

DISCOURSE ON RUSSIAN GAS IN THE SLOVAK INFORMATION SPACE: THE ENDURANCE OF NARRATIVES FOLLOWING THE ABORTED REFERENDUM INITIATIVE IN 2025¹

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Abstract

The issue of Russian gas imports is among the most contentious topics in contemporary Slovak political communication. Our previous primary research on Slovak online discourse focused on identifying the dominant actors and the overall structure of narratives related to Russian gas imports during the broader period of 2024–2025, and it showed that narratives supporting imports were more frequent and more successful in generating online interactions than positions rejecting the continuation of imports.

The aim of this study is to describe the post-referendum discourse on Russian gas in the Slovak information space from June to November 2025, focusing on the continuation and transformation of dominant narratives following the rejection of the referendum.

This article examines the evolution of discourse on Russian gas in the Slovak online information space in the period following the Slovak president's decision not to call a referendum, specifically between June and November 2025. It is based on Facebook posts collected via the Gerulata Juno monitoring system using a dataset from a previous study, focusing only on a subset of posts published after the failed referendum initiative.

Through a combination of content analysis, discourse analysis, and frame analysis, the article examines which narratives remained stable and which transformed under the new political conditions. The findings suggest that the failure of the referendum did not lead to a weakening of the discourse supporting Russian gas imports. On the contrary, established economic narratives based on price advantages, energy stability, and national interest persisted, while new or reinforced frames linked this issue to questions of democratic legitimacy, sovereignty, European Union intervention, and dependence on the United States.

Keywords: energy security, narratives, political communication, referendum, Russian gas, Slovakia.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of Russian gas imports has become one of the most visible and polarizing topics in Slovak public discourse in recent years. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it ceased to be solely a matter of energy prices or the technical security of supplies and gradually became intertwined with a broader geopolitical and values-based conflict involving sanctions, solidarity with Ukraine, relations with the European Union, and the importance of national sovereignty. (Funtíková, Grečko 2023)

In the Slovak context, this debate was particularly pronounced because, even after 2022, Slovakia remained among the EU member states with a relatively high degree of dependence on Russian energy sources, although the share of Russian gas in total imports gradually declined and transport routes changed. (Oravcová 2023)

In 2025, the discussion intensified as a result of two significant events. The first was the termination of Russian gas transit through Ukraine as of January 1, 2025, which altered both the practical and symbolic framework of the debate on gas imports and shifted attention to alternative routes and the issue of future security of supply. The second was a petition initiative by the Slovak Revival Movement calling for a referendum on the non-application of anti-Russian sanctions. The proposed question read: *“Do you agree that the Slovak Republic should not apply sanctions against the Russian Federation that harm Slovak citizens, small business owners, and entrepreneurs?”* The petition organizers collected approximately 400,000 signatures, which was sufficient to call a referendum; however, on June 4, 2025, Slovak President Peter Pellegrini did not call the referendum, arguing that the question did not meet the requirements of legal certainty, was not enforceable, and could conflict with European Union law. The Constitutional Court subsequently confirmed that the president had acted within the limits of his powers. (TASR, 2025)

More specifically, this study examines the post-referendum discourse on Russian gas in the Slovak information space from June to November 2025, focusing on the continuation and transformation of dominant narratives following the rejection of the referendum.

We pose two research questions:

- RQ1: *How did the dominant narratives about Russian gas changed after the President of the Slovak Republic rejected the referendum?*
- RQ2: *Which narratives remained stable, and which transformed between June and November 2025?*

These research questions reflect the assumption that the rejection of the referendum represents an important turning point in the discourse on Russian gas, which may rearrange the hierarchy of arguments and the framing of topics. At the same time, they allow us to distinguish between narratives that persist in a stable form despite political failure and narratives that adapt to the new political and institutional context.

Several approaches address the issue of energy security and relations with Russia: for example, Tichý and Kratochvíl emphasize the securitization dimension, in which dependence on Russian gas is framed as a

security risk and a source of strategic vulnerability; Falkner emphasizes the geopolitical and economical dimension, where energy functions both as a commodity and a tool of coercion; and finally, authors such as Roe demonstrate how political actors translate these dilemmas into established narratives about sovereignty, justice, or the social costs of sanctions, which are disseminated and reproduced primarily through social media.

The article is structured into several sections: the first section presents the methodological framework and a description of the dataset; the second section summarizes the state of knowledge regarding the discourse on Russian gas in Slovakia; the third section analyzes post-referendum narratives; and the concluding section discusses the results within the broader context of political communication on energy.

1. STATE OF RESEARCH

The role of social media in political communication has been explored in detail in the current literature. Jungherr has shown that digital traces are useful not only for mapping political behavior, but also for examining the ways in which political messages spread, gain visibility, and become part of broader communication dynamics. (Jungherr, 2015) The publication *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics* also demonstrates that online platforms are not neutral communication spaces, but arenas in which political actors compete for attention, agenda-setting, and interpretive dominance. (Bruns et al., 2016)

In the Slovak context, our primary research has shown that Facebook serves political actors to stabilize ideological positions, mobilize supporters, and reinforce conflict frames, particularly in highly polarized environments. The article “*An Informational Narrative on Slovakia’s Energy Dependence on Russian Gas*” also confirmed that Facebook provides an exceptionally suitable environment for observing how narratives are repeated, combined, and disseminated among political actors. (Sinicyn, Denciová, and Eštok, forthcoming)

1.1 Energy Security and Narratives on Russian Gas

Energy security has long been a central topic in European political and academic discourse, particularly following the gas crises of 2006 and 2009 and, above all, after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. Tichý identified three basic subdiscourses shaping energy relations between the EU and Russia: the subdiscourse of securitization, the subdiscourse of diversification, and the geopolitical subdiscourse. (Tichý, 2017) These approaches are also relevant to the Slovak case, as debates on Russian gas are rarely limited to technical or economic issues and are typically intertwined with themes of dependence, power, and strategic vulnerability.

The concept of securitization according to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wild is particularly useful because it captures the process in which an originally economic or administrative issue begins to be articulated as a security threat requiring special attention. (Buzan et al., 1998). In debates over Russian gas, both sides of the dispute employ securitization strategies. Critics of imports frame dependence on Russia as a geopolitical risk,

while supporters of continued imports present sanctions, diversification, and EU pressure as a threat to Slovakia's economic stability, sovereignty, and energy security. (Kratochvíl, Tichý, 2013) Falkner's understanding of the use of energy dependence as a weapon further expands this framework by emphasizing that energy can simultaneously be infrastructure, a commodity, and an instrument of geopolitical pressure. (Falkner, 2023.)

1.2 Narrative Resilience and Political Communication

This article builds upon the definition of narrative used in a previous study, where we understand the concept of narrative in accordance with Roe's concept of narrative policy analysis. A narrative refers to a consistent line of argument or "story" that political actors repeatedly use to consolidate and legitimize their positions in situations of uncertainty or polarization. It is therefore not a single statement, but a structured framework that links claims about causes, value judgments, and implicit or explicit recommendations for further action. (Roe, 1994) In accordance with Roe's concept of narrative analysis, narratives can persist even when their empirical basis is questioned or when political developments seemingly weaken their persuasiveness.

This text therefore uses the term "narrative resilience" to denote the ability of political narratives to survive institutional or political defeat. However, resilience in this context does not mean immutability. On the contrary, resilient narratives often persist precisely because they adapt: they retain the core of their interpretive logic but shift emphases, absorb new events, and reinterpret the conflict in a slightly altered form. (Sinicyn, Denciová, Eštok, 2025, Gerulata Juno internal dataset)

Significant political events can function as critical moments that alter the structure of public discourse. They can redirect attention, disrupt established rhetorical routines, or create new possibilities for framing the conflict. In the case under examination, the rejection of the referendum can be understood as such a critical discursive moment. The referendum ceased to be the immediate goal of political mobilization, but the very failure of the initiative became a new interpretive source for narratives about the blocked will of citizens, external pressure, and Slovakia's limited autonomy within the EU. (Sinicyn, Denciová, and Eštok, forthcoming)

2.METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper employs a qualitative-interpretive research design that combines content analysis, discourse analysis, and frame analysis. It builds on an internal dataset compiled for a primary study on Slovakia's energy dependence on Russian gas, which is based on a database of posts by political actors on the social network Facebook from November 30, 2024, to November 30, 2025. Facebook was chosen due to its central role in political communication in Slovakia and its ability to reach a wide audience directly. The posts were collected using the Gerulata Juno monitoring system based on thematically defined keywords

(Russian gas, gas from Russia, Russian gas imports, Gazprom, sanctions against Russia, anti-Russian sanctions, gas transit, energy security, TurkStream, REPowerEU). After filtering a larger set of 736 posts and applying a threshold of more than 500 interactions, we identified 147 relevant Facebook posts published between November 30, 2024, and November 30, 2025. The list of actors was not predefined; actors were identified based on linguistic analysis of the content and subsequently manually categorized by type and relevance to the discourse under examination. Of the total set of 147 posts, which was formed after removing duplicates and applying a threshold of 500 interactions, 64 posts were published after June 4, 2025, and it is precisely this post-referendum subset that forms the analytical basis of the present study. For the purposes of this study, only those posts published between June 4, 2025, and November 30, 2025 - that is, after Slovak President Peter Pellegrini refused to call a referendum - were analyzed. (Sinicyn, Denciová, Eštok, 2025, Gerulata Juno internal dataset) The primary study focuses on the entire online discourse on Russian gas during the period November 2024–November 2025, mapping the main actors, dominant narratives, and their frequency within a broader timeframe. This paper focuses exclusively on the post-referendum period (June–November 2025), specifically on how narratives persisted, transformed, and were reframed within the frameworks of sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and dependence on the U.S. following the failure to call a referendum.

The methodological aim of the article is not to verify the truthfulness of individual claims contained in the posts, but to identify dominant narratives. The analysis is based on the narrative classification created in the original article. This includes positive narratives such as “*Russian gas is cheap*,” “*Russian gas ensures energy stability*,” “*Russian gas is in the national interest*,” “*diversification means buying repackaged Russian gas*,” or “*cutting ties with Russian gas means dependence on other states*,” as well as negative narratives such as “*Russian gas creates strategic dependence*,” “*Russian gas undermines Slovakia’s credibility with its allies*,” “*Russian gas finances the war against Ukraine*,” and “*Russian gas is not actually cheap*.” (Sinicyn, Denciová, Eštok, 2025, Gerulata Juno internal dataset)

Table 1: Main narratives about Russian gas and energy policy in Slovakia following the failed referendum initiative

Narrative	Main idea (after the referendum)	Main actors
Russian gas as an economic necessity	Russian gas is presented as key to protecting jobs and keeping energy prices low.	Smer-SD, Hlas-SD, SNS, government representatives
Sanctions as self-harm	EU sanctions are portrayed as measures that harm Slovakia and the European Union more than Russia and are labeled as “ideological.”	Smer-SD, the far right, pro-Russian actors
Brussels and limited sovereignty	The European Union is portrayed as an entity imposing energy decisions contrary to Slovakia’s national interests.	Government elites, nationalist actors
The will of the people blocked (referendum)	The failure to call a referendum is interpreted as a betrayal of citizens and a suppression of the will of the people.	Petition organizers and their allies
Resilience of narratives following the initiative’s failure	Key pro-Russian and pro-gas narratives persist and adapt despite the failure.	Various pro-gas and pro-Russian actors

(Author's work.)

Table 1 provides an overview of the prevailing narratives about Russian gas in the Slovak debate following the cancellation of the referendum (June–November 2025), focusing on their basic framing and main political proponents.

In addition to these pre-identified categories, the text also examines post-referendum interpretive frameworks that proved significant in the June–November 2025 subset, particularly those concerning sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, EU interference, and dependence on the United States. (Sinicyn, Denciová, Eštok, 2025, Gerulata Juno internal dataset)

To better structure the analysis, the period is divided into three phases. Phase I covers June and July 2025 and captures the immediate aftermath of the failed referendum, reactions to the debates on sanctions, and disputes over the significance of a “sovereign” energy policy. Phase II covers August and September 2025 and represents a period of stabilization in the discourse, during which established economic narratives persist while the referendum itself recedes into the background. Phase III covers October and November 2025 and reflects a renewed intensification of the discussion in connection with debates in the European Parliament on ending imports of Russian gas, oil, and other energy inputs, with frameworks of sovereignty and anti-dependence being promoted more strongly.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The persistence of narratives

The first key finding is that the failure of the referendum initiative did not lead to the demise of the discourse supporting the continuation of Russian gas imports. On the contrary, the subsequent period shows a clear persistence of the main pro-import narratives that had already been identified in the primary study based on an internal dataset from the Gerulata Juno platform, particularly narratives based on price advantages, energy stability, and national interest.

The most prevalent of these narratives was the claim that Russian gas remains an economically rational choice because it is cheaper than alternatives, or because alternative solutions impose additional costs on Slovak consumers and industry. In the primary dataset, cost-effectiveness had previously emerged as the most frequent positive narrative, present across nearly all major actors supporting imports. In the post-referendum subset, this pattern persists. Branislav Ondruš (Hlas-SD), for example, argued in October 2025 that an accelerated end to Russian gas imports would increase transit costs and cause a roughly 20-percent price hike for households and businesses, framing the proposed measures not as strategic diversification but as an ideologically motivated price shock. (Ondruš, 2025)

Similarly, Milan Uhrík (Republika) argued that, in times of high prices, responsible politicians should seek out the cheapest energy inputs rather than deliberately erecting barriers against Eastern trading partners. Although this type of argumentation is often not based on detailed empirical calculations, its persistence suggests that affordability remained the main interpretive framework for pro-import discourse even after the failure of the referendum initiative in June. (Sinicyn, Denciová, and Eštok, forthcoming)

The second persistent narrative was the claim that Russian gas is a source of energy stability and supply continuity. In the primary study, this framework appeared less frequently than the cheap gas argument, yet it nonetheless constituted an important part of the pro-import discourse. After June 2025, it remains visible primarily through criticism of alternative supply solutions and warnings that the measures promoted by the EU will create uncertainty rather than true system resilience. Robert Fico (Smer-SD), for example, in October 2025 described REPowerEU as a “senseless ideological move” and emphasized that Europe must consider not only environmental sustainability but also the sufficiency, availability, and stability of energy supplies. (Fico, 2025)

The third consistent narrative was the national interest. This narrative presents the continuation of Russian gas imports not as ideological alignment with Russia, but as a legitimate defense of the economic and social interests of the Slovak Republic. It remained strongly present in the post-referendum period. Marián Kéry (Smer-SD), for example, presented opposition to further sanctions and the effort to maintain flexibility in energy imports as part of a “sovereign policy,” emphasizing that such a position does not imply approval of Russian aggression, but rather prioritization of domestic energy needs. Branislav Ondruš, in turn,

framed Slovak MEPs supporting an accelerated restriction on Russian energy as actors acting against their own state, Slovak families, and jobs. (Sinicyn, Denciová, Eštok, 2025, Gerulata Juno internal dataset)

3.2 The transformation of narratives

Although the main economic narratives (cheap gas, energy stability, national interest) persisted, the discourse also underwent a significant transformation. Communication gradually shifted from the actual mobilization of citizens for the referendum toward broader claims regarding sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and power asymmetries within the European Union. Actors increasingly presented decisions at the EU and domestic policy levels as proof that Slovak concerns are being ignored or overruled. In this sense, the referendum functions as a latent symbol of blocked political will.

A more significant transformed framework is the narrative of sovereignty. The debate over Russian gas is no longer confined to the level of price and availability but is framed as a test of whether Slovakia still retains control over key economic decisions. This framework intensified in the fall of 2025 during discussions on the European Parliament's proposals to accelerate the end of Russian energy imports. Branislav Ondruš labeled these proposals "political treason against the state" and a threat to the Slovak economy and energy security, accusing Slovak opposition representatives in Brussels of acting against their own country. (Ondruš, 2025)

The third transformed narrative is the growing emphasis on double standards and dependence on the United States. This narrative is driven by the argument that diversification is merely superficial or formal. A narrative had already emerged in the dataset that diversification means purchasing "repackaged" Russian gas through intermediaries. (Sinicyn, Denciová, and Eštok, forthcoming) In the post-referendum period, however, this argument has gained further traction. Katarína Roth Neved'alová (Smer-SD), for example, claimed that cutting ties with Russian gas does not create true independence, because "everyone is buying repackaged Russian gas" and Europe is simultaneously becoming dependent on the United States. She described this direction as ideological, not rational. (Neved'alová, 2025) This anti-dependence framework was subsequently developed even more sharply by Branislav Ondruš, who in October 2025 described the European Union as a "humiliated vassal" of the U.S. and suggested that tariffs, bans, and regulatory measures are in fact a mechanism by which Europe is being pressured to purchase American fossil fuels. (Ondruš, 2025) In this narrative, the issue of Russian gas becomes just one element of a broader story about strategic subordination to Washington. It is here that the transformation of post-referendum discourse is most clearly visible: while it remains pro-import, it simultaneously takes on a broader anti-hegemonic and anti-American dimension.

Another clear shift is the growing importance of arguments concerning routes, infrastructure, and the feasibility of alternative solutions. Those advocating for continued imports repeatedly argue that the problem lies not only in whether Europe wants to end imports of Russian energy, but primarily in whether it has

credible, affordable, and technically viable alternatives at its disposal. Before the failed referendum, the pro-import discourse could rely primarily on sanctions, prices, and the principle of continuing trade relations with Russia. After June 2025, particularly in the fall, the discussion is increasingly shifting toward what is technically and economically feasible in the new transport and regulatory reality. (Sinicyn, Denciová, Eštok, 2025, Gerulata Juno internal dataset)

3.3 Continuity of Polarization

Despite the transformation of several frameworks, the overall structure of the discourse remained significantly polarized. The post-referendum period did not bring about a rapprochement between the two camps but rather confirmed the coexistence of two sharply separated interpretive worlds. On one side stood figures such as Robert Fico (Smer-SD), Branislav Ondruš (Hlas-SD), Marián Kéry (Smer-SD), Milan Uhrík (Republika), and Katarína Roth Neved'alová (Smer-SD), who continued to frame sanctions, REPowerEU, and restrictions on Russian energy imports as ideologically motivated, economically harmful, and politically coerced measures directed against Slovak interests. On the other hand, were figures such as Ľubica Karvašová (PS) and Ivan Korčok (PS), who continued to present Russian gas as a source of strategic dependence, reputational damage, and geopolitical risk. (Sinicyn, Denciová, and Eštok, forthcoming)

Ľubica Karvašová's October posts particularly clearly illustrate this anti-import stance. She argued that Russia is neither a reliable partner nor an energy supplier, and rejected claims about allegedly cheap Russian gas, arguing that if Russian gas were truly cheap, households would not need hundreds of millions in gas price subsidies. At the same time, she framed the end of Russian gas imports as part of a responsible energy policy that other EU member states have already managed to implement, thereby rejecting the pro-import argument that Slovakia has no realistic alternatives. (Karvašová, 2025)

4. DISCUSSION

The results suggest that the unannounced referendum on not applying anti-Russian sanctions did not mark the end of the discourse on Russian gas, but rather a moment of its reorganization. This finding confirms the analytical utility of the concept of narrative resilience. Political narratives do not necessarily disappear when the political campaign with which they were most visibly associated fails. On the contrary, they may persist precisely by abandoning one immediate form of mobilization and reformulating themselves into a broader and potentially more enduring framework.

In the case under study, the persistence of narratives regarding cost-effectiveness, energy security, and the national interest indicates that the core argumentative structure of the pro-import discourse remained intact after June 2025. These narratives were also primary in the overall dataset for the entire period from November 2024 to November 2025, during which cost-effectiveness was the most dominant positive narrative and pro-import actors also predominated in terms of interactions. Their continuation in the post-referendum period shows that support for continuing Russian gas imports was not dependent on the

referendum itself. While the referendum campaign intensified and focused the discourse, it did not create its deeper narrative foundations.

The referendum issue became part of a broader framework concerning blocked sovereignty, ignored national interests, and Slovakia's limited ability to make autonomous decisions within the EU. This shift corresponds to the logic of framing as defined by Entman: the original arguments were not abandoned but reassembled into a new definition of the problem. (Entman, 1993) What had previously been articulated primarily as an issue of sanctions and gas prices increasingly began to be communicated as a dispute over who decides, whose interests prevail, and where national political autonomy ends.

Another important consequence is the way in which the significance of political events is applied in online political communication. The rejection of the referendum served as a critical moment, not in the sense that it concluded the discussion, but in that it changed the conditions under which the discussion continued. Its failure itself became, in retrospect, a useful element of the narrative of grievance, which linked domestic institutions, EU policy, and foreign pressure into a single interpretive whole.

CONCLUSION

This article examined the evolution of the discourse on Russian gas in the Slovak information space after President Peter Pellegrini refused to call a referendum on the non-application of anti-Russian sanctions in June 2025. Based on a post-referendum subset of Facebook posts from the broader Gerulata Juno dataset, the article analyzed how narratives evolved between June and November 2025.

In this article, we identified two research questions and derived the following answers from them.

RQ1: How did the dominant narratives about Russian gas change after the President of the Slovak Republic rejected the referendum? The dominant economic narratives (cheap gas, energy stability, national interest) neither diminished nor disappeared, but expanded to include frameworks of sovereignty, the blocked will of citizens, criticism of the EU, and warnings against replacing dependence on Russia with dependence on the US.

RQ2: Which narratives remained stable, and which transformed between June and November 2025? Narratives regarding the cost-effectiveness of Russian gas, its contribution to energy stability, and imports as a national interest remained stable; the frameworks of sovereignty, democratic legitimacy, and dependence transformed; following the cancellation of the referendum, these reframed the issue from one of sanctions and prices into a dispute over Slovakia's position in the EU and its relationship with the US.

The analysis showed that the failure of the referendum did not lead to a weakening of the discourse supporting the continuation of Russian gas imports. The most important economic narratives, particularly those emphasizing cost-effectiveness, energy stability, and the national interest, remained clearly present in the post-referendum period. At the same time, however, the discourse underwent a transformation as it

expanded to include political frameworks focused on sovereignty, democratic obstruction, European Union interference, and the danger of replacing dependence on Russia with dependence on the U.S.

At the same time, it became apparent that the post-referendum discourse was not maintained solely by marginal or explicitly pro-Russian actors but also permeated the communication of established government officials and the broader political spectrum, which increased its legitimacy and visibility in the online space. During the period under review, frames linking the issue of Russian gas to Slovakia's economic survival, the risk of sharp price increases, the threat to industry, and the notion that the European Union is forcing the country into decisions contrary to its specific conditions gained particularly strong traction. In this sense, the discourse on gas after June 2025 was not limited solely to energy policy but was expanded to include interpretations of sovereignty, solidarity, and Slovakia's position within the European Union, with the question of the state's positioning in the Central European space between Eastern and Western influences remaining a key context of this debate. (Eštok, 2020)

The findings also suggest that political failure does not necessarily mean a decline in discourse. On the contrary, in highly polarized conditions, a failed initiative can serve as a new source of mobilization, allowing the original arguments to be transformed and embedded in a new framework. The key conclusion is that the failure to call a referendum did not lead to a decline in narratives, but rather to their adaptation.

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