Anti-elitism statements	29	Portraying political parties as the same entity, populated by similar political elites. Describing the political system as two hills (caught between SDP and HDZ as a two party system), where choice seemingly does not matter. Present in the national sovereign and alternative political sphere.	Ivan Pernar, Marin Miletić, Most
Anti-EU sentiment	27	Strong rejection of the EU influence on national politics, which supersedes national interests and needs with globalistic ones. Comes from the sovereignist and alternative political scene.	Marin Miletić, Domovinski pokret, Marijan Pavliček, Mislav Kolakušić
Pandemic grievance	22	Pandemic measures grievances due to the restrictions on personal freedoms, which are seen as being unconstitutional and illegal. Also, criticism of mandatory vaccination, which are seen as being useless, with demands to open investigations on the work of experts who handled the pandemic. Comes from the sovereignist and alternative political scene.	Ivan Pernar, Most, Marin Miletić, Mislav Kolakušić
Anti-media sentiment	22	Attacking the news media for ignoring certain societal issues, refusing to provide visibility for alternative politicians, collaborating with HDZ, and rigging polls. Comes from the sovereignist and alternative political scene.	Ivan Pernar, Karolina Vidović Krišto, Mate Lukić, Marin Miletić
Advocating conspiracy theories	21	Advocating for the Great Reset and Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which are being deliberately pushed by globalist elites to destroy national states and societies. The end result would be the introduction of a rootless and directionless society under the digital dictatorship. Comes from the sovereignist and alternative political scene.	Marin Miletić, Nikola Grmoja, Domovinski pokret, Mislav Kolakušić, Marijan Pavliček



Topic	Frequency	Description	Prominent accounts
Promoting women's rights	16	Fighting for the acknowledgement and improvement of women's rights. Focus on equality of men and women, on placing more women onto official electoral lists, and advocating for pro-abortion procedures and laws (including transforming the practice as a constitutional right).	Možemo, Ava Karabatić, Katarina Peović, SDP
Anti-capitalist sentiment	12	Listing the dangers of capitalism, and how it oppresses and chains citizens, especially workers. Focused on a Marxist criticism of capitalist structures, institutions, and elites which promote it.	Radnička fronta, Katarina Peović
Anti-communist sentiment	10	Noting the dangers of communism, and Croatia's oppression in the socialist Yugoslavia. Focusing on the need to prevent the rise of communism in Croatia.	Mate Lukić
Criticism of Croatian president	10	Attacks on the Croatian President Zoran Milanović for his unconstitutional inclusion into the parliamentary elections, as SDP's leading politician. Emphasizing the dangers of such a maneuver for electoral integrity.	HDZ
Promoting fascist gestures	7	Usage of Ustasha (Croatian fascists) symbols, salutes, and quotes.	Mate Lukić
Discussing international conflicts	4	Declarations that a ceasefire should be brokered between the two warring states, and that Croatia has been pushed into the conflict by the EU.	Možemo, Mislav Kolakušić
Pro-Putin statements	2	Positive perception of Vladimir Putin as a successful politician.	Ava Karabatić
TOTAL	665		

Analysing the way in which these topics are communicated by official political accounts provides insight into the existing TikTok political narratives, revealing a political scene split between pro-democratic and anti-democratic narratives. The pro-democratic political narrative on TikTok consisted of criticism of the ruling party, criticism of the Croatian president (which questions the constitutionality of a president entering the parliamentary elections), promotion of women's rights (Možemo's demands for gender equality), anti-corruption stances, advocating social policies, mobilising voters and encouraging them to politically participate, and self-promotion. The pro-democratic political narrative on TikTok consisted of 600 posts (45.80% of total official political account posts), which gathered a total of 143.070 user likes (62.38%), 12.627 user comments (67.34%), 2.878.011 post views (49.88%), and 24.695 post shares (37.50%).

This narrative was emphasized by mainstream politicians and political parties, such as HDZ, SDP, Možemo, Sandra Benčić, and Dalija Orešković (despite the divide between HDZ as the long-lasting ruling party, and the entire political opposition). The political narratives coming from the TikTok accounts of these political actors are rooted in a dedication to democratic values (pluralism, liberalism, tolerance), a general acceptance of globalistic political tendencies, an acceptance of the Croatian political system and election results, and promotion and dedication to both the European Union, and the European integration of Croatia. When communicating their political content to TikTok users, these accounts never questioned the role and position of the EU, its influence and impact on Croatia, nor did they advocate national sovereignty. Additionally, the communication style of these actors was always polite and tolerant of other politicians and political parties. This was true even for SDP and Možemo, which strongly criticise the ruling party HDZ, expressing belief that its rule is ruining Croatia and spreading corruption, and the far-right Domovinski pokret, which is seen as endangering human rights, liberty, and democratic values. Despite such statements, these political actors never questioned the electoral results, after HDZ won the relative majority.

On the other hand, the anti-democratic political narrative on TikTok was far more developed, consisting of a number of anti-democratic, anti-hegemonic, and anti-globalistic topics. They included the promotion of fascist gestures (from an apologetic stance of the Ustasha regime), advocating conspiracy theories (which bring into question the legitimacy of the Croatian democratic political system), espousing anti-media sentiment (blaming traditional media for limiting media presence of alternative politicians), promoting pandemic grievances (accusing pandemic measures as a method of planned removal of personal freedoms), emphasizing an anti-globalistic, anti-EU, and anti-elite stance, and expressing anti-migrant views (both for legal and illegal migrants). This anti-democratic political narrative on TikTok consisted of 710 posts (54.19% of total official political account posts), which gathered a total of 86.134 user likes (37.62%), 6.089 user comments (32.66%), 2.886.246 post views (50.12%), and 19.084 post shares (62.50%).

Of political actors which promoted the anti-democratic political narrative, notable ones include Domovinski pokret, Most, Ivan Pernar,⁴ Ava Karabatić, Karolina Vidović Krišto, Mislav Kolakušić, and Mate Lukić. This second group is defined by its anti-democratic stance (against pluralism, liberalism), and its demand that Croatia must resist globalistic and EU influences and interests. For them, globalistic actors force their interests and goals onto national societies, uprooting them from national and traditional values, and in doing so, endangering them. These “dangerous” influences include promotion of LGBT rights (which are deemed “woke ideology”, and seen as endangering children and family structure), pushing for accepting migrants (which are deliberately allowed to enter societies). In this narrative, mainstream politicians that do not oppose such influences are seen as foreign collaborators and traitors. Instead of promoting and advocating politics which put Croatian interest in first place, they push globalistic politics - framed as promoting “their politics, not ours”. These globalistic enemies are portrayed vaguely, except for the EU, which is clearly pointed out as forcing a globalistic agenda.

This anti-globalistic sentiment was deeply rooted in advocacy for national sovereignty. While national sovereignty is not necessarily an aspect of anti-democratic political narrative, it is important to note that only accounts which espoused this type of narratives contained mentions of national sovereignty. In their posts, these actors often highlighted the crucial need to place national interests, as well as the national society interests, above all other interests. Therefore, calls to oppose EU decisions, and reject their demands, were frequently seen in their posts. Additionally, this “national interests first” sentiment was commonly accompanied by criticism of migrants, which are seen as presenting a danger for the homogeneity of the national society, and a threat to job security. Additionally, the influx of migrants in Croatia was often presented as a fault of both the national political elites which “allow and encourage” their coming, and of the EU, which is insidiously undermining national societies.

Notably, support for Putin was not strongly present in this anti-democratic narrative. However, the clear desire to limit the EU’s influence on national states, alongside the rejection of global progressive liberal values, and the fear of globalistic agendas, provides arguments for concluding that these are actors which would take a neutral stance towards the Ukraine-Russia war. This is most clearly found in Mislav Kolakušić’s posts. In this stance, the EU is seen as a globalistic power which forced national states into supporting Ukraine, without giving them the ability to decide on their own whether they wished to do so. Commonly, this line of thought will state that the EU is deliberately prolonging the conflict, that it should instead broker for peace, and that national states such as Croatia have no reason to take a stand in the conflict, as it is not related to them. This stance clearly favours Russia in the end, as it weakens the EU response, and works towards further strengthening of national sovereignty claims.

4 Ivan Pernar’s self-promotion Tiktok posts can be considered a special case, due to the fact that he frequently filmed himself in close proximity to elementary and secondary schools, engaging with underage pupils. This is especially troublesome given the fact that their parents did not consent to this, and that he published the videos with the children on his official TikTok account, in order to gain political support.

This narrative was frequently combined with explicit mentions of conspiratorial beliefs, which all share the belief that powerful globalistic entities are conspiring against national societies. Notable examples include the espousal of the Great Reset (globalistic forces are actively trying to reshape the world into a single global, dictatorial, state) and the Great Replacement conspiracy theory (globalistic forces are deliberately increasing the number of immigrants in national societies to replace the domestic citizens for easier control), which point to the presence of a coherent anti-globalistic and anti-EU worldview on Croatian political TikTok accounts. This type of belief represents an extreme version of the usually present anti-globalistic sentiment, because rather than simply criticising international institutions, it presents them as deliberately working against the interest of national states.

Unofficial political accounts

Moving on from official political accounts onto unofficial accounts, a total of 676 topic references were detected. The most dominant ones included criticism of politicians (225 references), making fun of politicians (116 references), informing citizens (113 references), supporting politicians (98 references), and mobilising voters (27 references). As for the most infrequently mentioned topics, these included promoting a pro-LGBT sentiment (2 references), advocating social policies (7 references), espousing anti-abortion beliefs (7 references), advocating conspiracy theories (8 references), and promoting anti-migrant sentiment (12 references).

These unofficial political accounts can be divided into four groups - support/criticism accounts for political parties and politicians, meme pages, anti-system accounts, and educational/informative accounts. The first group consisted of accounts which provide support, or criticism, of politicians and political parties. These criticisms and support mostly came from conservative-oriented accounts, which either criticised left-wing politicians and political parties for their values, and right-wing ones for their lack of commitment to conservative values and politics, or gave support to them. Despite this, there have been some left-wing unofficial accounts that supported left-wing politicians (forum.mladih, politika za gen z). The second group consisted of meme and satire accounts, whose original content dominantly made fun of politics and politicians. The third group was populated by alternative, anti-system accounts, which criticised the Croatian political system, the political establishment, espousing a rejection of politics. The last group consisted of informative accounts, which provided unbiased information to TikTok users, mostly related to electoral dates, rights, and instructions on how to vote. The full list of topics, alongside the frequency of their appearance, a short description, and the most prominent accounts that mentioned them, can be found in the following table:

Table 2: Frequency of political topics among official political accounts

Topic	Frequency	Description	Prominent accounts
Criticism of politicians	226	Voicing dissatisfaction with ruling politicians of the capitol city Zagreb (Možemo), and the state (HDZ, SDP, Most). Dominantly done by sharing statements and quotes from other politicians, where specific parties and politicians are criticised. Less frequently, original content is produced, in which the politicians are criticised.	Ne možemo , KingInvictusOfficial , vojnica , Zagreb Istok bez cenzure
Making fun of politicians	116	Creating meme images and videos, in which politicians and political parties are made fun of. Somewhat frequent use of AI-generated images. Usual targets are Andrej Plenković, Zoran Milanović, Tomislav Tomašević, Sandra Benčić, HDZ, SDP, and Možemo.	Jan Klasinc , antikradeze , Dr. Udo
Informing citizens	113	Helping citizens by informing them on daily political happenings, and by educating them on important electoral dates and voting procedures. Also, advocacy based informing on social issues.	politika , dezinformiranje i izbore , Superizborna godina , pametniizbor , GrofDarkula
Supporting politicians	98	Showing appreciation and support for politicians, usually through playing clips of their speeches, and adding positive messages on top of them. Commonly supported politicians were Dalija Orešković, politicians from Most, and Karolina Vidović Krišto.	Fenomentastic (Most) , Politika za Gen Z (Dalija Orešković, Sandra Benčić, Ivana Kekin) , forum mladih, mladi_za_karolinu_i_oip (Karolina Vidović Krišto)
Mobilising voters	27	Attempts to motivate and mobilise voters to participate in the elections, usually by reminding them of election dates.	Jan Klasinc , GrofDarkula , genz0z4
Anti-EU sentiment	20	Strong rejection of the EU influence on national politics, which supersedes national interests and needs with globalistic ones.	KingInvictusOfficial
Advocating for women's rights	16	Fighting for the acknowledgement and improvement of women's rights. Focus on equality of men and women, making menstruation goods be considered as life necessities, and promoting body positivity.	GrofDarkula
Anti-LGBT sentiment	14	Highlighting the dangers of gender politics and LGBT rights for the traditional family structure, and for women. Noting that pro-EU politicians, such as Možemo, will indoctrinate children.	Ne možemo



Topic	Frequency	Description	Prominent accounts
Anti-migrant sentiment	12	Negative perception of the rising number of migrants in Croatia. Claiming that they are ruining the work conditions of domestic workers, and that they are rapidly changing the societal structure.	Fenomentastic, Ne možemo,
Advocating conspiracy theories	8	Advocating for the Great Reset and Great Replacement conspiracy theory, which are being deliberately pushed by globalistic elites to destroy national states and societies. The end result would be the introduction of a rootless and directionless society under the digital dictatorship. Možemo is seen as a political party which endorses globalistic plans.	Ne možemo
Anti-abortion sentiment	7	Advocate for total restriction of abortion rights, claiming that women kill children through it. Criticising politicians who support abortion in any form.	vojnica
Advocating social policies	7	Emphasising the need for social public policies, in order to raise the quality of life in Croatia. Dominantly focused on education, mental health, and wages.	forum mladih, GrofDarkula
Anti-elite sentiment	5	Framing the political parties as the same entity, populated by similar political elites. Descriptions of the political system as two hills, where choice does not matter.	mladi_za_karolinu_i_oip, ZA DOMOVINU HR
Anti-media sentiment	3	Attacking the news media for ignoring specific societal issues, and for refusing to provide visibility for alternative politicians.	Fenomentastic, Zagreb Istok bez cenzure
Anti-globalist sentiment	2	Negative portrayal of globalist institutions and elites, which push their own „insidious“ interests and goals onto national governments. Politicians who follow their directions are seen as „traitors“ which follow „their politics, not ours“.	Ne možemo, <u>NE_ČE_TE</u>
Pro-LGBT sentiment	2	Support for the LGBT community, noting the need for further improvement of their rights and safety.	GrofDarkula, forum mladih
TOTAL	676		

Looking into the ways in which these topics were touched upon, the analysis is able to provide insights into Croatian citizens' political narratives. First of all, it is important to distinguish the informative and satirical account groups, which seemingly did not contain political narratives, despite having political content. Accounts which based their content on unbiasedly informing TikTok users showed no signs of political narratives, instead providing content which helps voters understand the voting procedure. These accounts included politikica, Razmontiranje, Dezinformacije i izbori, Pametni izbor, and Superizborna godina. The exception is the GrofDarkula account, by far the most popular account in this group, which combined informative content with advocacy, in order to both inform and educate users on various social issues (such as women's rights, LGBT rights). This account also worked to mobilise voters into participating in the elections. These accounts consisted of 100 posts (10.55% of the total unofficial account post count), which gathered a total of 22.247 user likes (9.87%), 1.607 user comments (23.03%), 325.697 post views (8.34%), and 1.984 post shares (3.12%).

So-called meme accounts, which made up the satire account group consisted of such accounts as Dr. Udo, Ja zmaj, Jan Klasinc, and antikradeze. Their content was usually original and unique, consisting of AI generated images and voices, as well as meme images, that made fun of various politicians and political parties. The most commonly satirised politicians were Može mo, politicians Tomislav Tomašević and Sandra Benčić, as well as Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković. These accounts made up 137 posts (14.46%), which gathered a total of 1.349 user likes (0.59%), 412 user comments (5.90%), 54.266 post views (1.38%), and 712 post shares (11.21%).

The most prevalent group of accounts were those who supported or criticised (usually both) certain politicians and political parties. These included accounts such as Ne moze mo, IvanPernarTV, politika za gen z, fenomenastic, and Mladi za Karolinu i OIP. Less relevant and present was explicit endorsement of political narratives, as was the case with the official political accounts, and their polarisation between pro-democratic and anti-democratic stances. Instead, these accounts differed based on which politicians and political parties they supported, or criticised. While these accounts did not themselves mention topics related to any political narratives, the posts commonly included statements and speeches from politicians and political parties. Therefore, the political narratives espoused by these types of accounts depended greatly on the politicians and political parties that they chose to portray in a positive light. Notably, when supporting politicians and political parties, Domovinski pokret, Most, and Karolina Vidović Krišto were more frequent, and the accounts which supported them had the largest amount of posts and user engagement. These are all politicians and political parties which communicated anti-globalistic, anti-EU, and conspiratorial topics in the unofficial account posts - aspects of the detected anti-democratic political narrative. Može mo, on the other hand, was less present as a supported political party in these accounts. Therefore, pro-EU, pro-globalistic, and pro-democratic values, which compose the pro-democratic political narrative, were in turn less frequent. These accounts made up 525 posts (55.43%), which gathered a total of 192.793 user likes (85.55%), 4.144 user comments (59.41%), 3.396.488 post views (86.97%), and 58.928 post shares (92.85%).

Finally, the last group consisted of anti-system accounts, which endorsed opposition and rejection of the current Croatian political system and establishment. Their content consisted of original posts, which attempted to explain to TikTok users why they should not trust any of the political parties, or politicians, and why they should be rejecting globalist forces, such as the EU. These globalistic forces were noted to influence mainstream political parties, which are only following the orders from above. Politicians and political parties which do so are branded as mercenaries and servants of the New World Order. These types of accounts had 185 posts (19.53%), which gathered a total of 8.946 user likes (3.97%), 812 user comments (11.64%), 128.759 post views (3.29%), and 1.840 post shares (2.89%).

Overview of disseminated disinformation during the election

A special segment of the analysis revolves around found disinformation, which was detected during the elections. The deep dive into the published content from politicians and political parties revealed a lack of disinformation during the national parliament elections campaigns. This is confirmed by the fact that relevant Croatian fact-checkers did not list any cases of disinformations coming from politicians and political parties, except one case.

On March 22nd, the ruling party HDZ published content on their social media, in which they took a statement from the speech of the Croatian president Zoran Milanović out of context, presenting it in a way which was deliberately misleading. Namely, the president spoke about the Constitutional Court's decision to prevent Zoran Milanović from being an official candidate for the prime minister, discussing the possibility of having the election results be annulled. In that speech, he discussed the following with a journalist:

Journalist: *Do you expect that they (Constitutional Court) might annul the elections, or the SDP electoral list after the elections have passed?*

Milanović: *Well, what did I just talk about?*

Journalist: *But you now talked about the election date?*

Milanović: *That's when they can start apprehending, without selection. At least try. And then see where they get. They cannot, they mustn't. They mustn't meddle in the election date.*

Journalist: *Not the election date, but the election results, that is, the SDP election list...*

Milanović: *After the elections?*

Journalist: *Yes.*

Milanović: *I told you, apprehend everything from them, and take their children for hostages. Just as they have now taken SDP for a hostage, in this case this party. How can you think to annul it, based on what? The entire list in all 10 electoral constituencies...*

Journalist: *You just now said that they can do anything...*

Milanović: *They act as if they can do anything..."*

The transcript clearly shows that Milanović is referring to the Constitutional court's powers, commenting on their ability to supersede the president's will, and the electoral body's decision. However, HDZ took out one of the sentences outside the context of the speech, writing the following post:

“Apprehend them all and take their children for hostages”. That is the Croatia that Milanović wants. We knew that the breaker of the Constitution wanted to apprehend, sue, and judge, but we did not know that he wants to steal children from Croats. And he fears to step down from his presidential position and face Andrej Plenković.”

The post included a short video clip from Milanović's speech, cut just so that one can hear: *“After elections. I told you, apprehend everything from them, and take their children for hostages.”* This was quickly detected by fact-checkers, who reported on the matter. Also, the [Ethics Committee](#) officially [reacted](#) by publishing a statement, after receiving a report. In it, the content of the report was omitted, noting only that it “reminds all election participants to conduct the pre-election competition freely, openly, publicly and with arguments, and in opposition to less well-founded and reasoned criticism.” Additionally, the statement came with a warning, in which they “call on the media not to publish content that contradicts the fundamental values and rules of the Electoral Code of Ethics.”, without explicitly stating that the warning comes because of HDZ's post. Yet this still did not prevent traditional news outlets from publishing articles with the statement taken out of context, only later correcting themselves by providing the full context and statement. Additionally, a number of social media user accounts and groups proclaimed that Milanović is after them, showing that this disinformation did in fact spread on the internet. However, as stated previously in the analysis, instead of individual disinformation, more relevant and prevalent were entire conspiratorial narratives, which portrayed current social issues and situations through the lens of a massive globalistic conspiracy.

Conclusion:

**Recommendations
to improve the
regulation of online
political campaigns**

The analysis reveals a thriving, complex, and dynamic TikTok political landscape in Croatia, characterized by a split between pro-democratic and pro-EU narratives, and anti-democratic, anti-EU narratives. These two political narratives were spread across official and unofficial political accounts, and were communicated towards TikTok users through references to various topics that reflect underlying societal and political concerns. The mainstream political scene, with parties like HDZ, SDP, and Možemo, advocates for democratic engagement, social policies, and anti-corruption measures, aligning with European values and cooperation. In contrast, Domovinski pokret, Most, and figures like Mate Lukić, Ivan Pernar, Karolina Vidović Krišto, and Mislav Kolakušić, promote nationalist, anti-globalist, and conspiratorial narratives, that challenge the foundations of democratic governance and European integration. As far as their presence on TikTok goes, both political narratives prevailed over a certain aspect of user attention (likes and comments for pro-democratic, post count, views and shares for anti-democratic). Additionally, the unofficial political accounts were noted to be dominated by support/criticism accounts for various politicians and political parties, which simply shared politician's speeches, furthering the existing political divide.

By noting the frequency of specific topics, the nature of the detected political narratives, and the overall user engagement generated by accounts that disseminate them, the analysis was able to provide valuable insights into the ways in which political narratives are disseminated towards a younger userbase on TikTok. Through it, we managed to get a glimpse into the political dynamics that influence present voter sentiments that are shaping Croatia's future. Based on these findings, the conclusion of the analysis seeks to raise awareness among national policy stakeholders on risks for democracy and election integrity posed by unregulated political communication on platforms like TikTok.

Improving monitoring of online political campaigns

As social media become more integrated in our lives, online political campaigns become a more prominent method for politicians and political parties to reach potential supporters. Therefore, politicians and political parties place greater emphasis on running online electoral campaigns, raising the importance of their official social media accounts. Yet despite this trend, the State Electoral Commission has not placed stronger emphasis on online political campaigns, despite monitoring campaign spending on social media. Notably, spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories, and using fake profiles on social media during the (pre)election campaign does not result in this body sanctioning politicians and political parties. In addition to official communication from politicians and political parties, TikTok hosts a diverse number of unofficial political accounts, which spread their own political content. Although their engagement fosters the freedom of expression and grassroots initiatives, these same accounts can be used to run covert electoral campaigns, launder money, and spread foreign influence.

Due to this fact, Gong suggests that the State Electoral Commission should, in addition to monitoring campaign costs, place more emphasis on their digital content. Gong suggests that the SEC monitor digital campaigns more proactively, sanctioning politicians and political parties for breaching election rules.

Greater transparency of social media electoral campaigns

Per Croatian electoral regulation, political parties are obliged to deliver financial reports for their electoral campaigns to the State Electoral Commission. These financial reports are also required to include social media expenses for the social media electoral campaigns. Yet when these reports are looked into, it is common to lump all financial expenses for social media campaigns as one expenditure line, making it difficult to determine how much was spent for campaigning on individual social media platforms. In addition to unclear expenses for social media platforms, information on social media usage during the electoral campaign remains difficult to collect and observe. Citizens, researchers and NGOs can only manually collect links for individual posts and post metrics, making it difficult to monitor and analyse the electoral campaigns of politicians and political parties. This in turn makes it harder to hold them accountable for the manner of political communication deployed during the electoral campaign, as well as to investigate how their expenditures for social media campaigning looked like.

Therefore, Gong recommends that the State Electoral Commission obliges political parties and politicians to timely provide more detailed, machine-readable reports on the usage of their official social media accounts during the electoral campaign to it, which would be made publically available. Notably, these reports should differentiate statistics for each social media platform which they use, and it should contain the follower count change and the post count during the electoral campaign period. In addition, these reports should contain a list of published posts for each social media account, their content, their post metrics (likes, shares, comments, total views), and the post link. This would enable the State Electoral Commission, as well as NGOs and journalists, to monitor and observe the usage and impact of social media for electoral campaign purposes.

Obligatory cataloging of political candidates' official social media accounts

The experience of preparing the analysis shows that collecting a database of official social media accounts of politicians and political parties is made difficult due to a lack of dedicated rules for transparency of communication sources. For instance, political parties often list their official social media accounts on their websites, but politicians, which usually lack personalised websites, do not do so. This makes finding their official social media accounts harder than in the case for political parties, making citizens, NGOs, and journalists resort to manually discovering them, or by hiring web-scraping experts.

In order to improve transparency of politicians' and political parties' social media accounts, from which they communicate with citizens, Gong proposes that the State Electoral Commission creates guidelines for electoral advertisement, through which they would oblige political candidates to deliver information on their official social media accounts, with links. This list should be publicly available at all times. Additionally, Gong recommends that other institutions and public bodies follow suit. For instance, the official website of the Croatian Parliament contains personal pages for all elected representatives, with personal information such as their education, date of birth, etc. Missing from it is a list of official social media accounts which they use, which would be helpful for monitoring their political communication.

Protecting children and minors

An insight from the analysis reveals that political TikTok content frequently contained anti-democratic statements and bigotry, especially coming from the anti-democratic side of observed accounts. As shown by the analysis, this style of communication frequently attempted to gain political support by attacking, defamating, and opposing vulnerable social groups (such as migrants, national minorities, and LGBT groups). This is especially worrisome given the fact that TikTok is the most popular social media platform for underage users, meaning that they have a higher chance of being exposed to such content while in a sensitive age. In addition to exposure to such content, the analysis also revealed that some politicians (Ivan Pernar) post videos of them in close proximity to elementary and secondary schools, filming pupils and using them for publicity stunts. This case shows how politicians can manipulate children and minors for political purposes, and publish online content with them in the videos without the parents' consent.

Therefore, it is Gong's suggestion that relevant national authorities, notably the Ombudswoman for Children, react more proactively to these cases, in order to raise awareness about these issues. In doing so, electoral campaigns would then need to be better regulated, so that more care is given to children on social media, making sure that they are kept safe from dangerous content. In addition, harsher sanctions should be given to those who manipulate children for political gains.

Regulating democratically dangerous narratives

Evidence from the analysis shows that political TikTok content, including comments under posts, were marked by hate speech, anti-democratic values, and conspiracy theories. Since there are no editors that control social media communication, this means that anyone can write without any filters. In addition, these topics and styles of communication operate differently from their offline counterparts, as the speed at which information spreads online is greater. Therefore, deleting dangerous and inappropriate content cannot be the solution, since the "damage" will be done beforehand. This is supported by the evidence from the research, which shows that anti-democratic and anti-EU content is shared more frequently than pro-democratic content, meaning that its messages have been widely disseminated, and any kind of censorship would not be able to prevent it. Notably, official and unofficial accounts, while fostering free expression of speech and grassroots initiatives, are anonymous, making their administrators unknown. Therefore, they can become breeding grounds for insidious foreign influence onto the national political scene, endangering electoral integrity.

To combat such anti-democratic tendencies, Gong insists that the Croatian national regulator for Digital Security Act, HAKOM, should, in preparation for the introduction of DSA into Croatian legislature, actively monitor social media, and observe if electoral campaigns comply to the DSA and DSA electoral guidelines, which seek to suppress inauthentic behavior, deep fake content and non-transparent influencers. All this leaves room for foreign influence on the electoral process, which cannot be countered by the work of a single body. Therefore, HAKOM should also establish coordination

with other relevant national regulatory and monitorial bodies, in order to work together towards the prevention of foreign influence on digital platforms.

Appendix

Table 1: Official political account metrics and user engagement

Account name	Follower count	Post count	Likes	Comments	Views	Shares
Ivan Pernar	149.691	98	31.764	1.551	1.133.634	6.171
Andrej Plenković	38.760	17	55.923	5.276	845.830	22.052
Mislav Kolakušić	36.311	11	6.054	500	92.734	497
Marin Miletić	17.356	60	3.307	319	84.044	289
Ava Karabatić	14.180	125	10.579	316	433.520	3.594
Karolina Vidović Krišto	13.099	36	7.356	587	229.846	1.579
Možemo!	12.161	81	23.667	1.523	371.093	2.938
HDZ	10.495	53	4.654	860	65.187	730
Stipo Mlinarić	10.283	19	8.725	346	115.503	203
Nikola Grmoja	8.470	30	753	199	46.578	166
Domovinski pokret	7.508	27	1.215	176	49.845	153
Ivica Todorčić	7.407	6	39.422	1.454	960.840	18.085
Krešo Beljak	5.603	20	565	177	3.358	617
ljubocesicrojs	3.876	44	8.060	612	277.695	5.221
Marijana Puljak	3.324	32	2.617	903	69.953	253
most_hrvatska	2.996	65	2.427	151	72.784	286
Dalija Orešković	2.635	4	544	193	14.581	35
Sandra Benčić	2.605	3	1.661	567	53.100	51
Dario Zurovec	2.588	16	2.959	267	67.987	213
Katarina Peović	2.548	52	1.371	147	51.917	234
Hrvatski suverenisti	1.913	25	204	24	9.032	19
Goran Kajkić	1.802	28	1.057	206	38.581	326
SDP Hrvatske	1.760	51	2.028	155	31.928	289
Mate Lukić	1.692	65	1.944	548	164.089	291
Marko Milanović Litre	1.448	8	420	33	2.984	33
Ivan Penava	1.146	8	634	112	27.681	59
Ante Kujundžić	1.094	8	421	0	21.425	93
Mislav Kolakušić za premijera	975	20	150	7	10.491	47
Miro Bulj	955	12	652	41	40.574	78
damirhabijan	948	9	418	68	16.272	38
Ivica Puljak	935	5	141	134	9.408	16
Stranka Republika	793	27	4.307	283	122.987	420

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Hrvoje Zekanović	765	14	316	32	27.519	53
stranka Centar	659	22	1.083	270	29.322	264
Marijan Pavliček	614	23	577	195	42.412	60
Mirela Ahmetović SDP	563	25	331	120	18.957	79
fred.matic	401	17	296	444	14.921	18
Radnička Fronta	352	62	303	89	23.776	181
davorbernardic	285	19	509	87	55.881	86
valterflegomep	205	5	1.275	132	58.759	63
Martina Vlašić Iljkić	187	6	256	166	14.219	12
Socijaldemokrati Hrvatske	133	37	54	46	1.126	7



Analysis of political narratives on TikTok
during the 2024 election campaign

