



Adria Digital Media
Observatory

GENERATIVE AI USE AND DISINFORMATION DURING THE CROATIAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS 2024

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ABSTRACT

This report is part of the research activities carried out within the project “Adria Digital Media Observatory” funded by the Digital Europe Programme. The aim was to identify use of Generative AI in production of disinformation that was shared on social media during campaign for the Croatian Parliament Elections 2024.

Key findings:

- Detected presence of generative AI disinformation during the Croatian parliamentary elections 2024,
- Main platforms for dissemination were TikTok and X,
- Generative AI disinformation targeted the Croatian political elite and had low to high user activity,
- The disinformation analysed was created with moderate technical sophistication, combining generative AI and cheap fake technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of generative artificial intelligence (AI) on the 2024 national and European Parliament elections is a challenge for democracy in the European Union. Undoubtedly, generative AI can be used to create different types of media content that “...can be used to influence the politics of evidence: how evidence changes and is changed by its existence in cultural, social, and political structures.” (Paris & Donovan, 2019)

According to Valerie Wirtschafter (2024), in the context of elections, generative AI disinformation can discourage voters from voting, mislead voters about candidates, events and information, undermine public trust (in general and about elections) and challenge societal consensus.

Generative AI disinformation can be divided into three main types (Bontcheva et al., 2024):

- AI-generated images and videos, also known as “deepfakes”, which are fully synthetic or digitally manipulated images and videos,
- AI-generated audio, which are fully synthetic or digitally manipulated audio that have a high potential for abuse and whose impact is underestimated,

- AI-generated text, which can be very persuasive.

The study focused on the first two types, as they carry a high risk of manipulation, which in real life has serious consequences beyond elections.

The Croatian parliamentary elections were unexpectedly scheduled for April 17 by Croatian President Zoran Milanović on March 15, 2024 (Vecernji.hr, 2024). This was the shortest deadline for convening elections with an election campaign that lasted only one month. The election campaign itself was characterized by controversy, from the decision on the election date, to President Milanović's announcement to run for one of the political options in the parliamentary elections, to the ban on President Milanović's candidacy by the Constitutional Court (Vičević, 2024), and therefore provided an ideal environment for the spread of disinformation.

The aim of this report is to determine whether generative AI disinformation was used during the Croatian parliamentary elections in 2024, to describe the way in which generative AI was used in the preparation of disinformation mitigation for the European Parliament elections in June 2024, and to deepen the understanding of the use of generative AI for disinformation in elections.

Consequently, we developed the following research questions:

RQ1: Was generative AI used during the Croatian parliamentary election campaign?

RQ2: If so, on which platforms was it used and whether platforms were labelled as disinformation or generative AI content?

RQ3: What types of generative AI disinformation were used and what was the impact based on the ABCDE framework?

RQ4: What is the level of technical sophistication in the production of disinformation through generative AI?

METHODS

Detection of generative AI disinformation during the Croatian parliamentary elections was limited to databases of fact-checking organizations covering Croatia: Faktograf.hr (<https://faktograf.hr/parlamentarni-izbori-2024/>), AFP (<https://provjeracinjenica.afp.com/list>), and DU-CHECK (<https://du-check.eu/>). A total of 19 generative AI disinformation related to the elections

(N=19) were identified, which were detected only by DU-CHECK or found based on the initial detection by DU-CHECK. The analysis covered the period from the announcement of the parliamentary elections (15 March) to the month following the elections in order to cover post-election phase and attempt to cover FIMI threat progression of the FIMI¹ threat (17 May) (EEAS, 2024).

For the analysis of generative AI disinformation, we used the ABCDE framework (Pamment, 2020) to ensure that the data is made available to the different stakeholders in a clear and coherent way:

Actor: Who is behind the disinformation?

Behaviour: How is the disinformation disseminated?

Content: What type of disinformation is being disseminated?

Degree: To what extent is the disinformation disseminated?

Effect: What impact does the disinformation have?

ABCDE framework categories were extended with spectrum category adopted from Paris and Donovan (2019, 10-11) to better describe the technical sophistication of the production of disinformation with categories ranging from high to low sophistication (virtual performances, voice synthesis, face swapping, lip-synching, face altering/swapping, lookalikes, and recontextualizing).

OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Generative AI was used during and after Croatian parliamentary elections 2024 and total of 19 disinformations² were identified with high possibility that more of them were created and shared during analysed period as fact-checking organizations have limited resources for detection and platforms are not providing data on that kind of content³. At the time of writing this report, 18 of 19 detected generative AI disinformation were still available (N=18) and none of them were labelled as such.

Majority of the detected generative AI disinformation were distributed via TikTok (N=14) and X (N=4) and could be attributed to private profiles. The detected generative AI disinformation targeted

¹ Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)

² For this study, the terms misinformation and disinformation were used as synonyms.

³ A detailed analysis can be found in Appendix 1.

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković (N=14), President Zoran Milanović (N=7), leader of right-wing oppositional party Nikola Grmoja (N=3), and leader of the left-wing party Peđa Grbin (N=1).

The predominant type of disinformation was audio disinformation attached to videos (N=16), manipulated videos (N=2) and generated photos (N=1). Most of the disinformation detected had high engagement (N=11), while few had low (N=5) and moderate (N=3) engagement. Most of the detected disinformation was based on voice synthesis without synchronization (N=16) with combination of the generative AI and cheap fake technologies.

Although most of the disinformation uncovered has a humorous background, it is aimed at leading politicians in Croatia and is likely to confuse Croatian voters.

EXAMPLES OF GENERATIVE AI DISINFORMATION

Example 1: This disinformation campaign is an Instagram Reels ad in which the Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković is deceptively portrayed. In the manipulated video, Plenković appears to encourage citizens to buy shares in the oil company INA, which is partly owned by the Croatian government. He claims that an investment of 250 euros could bring profits of up to 4,000 euros. This message is conveyed through a deepfake audio track that gives the impression that Plenković is giving these instructions. The video used in this ad is from an actual press conference, specifically the part where Prime Minister Plenković congratulates the Croatian water polo players on their recent success. However, to fit the deepfake audio narrative, the original video has been deliberately slowed down. In short, this manipulation is a combination of deepfake and cheap fake techniques. The deepfake technology was used to create the fake audio of Plenković, while the cheap fake aspect involved the simplistic manipulation of video speed without sophisticated lip-syncing. The possible aim of this disinformation was to recall the unexplained connection of Prime Minister Plenković's with the corruption scandal that rocked INA in 2022 due to the sale of gas to private companies below market price (Bradarić, 2022), or to use the election campaign to increase the reach of their fraud (Vladisavljević, 2024). As the video was a Facebook/Instagram ad, it was removed

because it didn't meet Meta's advertising standards. However, there are other versions of the same ad in Meta's ad library that were removed or successfully ran the entire campaign from the beginning of 2024 across various pages/accounts (Reporteri, N1info, HR informacija, Vijesti, Zadnja vijest, Ambmila Accesorios, etc.). The strategies used by the entity that created this generative AI disinformation should be further investigated as they successfully circumvent the platform's policy.



Image 1: Screenshot of AI (audio) deepfake disinformation about INA stocks and Andrej Plenković

Example 2: TikTok video with a fake portrait of Croatian President Zoran Milanović. Using deepfake audio technology, the video falsely shows Milanović talking about his alleged fondness for gambling and slot machines. It is important to note that the audio does not match

the movement of Milanović's lips. The video footage itself has not been slowed down or otherwise manipulated; only the audio has been altered. He can be seen giving tips on how to manipulate banks and teaching children about gambling. The original footage used for this manipulation was taken from a press conference where President Milanović attended the celebration of the 32nd anniversary of the founding of the Croatian Defense Council (HVO) in Knin. There he answered questions of a political nature with regard to the upcoming elections in Croatia. The possible aim of this disinformation was to link President Milanović to disinformation about his drug and alcohol addiction. Additionally, another possible aim was to discredit Milanović by emphasizing the issue of youth gambling, which was one of the topics promoted during the elections. This TikTok video had 21,000 views, 1,969 likes and 1,129 shares.



Image 2: Zoran Milanović is deceptively portrayed as promoting gambling and betting services

Example 3: In a video published by the satire show PrimeTime on X, Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and his party, the HDZ, are satirized using audio deepfake technology, making fun of their corruption and behaviour. The doctored election commercial uses an official HDZ campaign ad with altered words and subtitles. In the video, a deep fake version of Plenković makes exaggerated statements about HDZ's dishonesty and thievery and urges citizens to smile and vote for them. It is important to note that the video is lip-synced, although it is not perfect. This video on X received 10,000 views, 42 reposts, and 121 likes.

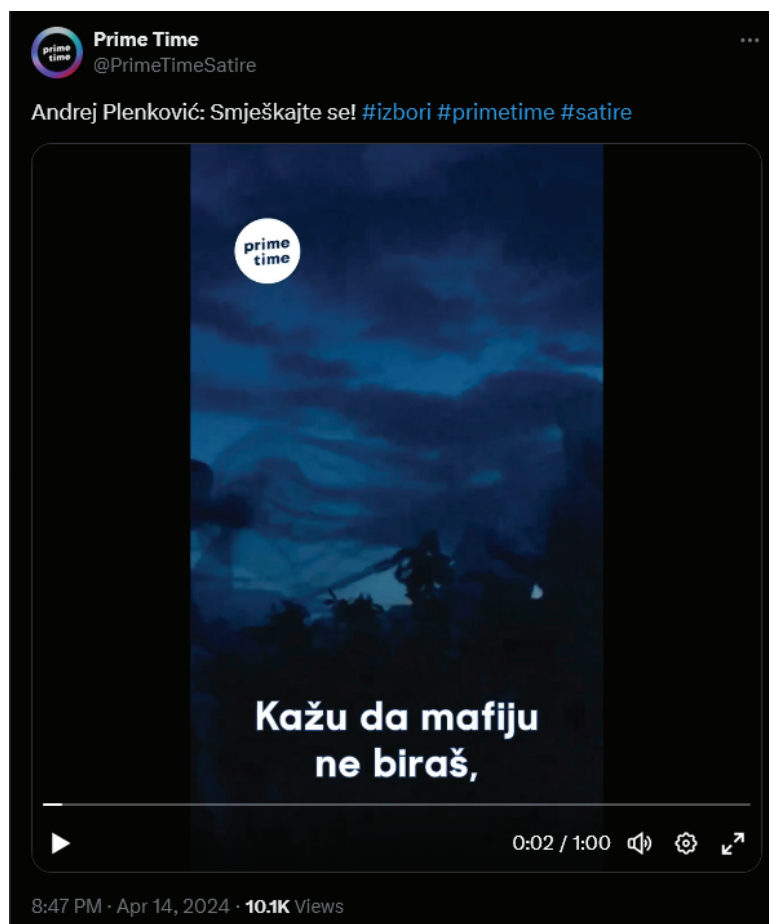


Image 3: Satirical deepfake video of PM Plenković discussing government corruption

CONCLUSION

Generative AI was used to produce disinformation during the 2024 Croatian parliamentary election campaign and shortly thereafter. The investigation found that the dominant social media platforms for dissemination of generative AI disinformation were TikTok and X and that they were still available and not labelled as generative AI or disinformation content at the time of writing. The disinformation targeted the Croatian political elite and had low to high user activity. The disinformation analysed was created with moderate technical sophistication by generative AI and mixed with cheap fake technologies. Although the analysis of generative AI disinformation had limited impact on the results of the Croatian parliamentary elections, it shows the potential of this technology to influence politics. The use of AI in the Croatian parliamentary elections in 2024 showed that "...it constituted an evolution rather than a revolution." (EEAS, 2024.)

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APPENDIX 1

Platform	Date	Disinfo labelled	Author	Behaviour	Content	Degree	Effect	Spectrum	Original link
X	27-03-2024	No	Dubravko Črnjak, artist	Face swapping to make Nikola Grmoja look like Andrej Plenković with a funny movie clip.	Manipulated video making Nikola Grmoja look like Andrej Plenković, humorous context.	Low engagement, 163 views, low impact. Part of ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause laughter or confusion, highlights need for critical thinking, low engagement, potential for minor political humour discussion.	Face swapping - audio not altered	https://x.com/dubravko_crnjak/status/1772923904090100177
X	28-03-2024	No	Dubravko Črnjak, artist	Face swapping to make Andrej Plenković look like Adolf Hitler.	Manipulated video portraying Andrej Plenković as Hitler.	Low engagement, but part of a broader campaign against political actors	Likely to cause shock, provoke discussion, and undermine trust in AI if not recognized as satire. It also portrays Andrej Plenković as “dictator.”	Face swapping - audio altering	https://x.com/dubravko_crnjak/status/1773454248530805009
TikTok	28-03-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: “shitposting”	Using audio deepfake to create a humorous and provocative content, mimics Andrej Plenković	Manipulated video of Andrej Plenković making absurd statements about “mogging” and “mewing” in school education.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, potentially undermines trust in political discourse, Andrej Plenković and election campaigns, can spur discussions about humour’s role in politics.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7351347951366851873
TikTok	28-03-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: “shitposting”	Using audio deepfake to create fake (humour) statement by Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković	Manipulated video with Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković exchanging insults.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7351348821554662688
TikTok	28-03-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: “shitposting”	Using audio deepfake of Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković with sexual and Minecraft references.	Manipulated video of Milanović and Plenković with sexual references and Minecraft allusions.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7351349150992076064

TikTok	28-03-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake of Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković with sexual and "fenum" references.	Manipulated video of Milanović and Plenković, sexual references and "fenum" allusions.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7351349782020918560
TikTok	28-03-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake of Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković discussing "rizz" and heavily swearing against one another.	Manipulated video response of Plenković to Milanović, with insults and references to "rizz".	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7351350310788451617
X	29-03-2024	No	Dubravko Črnjak, artist	Creating AI photo manipulation to make Peđa Grbin look like a weed smoker.	Manipulated image of Peđa Grbin with tattoos and a beanie, smoking marihuana. Humorous context.	Low engagement, 215 views, low impact.	Likely to cause laughter or confusion regarding Peđa Grbin and SDP party, highlights need for critical thinking, low engagement, potential for minor political humour discussion.	Image made with AI, altered face and body to make Peđa Grbin look like a weed smoker.	https://x.com/dubravko_crnjak/status/1773665230096069026
TikTok	29-03-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Creating audio deepfake showing Nikola Grmoja discussing "mewing" standards.	Manipulated video of Nikola Grmoja on "mewing" standards pushing Croats out and importing labour.	Moderate engagement, some virality.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Nikola Grmoja, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7351772835225832736
Instagram	04-01-2024	No	Unknown	Creating audio deepfake to create a misleading advertisement, with a political figure. In this case prime minister Andrej Plenković	Manipulated video of Andrej Plenković offering fake INA shares	Potentially high impact, but exact engagement unknown.	Likely to cause financial harm and distrust in political figures, in this case prime minister Andrej Plenković. Potential for significant discussion on fraud and deception using AI.	Voice synthesis, but no lip synching, however slowed down so that it looked like it overlapped. Mix deepfake and cheap fake technologies	The post is no longer available

TikTok	08-04-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Creating audio deepfake of Nikola Grmoja attacking HDZ and Gordan Jandroković.	Manipulated video of Grmoja criticizing HDZ and Jandroković on topics like "rizz," "mewing," and "edging". Esoteric by design, highschooler language used.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Nikola Grmoja and Goran Jandroković, spurs discussions on humour and satire in politics.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7355393308211907872
X	14-04-2024	No	Prime Time (N1)	Creation of a TV commercial using audio deepfake technology to satirize Andrej Plenković and his party, HDZ.	Manipulated election ad of Plenković and HDZ, "mocking their own corruption."	Moderate engagement, some virality. High potential due to the fact this is a show on N1 TV.	Potential confusion, portrays Plenković and HDZ as corrupt, impacts political discourse during election campaign, high potential for discussion on corruption and satire.	Voice synthesis and lip syncing	https://x.com/PrimeTimeSatire/status/1779582205628445061
TikTok	14-04-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Creating audio deepfake without proper lip syncing, for humorous content.	Manipulated video of Milanović with absurd claims, obvious joke.	High engagement, significant virality.	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, low chance of being taken seriously and as statement from Zoran Milanović due to absurdity of claims.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7357636150355316001
TikTok	14-04-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake of Plenković discussing Brawl Stars and HDZ corruption.	Manipulated video of Plenković discussing Brawl Stars, satirical take on how HDZ corruption will help HDZ members in Brawl Stars.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Andrej Plenković and HDZ, spurs discussions on humour and satire in politics and corruption.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/735763666208619808
TikTok	18-04-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake technology to create a fake video of Andrej Plenković admitting to corruption and theft, with real applause, and stating that HDZ	Manipulative video showing Andrej Plenković thanking citizens, admitting to being a mafia member, loves corruption and theft, increase prices and inflation, export young people, and import workers from Nepal, ending with real audio	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Andrej Plenković and HDZ, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7359226816445353249

TikTok	01-05-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake technology to manipulate a video where Zoran Milanović challenges Andrej Plenković to a fight in the game Brawl Stars, with heavy swearing, sexual references, and political threats.	Manipulative video showing Zoran Milanović challenging Andrej Plenković to a Brawl Stars match, threatening to abdicate if he loses, form a government with SDP if he wins, and ban HDZ. The video also mentions sexual activities with a Homeland Movement MP.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign	May cause confusion or laughter, undermining trust in Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, but also spurring discussions on humour, satire, and the acceptability of sexual references in political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7363943544433691937
TikTok	02-05-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake technology to manipulate a video where TV host Zoran Šprajc is commenting on Zoran Milanović, Andrej Plenković and their fictious "Brawl Stars" duel.	Manipulative video showing TV host Zoran Šprajc reporting on news about "Brawl Stars" results between Zoran Milanović, Andrej Plenković and Nikola Grmoja.	High engagement, significant virality. Ongoing campaign	Likely to cause confusion or laughter, undermines political trust in Zoran Milanović and Andrej Plenković, can spur discussions on humour and political satire.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7364304764974271776
TikTok	16-05-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio deepfake manipulation to create a satirical video where Andrej Plenković talks about Pupovac and Penava, and both Plenković and Penava talk about "edging" and "mewing".	Manipulative video showing Andrej Plenković saying that Pupovac is bad, while Penava is good. Plenković and Penava both talk about "edging" and "mewing". Plenković calls Penava "sigma" in the context of the election campaign and makes a statement about it.	Relatively low views, visibility is quite low. Ongoing campaign.	May cause confusion or laughter, undermining the perception of political actors (Andrej Plenković and Ivan Penava) and trust in political discourse, but also spurring discussions on the role of humour and satire in politics and the acceptability of sexual references.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/7369466472852180256
TikTok	16-05-2024	No	zastojaboze, private profile. Description: "shitposting"	Using audio (deepfake) technology to create a fake video where Zoran Milanović talks about his love for gambling and slot machines, gives tips on manipulating banks and teaching children about gambling.	Manipulative video showing Zoran Milanović talking about gambling, slot machines, giving tips on manipulating banks and teaching children about gambling, intended for entertainment and provocation	Video has moderate engagement and virality. Ongoing campaign.	The video may cause laughter or shock among viewers due to Zoran Milanović and the manipulation of his voice. It may undermine trust in political discourse, the image of Zoran Milanović, and media literacy if viewers are not aware of the satirical nature.	Voice synthesis, but no synchronization	https://www.tiktok.com/@zastojaboze/video/736946682427226401

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ADMO

Project Adria Digital Media Observatory (ADMO) ensures the establishment and continuation of the Croatian and Slovenian hub operation for tackling disinformation and cooperation with EDMO on multiple levels by a multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach. As an effective response to the challenges for democracy and society, the project sees a combination of different expertise and methods - attacking sources/actors, networks, reasoning, and disinformation narratives from different spheres and combining techniques. The implemented activities will contribute to the general objective - creating and ensuring the long-term development of a broader Croatian/Slovenian hub on digital media composed of a multidisciplinary community of academic researchers, fact-checkers and media practitioners, journalists and civil society advocates capable of detecting and analyzing disinformation campaigns; and supporting the government and regulator in strengthening the collective response to disinformation threat to democracy.

The project comprehensively approaches the social, political, and health problem of spreading disinformation campaigns through research, awareness-raising, and capacity-building methods. The key projects' outcomes/deliverables are: the project's website and its integration with the EDMO platform, production of the continuous flow of fact-checks, publication of analytic reports on disinformation content, disinformation sources, origins of disinformation narratives, the role of international actors in spreading disinformation, disinformation acceptance and debunking, on the reasoning behind conspiracist and anti-conspiracist behavior, training for journalists and student of journalism, media literacy education activities for citizens, reports on Code of Practice on Disinformation in Croatia and on the financial viability of the Croatian and Slovenian news media sector.



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