



ORIGINAL PAPER

The Impact of Deep Fakes in the Age of Populism and Post-Democracy

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Abstract:

In 2024, almost half of the world's population participated in electoral processes or is due to vote. The United States of America (USA), the European Union (EU), or India are among the democratic entities which organize elections in 2024. Citizens from autocracies like the Russian Federation are also summoned to express their options at the polls, although in their cases the proceedings are obviously flawed. Disinformation can manipulate outcomes both in liberal democracies and in hybrid regimes. In this context, our endeavor tries to analyze the impact of deep fakes on elections, in particular, and on political phenomena in general. A new remarkable tool, created with the help of Artificial Intelligence (AI), is weaponized by various politicians. Thus, an already worrying process of democratic backsliding seems to be accelerating. Both populist and non-populist politicians are using deep fakes in order to create unfair competitive advantages. Through several case studies, we describe and explain the influence of deep fakes on political developments. We highlight that populist groups can benefit from the political instrumentalization of deep fakes. Nevertheless, AI's dark side offers opportunities for politicians that are outside of the populist sphere too. Overall, the phenomenon described by Colin Crouch as *post-democracy* seems to be enhanced by the evolutions we describe. Reversing this trend would require both regulations from the authorities and a reconstruction of the public's trust in political mechanisms.

Keywords: *deep fake, post-democracy, populism, Artificial Intelligence, democratic backsliding.*

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1. Introduction

When humanity or parts of it advance into uncharted territories regarding certain aspects of its existence, scholars have the tendency to transform the prefix *post* into an important element of their conceptual toolbox. We often speak about postmodernism in discussions regarding philosophy, literature, architecture, music, etc. In political science, postmodernism refers to an ongoing period that began in the second part of the 20th century and is characterized by a combination of „*traditional and modern approaches in the study of politics as a way to finding or building better political theories that can solve political problems of our time. These anchor on the recognition and use of both historical, legal, institutional, behavioural and post-behavioural approaches in normative, empirical or any new relevant methods in the study of politics.*” (Agbaenyi, 2012, p. 456)

If we remain in the field of political science, we can identify, in a postmodern context, many other examples of concepts that include the above-mentioned prefix. Postcolonial, post-authoritarian, post-communism, or even post-transition (Gabor, 2023, pp. 556-597) are among the terms that populate the vocabulary of political scientists. For our study, a concept of particular importance has been coined by the British sociologist and political scientist Colin Crouch (2004): post-democracy (its meaning will be detailed below). The post-democratic environment described by Crouch has been additionally shaken by the ascension of populist movements or leaders. The election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, the vote that enabled the rupture between the United Kingdom (UK) and the EU, or the political hegemony of Viktor Orban in Hungary are parts of this phenomenon. Currently, we might wonder, given how strongly leaders like Orban have gained roots among the political and economic elites, if the term *post-populism* could not become useful for properly describing certain parts of the global political spectrum.

Another concept that is helpful for a social scientist who is focusing on contemporary developments is post-truth. It refers to situations that indicate that „*facts have lost their currency in contemporary political and public debate. The concept is not so much used to suggest that the truth does not exist, but that facts have become secondary to our political point of view.*” (O’Callaghan, 2020, p. 343) Post-truth is describing a climate that can be seen both as a cause and as an effect of the populist wave. It is important to mention that ignoring the facts is not the only peril; often, they are falsified. This paper is focusing on the effects of the latter situation, when data is being forged.

AI’s role in shaping the political and social fields is growing. Unfortunately, easing the manipulation of facts is one of its capabilities. Our study analyzes the impact of deep fakes generated by AI programs on contemporary politics through 8 case studies. This introductory section is followed by a theoretical chapter that includes a brief presentation regarding deep fakes and details on key-concepts like post-democracy or populism. Afterwards, we display our methodological approach and we discuss the identified cases. The conclusions are based on connecting elements from the theoretical section with the main aspects of the case studies.

2. Theoretical considerations

a. Deep fakes

A deep fake can be defined as a „*...digital forgery created through deep learning (a subset of AI). Deep fakes can create entirely new content or manipulate existing content, including video, images, audio and text. They could be used to defame targets, impersonate or blackmail elected officials and be used in conjunction with cybercrime operations.*” (Smith, H., Mansted, K., 2020, p. 5)

As an effect of the technological developments of the 2010s, deep fakes quickly cast their shadow on the political arena, creating both risks and opportunities for parties and leaders. It is important to mention that they made their presence felt not only in authoritarian or hybrid political regimes but also in liberal democracies. Not only politicians are tempted to use this tool. It must be emphasized that every structure that uses AI in order to obtain an unfair competitive advantage is harmful to the democratic order. Deep fakes can pave the way for a new authoritarian age or can, at least, amplify the issues that Colin Crouch sees as the roots of post-democratic reality. Notable is that not only organizations but also individuals can gain the ability and the instruments necessary for manipulating facts with the help of AI.

Although, as mentioned above, deep fakes can operate with images and text as well, their efficiency is increased when video or audio materials are created or altered. Our case studies focus on audio and video digital forgeries. Voice-cloning can trick people into believing that a politician has appalling statements. The credibility of this kind of fakes increases if it is used alongside lip-syncing. Lip-syncing is created when „a source video is modified to make the mouth region consistent with an arbitrary audio recording” (Farid & Schindler, 2020:16). As mentioned by Martin (2023), it is difficult for the average citizen to clearly differentiate authentic declarations from imitations. There are also more complex forms of audio deep fakes than voice-cloning, which have the capability of creating or modifying background noises. Apps like “Lyrebird AI” (Descript, 2024) and “CereVoice” (Cere Proc, n.d.) are able to create such forgeries.

Regarding video and image manipulations, one of the most remarkable tools is represented by the face-swap, which enables the face of a political actor to appear on the body of a different person, which usually performs inappropriate actions. The quality of the forgery depends on the app that is used. Free alternatives, like „FaceFusion” (Lanz, 2023) are less skilled than ones that require fees to be utilized.

Given the speed and amplitude of the evolutions that affect this field, it is difficult to present a comprehensive and exhaustive overview. However, although this limitation is not to be neglected, there is a certainty represented by the fact that every scholar or citizen interested in political and social topics can ignore the role of deep fakes only at the risk of altering the accuracy of his conclusions. Moreover, as suggested above, ignoring the political implications of AI programs can be in favor of those who aim at building or strengthening closed societies.

b. Post-democracy

At the beginning of the 21st century, Colin Crouch has identified an interesting paradox regarding the evolution of democracy and its practices. He described it using a new concept: post-democracy. On one hand, he acknowledged that democracy was enjoying “a world-historical peak” (Crouch, 2004: 1). On the other hand, he identified that “in the established democracies [...] matters are less optimistic”. (Crouch, 2004: 2). Two decades after Crouch presented his ideas regarding the democratic regress, the situation has worsened. On one hand, the frequency with which countries were becoming democratic has reduced. On the other hand, the number of democratic countries is decreasing at a faster rate than ever. For example, 19.30% of the countries in the world were perceived as electoral democracies in 1990, and that number increased to 30.68% in 2004. Afterwards, their number decreased towards 26%. In present times, a third of the countries in the world (32.96%) are perceived as being electoral democracies. (Roser et al., 2022). According to the same source, 16.96% of the countries in the world were

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perceived as liberal democracies in 1990, increasing to 23.7% in 2004 and remaining steady until 2012; afterwards, their number decreased, reaching the same point (17.88%) as before the fall of the Iron Curtain (ibidem).

The concept of post-democracy is not synonymous with lack of democratic practices such as “values of freedom, respect for human rights, and the principle of holding periodic and genuine elections” (United Nations, 2021) but rather depicts “situations when boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled in after a democratic moment” (Crouch, 2004: 19). It is best understood as a democratic apathy, as if “institutions of liberal democracy survived and functioned, but where the vital energy of the political system no longer rested within them” (Crouch, 2018: 126). We believe that there are multiple factors which have contributed to the fast development of post-democracy. Firstly, there is the lack of citizens’ interests, reflected in the voters’ turnout, which has seen “a decline that is both problematic and puzzling” (Blais and Kostelka, 2021) all around the world. Secondly, there is the matter of international events, such as “the global financial crisis, the consequent euro crisis” (Crouch, 2015: 71) and other ill-fated events which “suggest that the dominant forces in today’s politics are not those of democratic will” (ibidem).

Post-democracy is marked by a “distinctive contribution to the character of political communication.” (Crouch, 2004: 24), which has a negative effect of “distortion of political communication” (Crouch, 2015: 73), for example, making it “beyond the reach of scrutiny” (Crouch, 2004: 24). A key-element of political communication in post-democracy is technology. The internet made “it ever easier and cheaper to organize and co-ordinate new cause groups” (Crouch, 2004: 15).

c. Populism

Populism’s importance in the global political landscape became undeniable in the last few decades. Initially a political current rooted in agrarian movements from the late 19th century (the United States of America and Russia witnessed the development of such movements), populism gradually suffered a metamorphosis that made it an attractive ideology worldwide for opponents of globalization and critics of liberal democracies (Akkerman, 2003, p. 148). In 1969, in the context of decolonization, British political scientists born in Central and Eastern Europe argued that its specter was haunting the world (Ionescu & Gellner, 1969, p. 1). In other words, as the age of extremes slowly approached its conclusion, populism was seen as the force capable of playing the historical role previously claimed by Communism. More than 50 years later, the international ideological overview went through several transformations, but populism’s appeal has not been diminished. Public disappointment and low turnout at elections, among other factors, are contributing to the growth of populist parties (Carp, Strat, Matiuță & Oancea, 2023, p. 186).

Essential for populist identity is describing social evolution as being framed by the antagonism between a corrupt elite and a flawless people endowed with a general will (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). The anti-elitist component is doubled by an anti-pluralist one (Muller, 2016, p. 101). Those who are opposed to the general will are seen as unfit to represent the people. Therefore, the populists emerge as the only genuine representatives. Obviously, this approach is not compatible with preserving liberal democracies. Although there are academics that argue that there are also versions of populism that can be labeled as *respectable* (Akkerman, 2003, p. 149) or *good/pluralist* (Halmai, 2019, p. 297), most scholars consider that populism is by definition anti-democratic. In forging this new political landscape, which favors the spreading of populist

discourse, some particularities of globalization and European integration also play a significant role (Gabor, 2023, p. 55)

The contemporary political environment favors the growth of populist movements not only because of social, political, and economic factors but also because of the constant evolution of mass media in the wake of the latest technological developments (Akkerman, 2003, p. 147). On one hand, digital media can be a useful tool in the hands of those who aim to boost processes of democratization or to protect endangered democratic regimes. Protests that toppled Middle Eastern dictators like Hosni Mubarak were organized with the help of social networks like Facebook or Twitter. On the other hand, it is also instrumentalized by populists who plead for authoritarian paths. Former US president Donald Trump, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, and the nationalist Sweden Democrats are only a few examples in this regard (Schroeder, 2018, p. 60). Often, mainstream media is characterized by populists as a servant of corrupt elites; in this context, digital media is seen as a solution for establishing direct communication with the people. However, media organizations that are considered to be linked to the political establishment will usually contribute, due to commercial reasons, to the dissemination of populist messages that appear on social networks (Schroeder, 2018, p. 64). Obviously, this ethical ambiguity facilitates the circulation of fake news or deepfakes (disinformation) (Bakir & McStay, 2022).

Donald Trump is emblematic of the strategic transformation of populist discourse. At the beginning of the century, when in Europe politicians like Jorg Haider (Austria) or Pim Fortuyn (the Netherlands) were pioneers of the new exclusionary right-wing thin-centered ideology, classic media channels were important in reaching an important part of voters. After 2010, the digital environment became the main focus of the populists. This situation is reflected in the Italian political landscape. In 2017, Facebook was important for political communicators; leaders like Matteo Salvini, Luigi di Maio, Silvio Berlusconi, Matteo Renzi, and Giorgia Meloni used it frequently. The activity on this network highlighted that populism became endemic in the political discourse: 67% of the posts of the above-mentioned leaders had populist elements (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018, p. 7). In other words, just a few years after Stephen Hawking issued a warning about the potential catastrophic consequences of the development of AI (Hawking, 2014), a member country of the EU already had its digital political communication permeated by elements of disinformation. Their presence anticipated the emergence of deep fakes.

3. Methodology

The case study, the main research method of the paper, is perceived as „a research strategy or design to study a social unit” (Priya, 2020: 95), in this case, deep fakes of politicians. De Vaus considers that the case study can focus on a large array of subjects, including „an individual, a family, a household, a community, an organization, an event, or even a decision.” (De Vaus, 2001: 220). Thus, the choice of studying AI-generated deep fakes of political leaders is justified. Romanian sociologist Septimiu Chelcea has identified three different types of case studies, as follows: „intrinsic interest, instrumental interest, and multiple case study” (Chelcea, 2007: 601). Out of the three, the latter is used because it can „identify factors that appear in multiple situations” (ibidem). Multiple case studies are used because they allow us to research „multiple social entities, people, organizations, etc.” (Chelcea, 2007: 602). In the research, we included multiple situations

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in which AI-generated deep fakes depict politicians. Moreover, by using multiple case studies, „the overall value of the research increases” (Chelcea, 2007: 602), leading to important discoveries on a topic that was not thoroughly researched. For the same reason, we included pragmatic cases, allowing us to „establish a new direction in the field of research” (Chelcea, 2007: 604). The case studies are built around „social documents—official reports and articles” (Chelcea, 2007: 605) because they are „stable, precise, and cover a rather large timeframe” (ibidem). Due to the fact that the intention is not only to describe the AI-generated deep fakes of political leaders but also their consequences, this research is both „descriptive and exploratory” (Priya, 2020: 96).

4. Case studies

Oxford researches Markus Appel and Fabian Prietzel want to raise awareness towards the possibility that AI generated deep fakes could lead to the *“weaponization of manipulated videos for malicious ends”* (Appel & Prietzel, 2022: 1). In the following section, multiple situations in which deep fakes which illustrate politicians will be analyzed. The goal is to establish whether the deep fake material is malicious or not and what are the implications towards the politician which is implicated in the AI generated material. A deep fake can be harmful not only in the situation in which a candidate, an acting politician or a public person are negatively illustrated in an AI generated material, such an audio or video recording, or even in a photograph. The aforementioned categories of people can be affected even when they are in a real, unaltered material, which is accused of being a false. In this situation, the subject is not presented as a victim, but as the author of the deepfake material. In order to blame the victim, the real perpetrator has to *“point to the existence of the technology as a cause for doubt and distrust”* (Smith & Mansted, 2019: 13). Mika Westerlund mentions that AI technology which produces deep fakes can be used, with positive results, in certain domains, *“such as in the social and medical fields”* (Ibidem, 2019: 41).

One of the best known and earliest examples of deep fakes, was made public in **Belgium**. However, the center of this AI generated material was not a Belgian, not even a European politician or public figure. Surprisingly, Donald Trump was presented in that video, in which he encouraged Belgians to follow his lead and leave the Paris climate agreement.

The next example illustrates Westerlund’s statement. In 2018, The Flemish Socialist Party from Belgium, nowadays known as Vooruit, has published and popularized on their Facebook page a video which showed the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, who was encouraging Belgium institutions and its citizens to *“follow America’s lead and exit the Paris climate agreement.”* (Burchard, 2018) The video was a deep fake, generated by AI programs. It included several deep fake techniques previously discussed, such as *Gesture Mimicking, Entire Body Deepfakes, Voice Cloning and Lip Syncing* which allowed the authors of the video to be able to *“make it appear that Trump is giving a fictional address”* (Ibidem). The authors mentioned on multiple occasions that the video is a fake, and that it should not be taken in consideration. First, the main character in the video, mimicking former president Donald Trump stated that *“we all know climate change is fake, just like this video”* (Ibidem). Secondly, the spokesperson of the party actually mentioned that the video is generated with the help of A.I. technology and is a deep fake *“This is the first time we use this ‘deep fake’ technology for a video campaign”* (Ibidem). The main purpose of the video was not to criticize or denigrate Donald Trump and his actions, but to raise awareness towards the subject of climatic

change and to promote actions in this direction such as *“investing in renewable energies, electronic cars and public transport”* (Ibidem). The video was not necessarily meant as a publicity stunt, but rather as a wake-up call regarding two issues of public importance. First, the dangers represented by AI generated deepfake materials. Secondly, it was meant to emphasize the importance of proactive behavior regarding the climate change crisis.

Another example that illustrates the ways in which AI generated deep fakes can have a positive impact on society, raising awareness towards the negative influence of fake news, is the case of the leaders of both the Labor Party and Conservative Party, which were endorsing each other in fake videos. In the 2019 General Elections which took place in the **United Kingdom**, Jeremy Corbyn and Boris Johnson were the protagonists of a deep fake video generated by AI. The leaders of the two major parties from the British political scene were presented in a *“fake video where Johnson and Corbyn endorse each other”* (BBC, 2019). The fact that this farce was perceived by specialists as *“The first ‘deepfake’ video of the UK general election has been produced”* (Bienkov, 2019) should raise serious concerns regarding the efficiency of defense mechanisms against AI generated deep fake products, because it proves how gullible is the general public. On the bright side, the video was not really meant to produce misinformation. It was part of a campaign ran by Future Advocacy, an independent agency, with the purpose of *“highlighting the dangers of deepfakes for democracy in the lead-up to the 2019 UK general election”* (Future Advocacy, 2021). Unfortunately, not all AI generated deep fakes are harmless products meant to raise awareness. In 2023, the leader of the Labor Party has been the victim of not one, but two AI generated deepfakes. In the first video, he was presented as a person with violent traits, while he was *“abusing party staffers”* (Sky News, 2023). More explicitly, he was *“swearing at staffers”* (Bristow, 2023). In another, less harmful deep fake, he was *“criticising the city of Liverpool”* (Sky News, 2023). Disregard the fact that sometimes these twisted digital manifestations seem funny. Even in the circumstances in which they manage to make people laugh, they are still dangerous and ought to be treated seriously, because it might not seem much, but the impact of this kind of joke might reverse the electoral race. Moreover, the future looks grim. Experts are saying that Keir Starmer *“won’t be the last”* (Bristow, 2023) politician who fell victim to this kind of elaborate hoax and that we should prepare for an insurgence of this kind of materials. However, British officials are taking defensive actions against this wave of misinformation, by promoting an Online Safety Bill which was meant to *“to force platforms to take action against content which undermined democracy.”* (Bristow, 2023). However, these events illustrate the harsh reality, in which social platforms do not really fight deepfakes. This case also shows the lack of defense mechanisms against fake-news and how a politician’s public image can be affected by deepfakes. However, without knowing the source of misinformation, it is not clear if the materials were produced by political opponents or party colleagues.

An **Indian** politician used AI technology in order to generate the first deep fake used in the country’s political environment, with the purpose of becoming popular among the non-Hindi speaking electorate. In this case, the use of AI generated deepfake was neither harmful, nor deceitful. This is a neutral example of the applications of AI programs. However, it illustrated the harmful traits of deepfake technology.

In 2022, a video was released, which presented Manoj Tiwari, a member of the Indian Parliament, who was addressing his voters. The interesting fact is that the protagonist of the video was not speaking the official language of the Government, or even English, but *“Haryanvi, a dialect of Hindi”* (Lyons, 2020). It was later revealed that

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the video was not even original, but a deep fake, a video-recording generated with the help of AI programs. The purpose of the video was not necessarily a negative one, because it did not cause denigration to any politicians or other public figures. Moreover, the video was not deceitful because it did not necessarily promote false information. In the simplest terms, it was a language translation, which was accomplished with the help of AI applications. The aim of the video was to extend the electoral pool, by attracting the sympathy of new voters, to whom the politician addressed his message in their dialect.

Another interesting aspect of this case is that the politician is from the party Bharatiya Janata, which won the previous elections and holds the governing majority in the Indian Parliament. Thus, he is not from an opposition party wanting to gain power. However, the fact that these videos have been *generated* with the help of an AI tool, it still raises concerns regarding the presence of deepfakes and how harmful they can be, especially during periods of time close to elections.

The **United States of America** is one of the first countries who directly dealt with the dangers of deepfakes in the political arena. Politicians and supporters of both parties accused one another of using AI generated deepfakes during the last two electoral campaigns.

The 2016 presidential elections were marked by accusations of fake news and foreign meddling but did not necessarily include deepfakes, materials generated by AI programs. Four years later, on the brink of the 2020 Presidential election, experts warned that *“deepfakes will be very influential”* (Villasenor, 2019). AI experts believed that anybody could use deepfakes materials *“to disgrace politicians and even swing elections”* (Parkin, 2019). During a Congressional Hearing on the subject of deepfakes and the dangers this technology poses against democracy, experts from different spheres such as law and public policy agreed on the fact that deepfakes could be generated by *“malign actors, foreign or domestic”* (Schiff, 2019: 2) and that actions should have been taken immediately, not later, *“after viral deepfakes have polluted the 2020 elections, by then it will be too late”* (Ibidem: 5). Regardless of all these warnings expressed by the experts and of the fact that the 2020 election took place during a pandemic, deep fakes did not necessarily influence the elections result on the level foreseen by the aforementioned experts.

However, this does not mean that incidents did not occur. During the 2020 election for the House of Representatives, candidate Matt Gaetz from Florida was the victim of an AI generated deepfake, in which he was praising his opponent's skills and abilities. His political rival acknowledged the video was a deep fake. His justification was that Gaetz, who *“has repeatedly refused to acknowledge the threat posed by Vladimir Putin [...] in the electoral process”* needed to be convinced of the dangers posed by this technology (Ehr, 2020). This case is illustrative for two reasons. First, it shows that deepfakes can be used to raise awareness towards the danger they possess. Second, because Gaetz still won the election, it shows that deepfake materials don't always negatively influence electoral results.

Ali Bongo, the former president of **Gabon** was absent from the country for a long period of time due to medical problems, even being hospitalized abroad. His health issues were a concern for the general public and his absence was noted by the civil society, politicians and ordinary citizens alike. The video of him, in which he was trying to assure the Gabonese that he was safe was deemed as a deep fake.

While on a trip to Saudi Arabia, then Gabon President Ali Bongo was hospitalized (Al Jazeera, 2018) The information provided by representatives of the Gabonese

Government were not similar with those provided by sources from Riyadh. The uncertainty regarding his health was fueled by the lack of answers from the President's Office. In order to assure his fellow citizens that his health condition is improving, a video of him was broadcasted on TV. However, the transmission was not live, it was a recording, with several technical issues. The lack of information on his health and the technical issues within the recording made many citizens believe it was a deep fake, generated by an AI program. However, Ali Bongo has returned to Gabon not before it was said he was convalescing in Morocco. The rumors were validated by photographs when *"The Moroccan ruler visited Bongo at a military hospital in Rabat where the Gabonese leader was recovering from an illness."* (CGTN Africa, 2023)

In **Malaysia**, a deep fake video *"showing Economic Affairs Minister Azmin Ali and another man having sex"* (ibidem) led to political and social consequences because *"sodomy and same-sex acts are illegal under Islamic law in Muslim-majority Malaysia"* (Reuters, 2019). The politician in the video, who at that time was Minister for Economic Affairs, Azmin Ali, was a high ranking member of the *People Justice Party* and was perceived as being *"close to Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad"* (Euronews, 2019). After the video began to circulate, Azmin issued a statement in which he denied being *"in the videos"* (ibidem) and a member of Azmin's cabinet came forward and confessed that he was *„the individual with (the minister) in the video which was widely shared online"* (Straits Times, 2019). Moreover, he called for the Malaysian authorities to begin prosecution against his superior, whom he describes as *„not fit to be a leader"* (Ibidem).

Forensic experts concluded that *"there was no evidence of photo or image manipulation"* (Su-Lyn, 2019). However, there still is the possibility of an *„artificial intelligence-based technology that superimposes a face on a video"* (Ibidem). If we take into consideration the experts' opinions and the fact that *„the video resolution was too low to run a conclusive analysis"* (Ibidem), the possibility that the video is a deep fake should not be excluded completely.

This is another example of how deepfakes can affect the career of a politician. Azmin Ali was perceived as *"a potential successor to Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad"* (Ananthalakshmi & Brock, 2019). Moreover, in a country in which homosexual relations are punishable by law, even a deepfake video might be a career ender. However, it was not the case here, but undoubtedly, the opinions regarding Azmin shifted dramatically. This case is an example of how deepfakes can ruin a political career. Again, it is not clear if the source was within or outside the victim's political party. In a highly conservative country like Malaysia, it can still impact election results.

During the 2023 campaign for the Parliamentary elections in **Slovakia**, a popular, liberal, progressive politician was the target of several vicious fake news stories, based on deep fake audio and video materials generated with the help of AI applications. The outcome of the campaign was highly impacted by the deep fakes, the politician and his party lost the election.

Michal Šimečka has been a rising star in the national political arena of Slovakia. In 2019, at the age of 35, he became a member of the European Parliament, and two years later he became the vice-president of the *"EU's law-making body"* (European Union, 2023). During the parliamentary campaign from 2023, he was the target of a deep fake, an audio recording generated by an AI program, which presented him *"engaged in a conversation with a leading journalist from a daily newspaper discussing how to rig the election."* (Sky News, 2023). More specifically, supposedly, he was discussing with a journalist about how he was going to win the election after he would *"buy votes from the*

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country's marginalized Roma minority" (Biddle, 2023). The allegations that the audio recording was a deep fake generated with the help of AI programs were supported by specialists who claimed that *"the digital file showed signs of having been manipulated using AI"* (Ibidem). However, the harm was already done, because the audio recording was published on the eve of the elections, when electoral silence *"in which the media and politicians are restricted by law from speaking about elections at all."* (Ibidem) is imposed. Thus, Šimečka and his party were not able to actively defend themselves against these allegations. Before elections, the difference between the two major parties was so small, that neither *"have a clear path towards building a government"* (Zmušková, 2023). Surprisingly, the election's results were not so different from the opinion polls, thus the effect of the deep fake was not significant. However, it is a clear example of the direct effects of deep fakes unto electoral results.

A high ranking member of the **Romanian** government is the victim of a deep fake video in which he is encouraging people to buy stocks from a private corporation. The Romanian minister of Energy, Sebastian Burduja, was recently the victim of a deep fake. He was presented in an AI generated video in which he was promoting an energy company among Romanian citizens. Moreover, not only he was praising the capabilities of the organization, but he was also recommending his fellow countrymen to buy stocks at that particular enterprise, stating that the investors will definitely gain a good profit. Probably Sebastian Burduja was chosen as the central figure of this deepfake because he currently is the Minister of Energy, and thus, through his official position, he conferred credibility to the deepfake video. His case is interesting because in no other situation the image of an official personality, be it a politician from the ruling party or from the opposition, was associated with a private company. Thus, the damage done by the video was two-fold. On one hand, they damaged the public image of Sebastian Burduja, who said he was going to take legal action against the creators of the deepfake (Digi24, 2024). On the other hand, the video affected the private company which Sebastian Burduja was supposedly promoting. Experts have already concluded that the video recording is a deep fake, because *"the minister's voice seems distorted and the facial movements seem unnatural"* (Euronews, 2024). At this moment, it is difficult to indicate a clear perpetrator.

5. Conclusions

It is difficult to generate conclusions regarding the relationship between AI-generated deep fakes and their impact on elections and the general political scene for multiple reasons. Firstly, due to the fact that there is no consecrated instrument that can actually measure the influence or reach of deep fakes generated by AI on the general public. Secondly, because AI-generated deep fakes have only been used in recent times in politics, there is a lack of academic literature. Despite all of these epistemological and methodological hurdles, we managed to conclude, after thorough analysis of the aforementioned case studies, that both populist and non-populist parties can indeed influence elections' results through the use of AI-generated deep fakes.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that these illiberal practices can occur even in the most democratic countries, due to the phenomenon of post-democracy, which generates a lack of interest among the citizens in the way in which politicians are upholding democratic principles.

However, these AI-generated deep fakes can also be used in order to raise awareness regarding the dangers of the new digital instruments and also towards the

situation in which we are neglecting our own democratic rights due to a lack of interest. One might compare these situations to democratic wake-up calls. Thus, our paper might be a starting point in the study of the evolution of post-democracy and how it can be removed through technology, one of the instruments that contributed to its consolidation in the first place.

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