

*Report 3.1.2\_ COMP*  
Rhetoric of fake news in Poland / Czech Republic  
/ Slovakia  
(content analysis)

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# 1. Methodology and main assumptions

The research was conducted on a sample of 1523 (1020 from Poland, 263 from Czech republic and 280 from Slovakia) fake news messages that were published in the Polish, Czech and Slovak language in the time interval January 2023 - November 2024<sup>1</sup>.

The analysis included messages that were recognized as fake (fake news) by fact-checking organizations cooperating in the CEDMO 2.0 project. Specifically, those messages that were labeled as fake news, which refer to facts (provide false or manipulated information/data), were taken into account. Accordingly, debunks that refer to statements made by politicians were not analyzed. The situations in which the primary purpose is not to mislead, but to persuade the recipient to do something harmful to him/her, such as investing money (so-called scam), were also omitted, similarly as reports summarizing trends or disinformation narratives. The limitations adopted were due to the desire to achieve maximum genre and functional purity of the statements analyzed.

Data from the AFP fact-checking portals in Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia (<https://sprawdzam.afp.com/>; [www.napravoumiru.afp.com](http://www.napravoumiru.afp.com), [www.napravoumiru.afp.com](http://www.napravoumiru.afp.com) ) and the Demagog Association portal Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia (<https://demagog.org.pl/>; [www.demagog.cz](http://www.demagog.cz), [www.demagog.sk](http://www.demagog.sk)) were taken into account. The adopted method of producing a corpus of data addresses several difficulties that arise in the context of analyzing disinformation messages. The first is the unambiguous definition of the categories analyzed. In this case, it was assumed that the professional knowledge and competence of fact-checkers, who select material for analysis according to consistent, transparent and coherent criteria, applying specific and precisely described procedures in the analysis and qualification of media messages (in this case, as fake news) allow to maximize the genre purity of the analyzed set of texts. At the same time, using this type of

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<sup>1</sup> The indicated time interval is due to the connection of the conducted analysis with the research conducted within the framework of CEDMO, which covered the period until the end of 2022. The difference in sample size is due to the differing activities of fact-checking organizations in the countries studied. However, given the significant number of texts from all countries, it can be assumed that this difference does not have a fundamental impact on the possibility of comparing the results obtained.



data, we were sure that we are working on texts that are (without any doubt) false, as proven by a professional fact-checking group.

We realize, of course, that such a procedure has resulted in a kind of mediation - as the data set obtained depends on the decisions of the fact-checkers and in this sense, strictly speaking, is not fully representative (in relation to the total set of fake news). It is worth noting, however, that it is not possible to achieve total representativeness in this type of analysis - as there is no complete, total set of fake news available in social media at any given time. It should also be emphasized that - in connection with the criteria used by fact-checkers to select the analyzed disinformation messages, we have finally gained access to a set of data which meets several important criteria, including the criterion of representativeness (in the narrower sense - presenting the dominant trends in fake news messages at a given time) as well as the criterion of validity and social impact (in accordance with professional principles, fact-checkers select materials according to their popularity on the Internet, the intensity of reaction or their 'networking' in the context of other disinformation messages).

In connection with the criteria used by fact-checkers to select the analyzed disinformation messages, we also gained access to a dataset that meets several important criteria, including the criterion of representativeness and the criterion of social validity and impact (according to professional principles, fact-checkers, when selecting the materials they analyze, are guided by their popularity on the Internet, the intensity of the reaction or their "networking" in the context of other disinformation messages).

The use of data provided by AFP and Demagog allowed us to obtain comparative material for all three consortium countries, as both organisations conduct fact-checking activities in Poland as well as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. At the same time, Demagog and AFP remain recognised organisations of this type, which ensures the high quality and reliability of the data obtained. Not without significance for the reliability and representativeness of the obtained data is also the fact that these organisations are characterised by a slightly different context of their activities - the fact-checking department of AFP has a global character and is linked to the activities of AFP as a news agency, while the activities of the Demagog Association in the individual countries of the consortium are not linked to media institutions and have a primarily national character.



## 2. Research questions and coding scheme

The data presented in the report is concerned with two areas:

- a/ framing of the fake news messages (in the context of framing theory),
- b/ rhetoric (in the context of rhetorical theory applied to the analysis of media messages),
- c/ legitimization (in the context of van Leeuwen theory<sup>2</sup>).

The methodology used is intermediate between the classical qualitative method (case study) and quantitative method (e.g. CADS). Thanks to this, by analyzing several hundred examples according to the categories adopted earlier (tested in earlier CEDMO studies and modified on the basis of the experience gained during the implementation of this research) it is possible to capture the tendencies that dominate the structure of fake news messages. On the other hand, the use of elements of qualitative analysis allows us to answer the question of the interrelationships between the various elements and their functions in the analyzed messages to the audience.

In connection with the above assumptions, the research questions posed concern the characteristics and functions of the following elements:

1. framing
2. adopted rhetorical tools
3. adopted legitimization tools

The coding basis was a codebook with the following structure:

### 1. FRAMING

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<sup>2</sup> Van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91-112. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750481307071986> (Original work published 2007).



The categories are based on previous CEDMO research, with the analysis looking at the whole message (image/video + text) and, in line with framing theory, identifying the dominant frame of the message.

Type	Description	Symbol
Conspiracy, alternative knowledge and interpretation of facts	uncovering conspiracies, speaking directly about the existence of a conspiracy; showing alternative knowledge about the world or alternative interpretations of events; sensational news	C
elite violence/abuse of power/suppression of resistance	showing restrictions and persecution and the resistance; the rigging of election and other procedures	E
Social conflict (narrative us-them)	exposing social conflicts and hostilities (ethnic, class, etc.).	S
Depreciation of authority	stories about situations / statements / behaviour that bring public figures / institutions into disrepute	D
A sense of threat	portraying something as a threat and creating a sense of anxiety or fear, destabilizing the sense of security	T
Other	Difficult to say, many framings etc.	OTH

## 2. RHETORIC

The analysis looks at the tools / methods of persuasion present in the text (in this case only the linguistic code was analysed). Each text was checked for the presence of each tool, so some texts may not have any tools assigned, and some may have multiple tools or even all of them assigned.

Drawing on the literature<sup>3</sup> and previous analyses carried out within CEDMO, the following



rhetorical methods were identified:

a/ revealing the secret, the hidden (specific narrative perspective)

b/ polarisation (inciting polarisation)

c/ emotion (emotional language)

d/ conspiracy theories (linking facts together)

e/ misuse of key terms and deliberate choice of words to name phenomena, unauthorised linking of phenomena

e/ false quotes, ridicule through quotes

f/ use of 'experts'

## 1. LEGITIMACY STRATEGIES IN THE MESSAGE

In this case, we check each message (text and visual together – as one message) for the occurrence of each method. So some messages may not have any tools assigned, and some may have all tools assigned.

- authorization (A)
- moral evaluation (ME)
- rationalization (R)
- mythopoesis (M)

**Authorisation** is realised by appealing to authority, personal or otherwise (a person in the function of an expert, law, tradition, custom). **Moral evaluation** is based on values and morality (thus relating the action of a given social actor to categories of right and wrong), and is realised by evaluation, abstraction or analogy, which construct moral grounds for the positive or negative evaluation of a given action or situation. **Rationalisation** legitimises social practice by reference to its rational ends and effects, data and evidence, and appeals to knowledge, claims and logical arguments. **Mythopoesis** is legitimation achieved through the telling of short stories, actualizing recognisable narrative models that expose most often the theme of punishment and reward.

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<sup>3</sup> Hellman, M. (2024). Security, Disinformation, and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden, Palgrave.

### 3. Results – presentation and analysis

#### 1. Framing

conspiracy	37%
depreciation of authority	27%
elite violence	12%
social conflict	12%
a sense of threat	8%
other/mixture	4%

Table 1. Framing – entire corpus

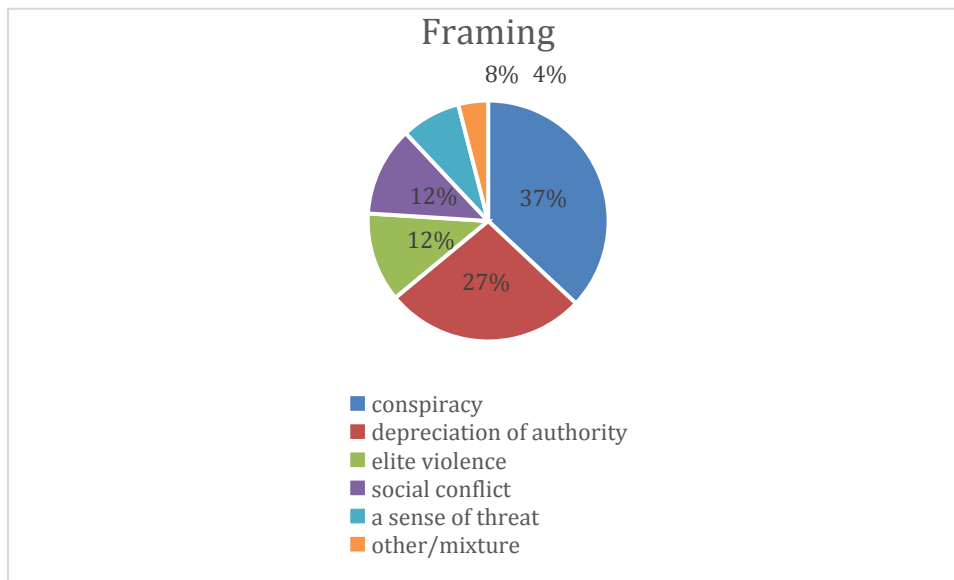


Figure 1. Framing – entire corpus

The dominant frame of interpretation that occurs in fake news is the conspiracy frame, which makes clear the correlation between the message of fake news and conspiracy theories. To a slightly lesser extent, fake news is framed in terms of depreciation of authority (which often correlates with conspiracy theories) and, to a lesser extent, elite violence (whether represented by individuals or the institution). At the same level, the frame of social conflict is found throughout the corpus.

This kind of framing indicates the specific world construction present in this kind of messages - it is definitely a world that is not friendly to its inhabitants, a world of lies, violence, conflict and false authority. This world is most often viewed by the recipient of

fake news through the prism of a series of interrelated events, the essence of which is deliberately concealed from her/him. Note that this kind of framing leads in the direction of undermining the veracity / credibility of narratives other than those of conspiracy, especially the credibility of the vision of the world presented in the so-called “mainstream media”, or the interpretation of the world presented by science or international institutions.

Such a construction of the world leads to a rejection of the category of truth - for this truth, proclaimed by the media and “official accepted authorities”, is a form of manipulation and concealment of what - in the construction of the world described here - is really important. In addition, conspiracy, as the deliberate concealment of something from “ordinary people,” correlates very clearly with the interpretation of the world as an area of violence - violence of those who have power (“elites”) against those who are deprived of this power. The world is also a field of permanent social conflict, a conflict that we lose or win, but cannot remain indifferent to. It is only at this point that the framing of fake news coincides with the classic framing of news, the frame of conspiracy is essentially absent in the recent ones, the frame of elite violence appears, but not as often as in the case of the messages analyzed here.

	CZE	POL	SVK
conspiracy	48%	28%	35%
elite violence	7%	18%	11%
social conflict	8%	20%	8%
depreciation of authority	25%	20%	35%
a sense of threat	8%	9%	8%
other/mixture	4%	5%	3%

Table 2. Framing – comparison



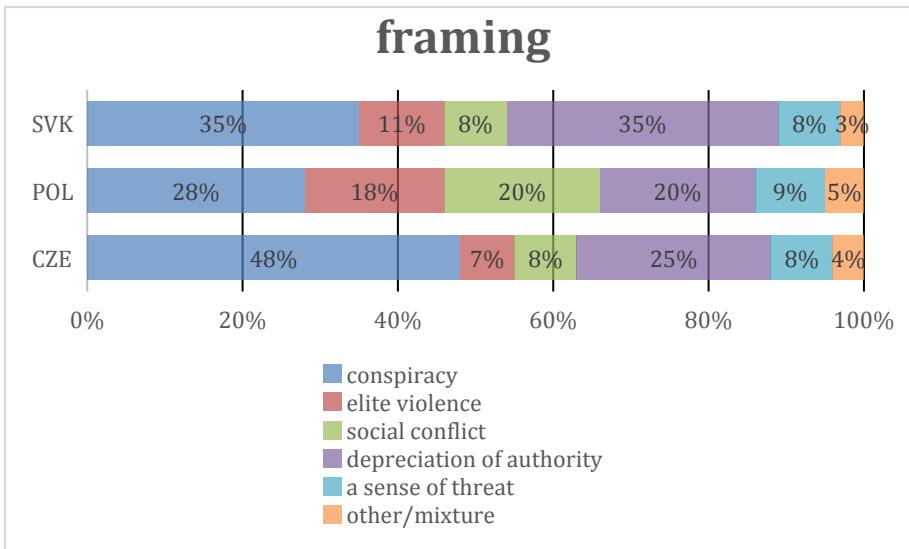


Figure 2. Framing – comparison

A detailed comparative analysis of the framing of fake news in each country shows significant and interesting differences. Although the conspiracy frame dominates in all countries, its prevalence is greatest in the Czech Republic (almost half of the messages!). Slovakia, on the other hand, is distinguished by the strong position of the frame of depreciation of authority. The most varied data concerns fake news in Polish - in this case, the frames of elite violence or social conflict are stronger than in other countries.



## 2. Rhetoric

misuse of terms	79%
polarisation	57%
emotions	56%
revealing	45%
"experts"	27%
conspiracy theories	23%
falese quotes	14%

Table 3. Rhetoric – whole corpus

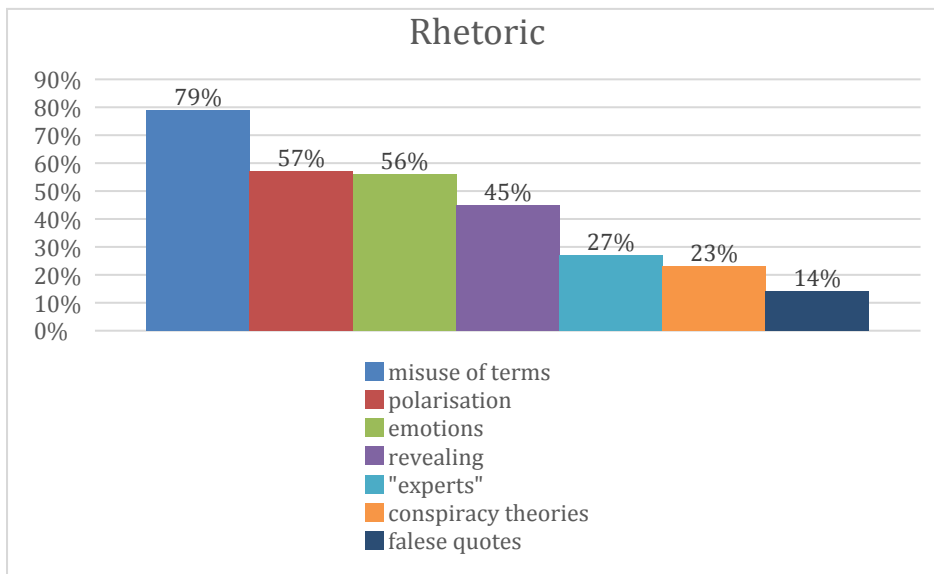


Figure 3. Rhetoric – entire corpus

In terms of the rhetorical devices used, three are definitely dominant - first and foremost the misuse of terms, followed by polarization and stirring up emotions. Then there is also the method of revealing what is covered.

Persuasive misuse of terms was observed in not a mere 80% of the messages - these include, for example, labeling or insulting words, but also seemingly ironic terms referring to those who are presented in a positive light (e.g., “foilists” who were right again). Also characteristic is the misuse of terms with strong moral and emotional overtones, such as murderers or liars. There are also frequent quasi-jocular alterations of words, suggesting the distance of the author(s) from certain topics, the classic example in Poland being the word “szczypawki” in the sense of “szczepionki”. This type of rhetorical operation is exceptionally interesting, because, firstly, it draws the recipient into a kind of

communication game; and secondly, it creates a sense of community between the sender and the recipient in the context of a shared vision of the world, which here can clearly also be interpreted as a linguistic image of the world. Its dominance in the analyzed messages should be considered very significant, it also indicates a kind of sublime non-obvious persuasion present in fake news texts.

Emotions, activated in both textual and visual messages, are also an important tool of persuasion in the messages analyzed.

The persuasive function, although to a lesser extent, is performed by experts. This is, of course, a classic mechanism for making media messages credible, with, unsurprisingly, the experts invoked in fake news are fundamentally different from those invoked by journalists in news (or other media messages). But while personally they are different, functionally and in terms of their social roles they are similar - they are still (often alleged, but presented as such) doctors, nurses, PhDs, professors, technology specialists or politicians. Let's note - the rejection of authorities is not accompanied by a rejection of the structural factors of their selection - individuals are different, to be sure, but their authority is built on formally similar grounds (knowledge, experience, popularity, etc.).

Reference to conspiracy theories also plays an important role - here not so much as an evocation of a certain vision of the world, but as a kind of argument for the thesis being put forward.

In correlation with the technique of “experts” remains the technique of false quotes. Importantly - cited not with the intention of being critical of the presented vision of the world, but as evidence for the thesis put forward in the fake news message. This is especially true of situations in which generally recognized authorities (doctors, politicians), “inadvertently” betrayed themselves, said something that revealed their truthful intentions or conspiracy. These quotes are taken out of context or blatantly manipulated, but their persuasive function and communicative structure are interesting - because at the same time they sustain the narratives of relevance of the quoted people (in this sense they are, perversely, still authorities), on the other hand, they undermine their credibility.

	CZE	POL	SVK
misuse of terms	80%	63%	95%
polarisation	58%	65%	47%



emotions	71%	54%	43%
revealing	35%	28%	71%
"experts"	14%	33%	35%
conspiracy theories	20%	32%	17%
falese quotes	6%	21%	16%

Table 4. Rhetoric – comparison

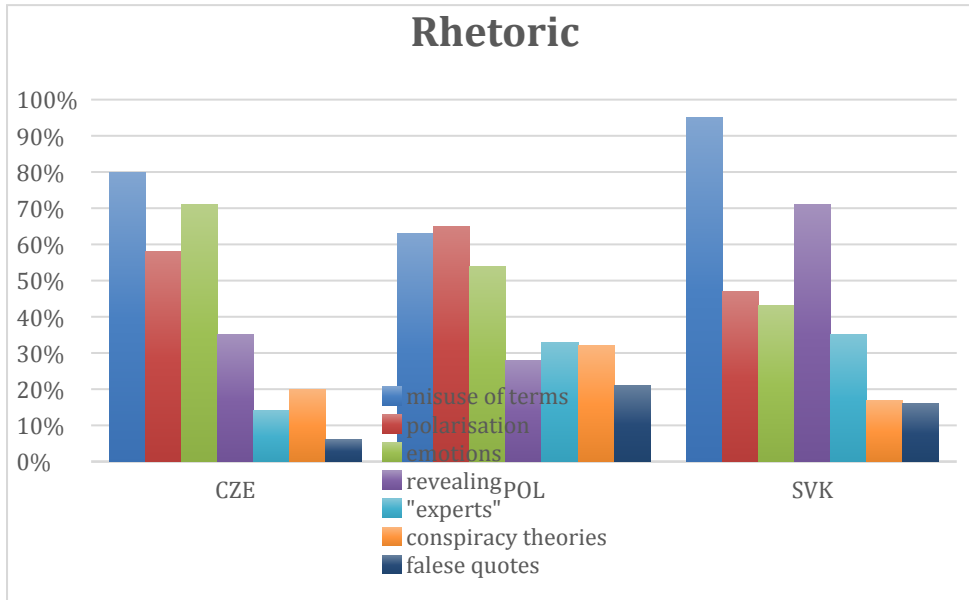


Figure 4. Rhetoric – comparison

A closer comparative analysis reveals significant differences in the use of rhetorical devices in the countries analyzed. In Poland, the role of misuse of terms is relatively low, similar to that of polarization and emotion. The aforementioned polarization appears to be the dominant rhetorical technique in Poland, which seems to correlate with the overall high level of polarization of Polish society and the low level of social trust. Conspiracy theories are also relatively important in Poland, while revealing what is covered up is less important. Note, in juxtaposition with the previously presented results on framing, that fake news in Poland appears as a very functionally coherent message (or a functionally coherent genre). Polarization and conspiracy are both the frame and the rhetoric of this type of messages (recall - frame here means the general vision of the world within which / in relation to which an event is presented; while rhetoric - specific tricks of a linguistic or visual nature aimed at obtaining the appropriate effect in the recipient).

In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, the role of emotions is relatively important, while false quotes and conspiracy theories play a small role. The presence of “revealing” as a rhetorical trick is higher than in Poland, but lower than in Slovakia.

In contrast, fake news in Slovak is characterized by a definite dominance of misuse of terms and revealing, at the expense especially of polarization and emotion. Also, conspiracy theories and false quotes remain relatively unimportant.



Picture 2. Polarisation in Poland. [https://demagog.org.pl/fake\\_news/dane-dotyczace-szczepien-i-nop-nie-sa-zamiatane-pod-dywan/](https://demagog.org.pl/fake_news/dane-dotyczace-szczepien-i-nop-nie-sa-zamiatane-pod-dywan/)

### 3. Legitimation

moral evaluation	52%
rationalization	50%
authorisation	34%
irony	22%
mythopoesis	9%

Table 5. Legitimacy strategies – entire corpus



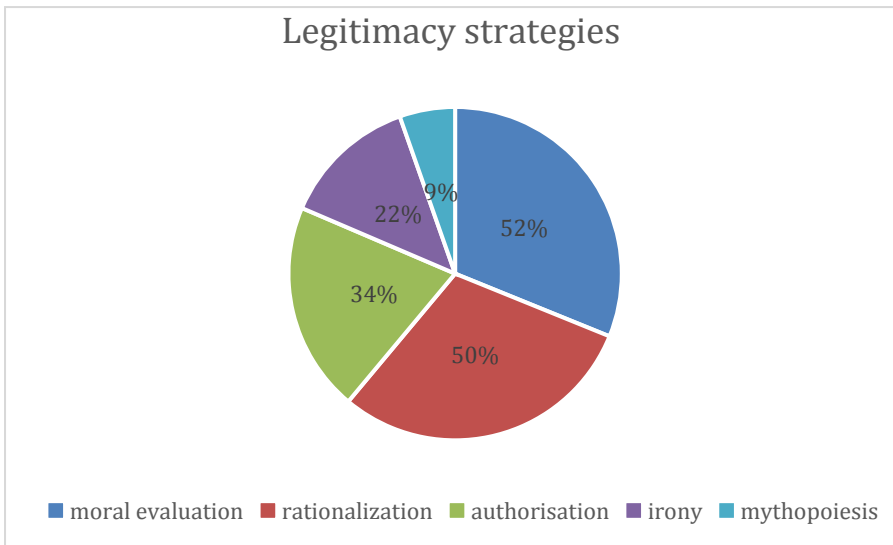


Figure 5. Legitimacy strategies – entire corpus

The types of legitimization considered in the study refer to the set of categories proposed by van Leeuwen, but supplemented - on the basis of a preliminary analysis of the material - by an additional category, namely irony.

The material analyzed is dominated by messages legitimizing themselves through moral evaluation - indicating or suggesting that the behavior of a given actor (person or institution) is wrong, immoral, harmful to society or individuals. Thus, it is clear that fake news operates in large part with a discourse of values, which connotes, on the one hand, the relevance of moral rules, and, on the other hand, the (not necessarily stated) belief in the existence of a proper moral world order and its relevance.

The predominance (small admittedly) of moral legitimacy over that which relates to the rational (facts, data, rational reasoning) is worth noting. It should be stressed that, clearly, fake news messages should be considered rational in the sense that - functionally speaking - they present some knowledge about the world, convey some information that is coded as true. In this sense, by virtue of their genre and functional specificity, fake news refers to data. However, one can speak of rationalization in the function analyzed here only if these facts and data serve to legitimize the narrative or interpretive framework presented, when they are intended to be what convinces the recipient to trust the sender or, in other words, to consider the message he or she encounters as credible. Thus, rationalization is

observed when there is a special emphasis placed on data or a special prominence given to a (seemingly) rational narrative.

In the analyzed material, although only in the third place, legitimization in the form of invoking authorities (in a positive, not critical, context), which is classic for media messages, also appears. This observation is not surprising - the classic fake news narrative, based on challenging dominant beliefs about the world, necessarily rejects commonly accepted authorities. And at this point, it can either replace them with “new” ones, or (which, as we can see, happens more often), reject the structure of legitimization through authority altogether, introducing in its place moral judgment, rationalization or, finally - the most typical in the context of rejecting authority - irony.

Irony, as is well known, encodes not only a distance from the phenomena described, but also a critical stance towards the world and, as such, is both a tool of legitimization and a structure in rhetorical function. In this case, the first interpretation is adopted, assuming that irony allows the author present in the text (or the text as such) to legitimize himself/herself/itself and build the credibility by taking a certain (ironic, distanced, informed) stance towards the world.

The poor saturation of the analyzed messages with legitimacy of mythopoiesis character is also not surprising - this structure is abstract in nature, requires a relatively high level of perceptual competence, and is not suitable for conveying current information about the world. In the analyzed messages, it basically appears only as telling a “story with a moral”.

	CZE	POL	SVK
moral evaluation	50%	57%	50%
rationalization	32%	45%	74%
authorisation	27%	39%	35%
irony	11%	23%	31%
mythopoiesis	11%	5%	10%

*Table 6. Legitimacy strategies – comparison*

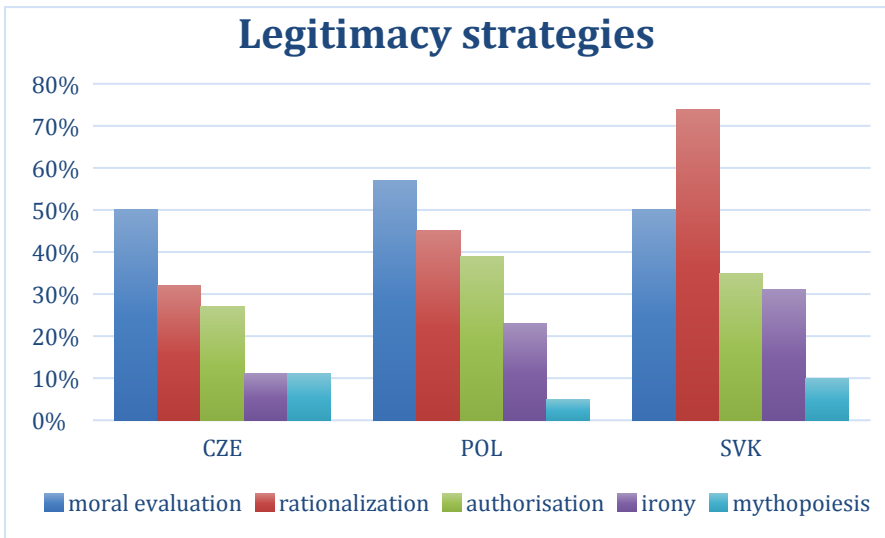


Figure 6. Legitimacy strategies – comparison

The structure of legitimacy methods is depending on the country. Although moral evaluation is the dominant method in all three countries, it has the greatest importance according to the data obtained in Poland. The high level of moral evaluation is accompanied, not surprisingly, and forming a coherent and logical whole, by a high level of authorisation, but relatively low mythopoiesis.

In the cases of Slovak fake news, rationalization is very clearly gaining in importance, and irony also ranks relatively high.

In the Czech Republic, the model seems to be the most balanced with a relatively comparable share of all analyzed methods of legitimization.



Picture 3. Legitimation – moral evaluation. <https://demagog.cz/diskuze/symbol-zelene-zaby-zustava-nove-logo-na-zmrzlinach-oznacuje-rostlinny-puvod>

## 4. Summary. Main conclusions

The analysis carried out shows that the analyzed fake news messages are significantly consistent in terms of building a relationship with the audience through framing, the use of tools of a rhetorical nature and techniques of legitimizing the message.

In the first aspect (framing), the connection of fake news with conspiracy theories and the reference to the vision (discourse) of the modern world as based on conflicts and violence - especially the violence of those who settle power against those who do not have this power, is clearly visible. Thus, it is, in general, violence perceived as unjust and at the same time based on hiding the truth about the world.

Such an interpretation is confirmed by the observed dominant measures of a rhetorical nature, which, on the one hand, refer to emotions and/or emotion-inducing areas (such as

polarization), and, on the other hand, correlate with the characteristic features of conspiracy theories, such as the linking of distant facts or the misuse of concepts (and thus the production of specific semantics and, consequently, alternative interpretations of the world). It is worth noting that - albeit secondarily, but nevertheless clearly - fake news actualizes in the rhetorical function the appeal to authorities or theses manipulated quotation of statements of people who are considered authorities. In this respect, they come close to hard news type messages.

The interpretation of the world outlined above is reflected in the prevailing techniques of legitimization, especially in the legitimization of the message by reference to ethical norms, and therefore the “right” world order. The reality constructed by fake news is, to some extent, the reality of data and authority, but above all - the world of moral judgment, directed at actions that disrupt the proper (natural, just) order of things.

A detailed comparative analysis of the framing, rhetoric and legitimisation of fake news in each country shows significant and interesting differences.

#### Fake news in Poland:

- characteristic framing by social conflict and elite violence;
- the main rhetoric is the rhetoric of polarization and conspiracy, lower incidence of misuse of terms than in other countries;
- in terms of legitimacy, moral evaluation is particularly important.

#### Fake news in Czech Republic

- framing through references to conspiracy theories is particularly important;
- rhetorical use of emotion is particularly important;
- in terms of legitimacy, fake news in Czech Republic represents the most balanced model.

#### Fake news in Slovakia

- the main frame is depreciation of authority;
- fake news in Slovakia stands out for its high position of “revealing what is covered up” as a rhetorical technique;



- the prominent legitimization technique is rationalization.



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