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Generative AI and the Transformation of Algorithmic Populism: From Amplification to Content Creation*

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Summary

This paper explores the usage of generative AI disinformation during the period of presidential and parliamentary elections in Croatia in 2024/2025. It has employed the notion of algorithmic populism as an analytical framework with the aim of understanding new communication patterns that emerged from generative AI technologies. By combining the algorithmic populism with the deepfake-cheapfake spectrum, developed by Paris and Donovan (2019), this study identifies 115 cases of AI-generated disinformation content. Fifteen of these cases were found during the parliamentary, and 100 during the presidential elections. Most cases were circulated on Facebook (56) and on TikTok (37), while the most used AI techniques were face swapping (43) and voice synthesis (30). Analysed disinformation campaigns mostly targeted Zoran Milanović, Andrej Plenković and Dragan Primorac. The findings indicate a transformation of algorithmic populism during elections, extending its role from the amplification of content to production and adaptation.

Keywords: Generative AI Disinformation, Disinformation Campaigns, Algorithmic Populism, Elections, Croatia

Introduction

The emergence of the internet, social media, and other digital technologies has liberalized media content production and allowed various actors, such as citizens, activists, politicians, and algorithms, to produce political messages (Maly, 2018). This transformation has radically changed the dynamics of political campaigns and pub-

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lic debates, enabling new forms of political action. Digital platforms have weakened traditional mechanisms of media mediation and enabled direct communication between political actors and the public, but they have also introduced new forms of mediation through the use of algorithmic selection and recommendations.

These processes enabled the rise and consolidation of contemporary populism, since the digital environment favours emotionally charged, personalized, and polarized messages and facilitates the dissemination of populist narratives by amplifying the clash between the "people" and the "elites". Platform recommendation systems are often assumed to be amplifying these messages, although the extent of the influence varies across platforms and contexts.

Additional issues with algorithms have arisen with the introduction of generative AI, which enables the mass production of text, images, and multimedia content, lowering barriers to entry into political communication and allowing the production of context-adjusted messages. These trends challenge public trust in contemporary societies, increase opportunities for the manipulation of citizens and represent a significant risk to democratic processes.

On this basis, this paper analyses the role of generative AI in the production and dissemination of disinformation during the Croatian parliamentary and presidential elections of 2024/2025, and how it transforms algorithmic populism, which is viewed as a sociotechnological pattern of political communication in which digital platforms, algorithmic recommendations, and generative AI tools enable the production, adaptation, and dissemination of political messages.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first part elaborates on the theoretical framework of algorithmic populism and the use of generative AI during elections. The second part presents the methodology and the coding scheme. The third part presents the results, and the last part discusses the implications of the findings for algorithmic populism, governance, and democracy.

Populism and Algorithms

The concept of populism experienced a renaissance in scholarly research following the American presidential elections and the Brexit referendum in 2016. However, this scholarly attention has not resulted in a single accepted definition. Building on Cas Mudde's (2004, p. 562) definition of populism, it is conceptualized as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite', and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people". This approach has three core features: (1) the existence of "the common people" as defined by populist leaders; (2) their opposition to "corrupt" or "evil" elites; and (3) their rejection of the "others" who are perceived as not working

for national sovereignty or representing dangerous "others" (Yilmaz and Morieson, 2025). Scholars identify different causes of the rise of populism, including economic factors (Mudde, 2007), reaction to post-democracy (Mouffe, 2018), and the process of mediatization (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017).

Recent research indicates that branching populism can weaken the concept and lead to inconsistent taxonomy across studies (Naxera *et al*., 2024). This paper adopts a definition of populism based on Mudde's (2007) approach. Treating populism separately from host ideologies with which it may be combined provides a stable basis for comparison and interpretation, and helps us to understand how populism interacts with the logics of digital platforms, rather than further expanding typological distinctions. Populistic features, when combined with amplification by algorithmic systems and production through generative AI tools, can reinforce populist narratives and create the illusion of widespread public support (Tufekci, 2015).

Leandro Ayres França and Carlos Adalberto Ferreira de Abreu (2022, p. 235) argue that algorithms have created a new form of populism, structured and conditioned by algorithms, which Ico Maly (2018) calls algorithmic populism. Bonini and Treré (2024, p. 135) defined it as a form of "... populism that is at least partially reliant on applying algorithmic knowledge and activism to construct the populist voice and let it circulate throughout the hybrid media system".

The proliferation of generative AI reshapes algorithmic populism by offering features beyond distribution, serving as infrastructure for production and adaptation, and shifting from a dominant amplification model to a mixed model of production, adaptation, and amplification. Recent analysis of the European Parliament election campaigns confirms this transformation and "extremist Eurosceptic voices were more dominant" (Daniel and Obholzer, 2026, p. 293).

The connection between echo chambers and polarization cannot be explained by a simple A-to-B relationship (Dahlgren, 2021; Hartmann *et al*., 2025). However, algorithms reinforce existing social trends, and can worsen polarization by amplifying extremist voices and making the moderate majority less visible. Consequently, "dominance" on a platform may result from ranking systems and engagement incentives, rather than accurately reflecting how voters feel (Metzler and Garcia, 2024, pp. 738-739).

A major shift occurred in 2022 when OpenAI introduced ChatGPT, a generative artificial intelligence tool that significantly democratized content production. Today, algorithms are not only used for the distribution of political messages but also for content production and adaptation, where generative AI plays an increasingly important role in political communication and, once again, redefines the concept of populism. Generative AI redefines the practice of populism in such a way that it simplifies the production of messaging that is emotionally compelling and

rapidly adapting. Although ChatGPT popularized public awareness of generative AI, the democratization of audiovisual tools such as Midjourney, ElevenLabs, and HeyGen, is especially important for political communication because they enable the cheap production of synthetic photos, voices and video.

Maly argues that "contemporary populism is not just a frame, or a style that is used to normalize an ideology, it is also a sociotechnical assemblage" (Maly, 2020, p. 463). This sociotechnical assemblage should be explored beyond the algorithmic spread of messages, as generative AI production provides another key ingredient to contemporary populism. Populists using generative AI content alter citizens' perception of the past, present and future by blurring the lines between reality and fabrication, "... crafting a precarious present, a nostalgic past that never was, and a dangerous future that must be averted" (Lemmes, 2025).

Based on the previous discussion, we define algorithmic populism as a sociotechnological mode of political communication in which populist-style narratives may be produced, adapted, and disseminated through the interaction of political actors, platforms, algorithmic recommendations, and the use of generative AI tools that enable large-scale content creation and contextual adaptation.

Generative AI and Elections

Generative AI does not act in isolation, but as part of the existing hybrid media system, where political communication is created, disseminated, and reinterpreted through traditional media, platforms, political actors, and users. This hybrid system operates in the context of an information disorder environment, which Wardle and Derakshan (2017, p. 5) define as a contemporary global challenge consisting of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. These notions distinguish three types of problematic information along the dimensions of falseness and intent to cause harm. Misinformation, therefore, describes false information shared, but with no harm intended. To the contrary, disinformation is false information shared on purpose to cause harm. Finally, malinformation is true information shared in harmful ways. Disinformation is, in particular, recognised as damaging because it strategically blends factual elements with fabrication to maximise its impact (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). Regarding AI-generated content, the boundary between misinformation and disinformation has become increasingly blurred, as it is often difficult to determine whether false or misleading content is being shared without intent to harm, as in the case of misinformation, or is being deliberately produced and disseminated to deceive or cause harm, as in the case of disinformation.

In this context, generative AI now represents infrastructure that facilitates, automates, and lowers the cost of content production, and as a result, reshapes media ecologies, erodes authority, and amplifies populism (Crilley and Saunders, 2025, p.

1). Furthermore, generative AI is reinforcing political polarisation and legitimate attacks on political opponents (Bayarri Toscano, 2025). In practice, synthetic political videos do not always work by tricking people into believing a specific false statement, but rather to make them doubt what they read, see, or hear. Experimental evidence suggests that exposure to such content erodes their trust in information sources (Vaccari and Chadwick, 2020, p. 8). The epistemic "grey zone" can be easily exploited during elections. Bad actors can inject synthetic media into circulation while simultaneously dismissing authentic evidence as "AI", making it difficult to distinguish between AI-generated and human content (Bontcheva *et al*., 2024, p. 10).

Generative AI tools enable the mass production of original, personalized, and context-adjusted content (LaChapelle and Tucker, 2023). More importantly, the level of knowledge required to enter the political arena using these tools is decreasing and enabling greater manipulation of information. Actors who use emotionally charged messages, simplified narratives, and moral divides, could gain additional communication potential through generative AI (Feitsma and Whitehead, 2024).

Recent studies documented a technically sophisticated mix of strategies, including impersonation, and synthetic identity construction, falsification of evidence, and large-scale content generation tailored to political objectives together with fabricated "news "and audiovisual content such as immersive deepfake videos or altered imagery (Marchal *et al*., 2024, pp. 11-14).

Both populist rhetoric and algorithmic logic rely on people's engagement and emotionally charged messages (França and Abreu, 2022). However, this relationship should not be seen as exclusive only to populists (Yilmaz *et al*., 2026). At the same time, available evidence suggests that algorithms generally reinforce existing social drivers rather than independently producing polarization or misinformation. In this sense, generative AI therefore enables the algorithmic adaption of these messages (Metzler and Garcia, 2024; Lasser and Poechhacker, 2025).

Furthermore, the combination of algorithmic amplification and automated production creates new opportunities for the rapid circulation of disinformation, as it can now be produced on "a production line" through networks of automated systems, coordinated actors, and platform infrastructure (Amin, 2025). As a result, disinformation is no longer an exception or a deviation in the contemporary information ecosystem.

There is also the question of effective countermeasures for the detection of rapidly circulating disinformation. The so-called "detection dilemma" essentially states that detection tools largely remain imperfect in detecting generative AI disinformation and can easily generate false positives, which in turn means that aggressive automated takedowns from platforms risk wrongful removal of content and can

fuel accusations of censorship, a dynamic that can easily be politically instrumentalised during election periods (Bontcheva *et al*., 2024, p. 14).

The core issue in detecting disinformation is fundamentally an imbalance problem, more specifically, the discrepancy in timing and resources. Creators of manipulated (synthetic) media can generally work much faster and with greater flexibility than the teams building AI-generated detection systems. Simply put, it is almost always faster to produce convincing fake content than it is to build a tool that can reliably detect it. Because of this gap, it is implied that even well-designed platform responses may not achieve complete coverage in detecting generative AI disinformation (Lundberg and Mozelius, 2024, p. 6).

Elections represent particularly sensitive phases of the political process in which the above-mentioned mechanisms are intensified (Baltezarević *et al*., 2025). Public interest in political topics grows during election campaigns, and at the same time, the volume of political communication increases, along with a rise in content production of varying quality and from different sources. Generative AI further amplifies this dynamic and creates additional problems by blurring the epistemic barriers between authentic and generative AI content, making it difficult for the average user to distinguish between them. This can result in lower trust in information sources, professional journalism, and the democratic process. On the other hand, populist actors can relativise facts, delegitimise institutions, and present their narratives as truth.

In this environment, the impact of generative AI on elections extends beyond individual pieces of content; it reshapes how the information sphere functions. Simon and Altay (2025, pp. 16-17) divided recurring arguments about the impact of generative AI on the elections into six broad categories. The first three arguments are more concerned with the content that generative AI produced. Due to its ease of use and high reach to potential voters, the generative AI increases quantity, quality and personalisation of the information. It allows a great number of all types of content across digital channels, while its quality is enhanced by technical capabilities to create audiovisual content at a low cost, but of high quality. Moreover, strengthened by the algorithmic curation, generative AI increases personalization of (mis)information at scale due to its technical capabilities, which may lead to increased persuasion using tailored messages to specific audiences. As argued in this article, this content increases the users' vulnerability to disinformation.

Apart from the content itself, the following categories are more concerned with the infrastructure of generative AI. As Simon and Altay (*ibid*.) argue, the fourth category emerges with the new modes of information consumption, in which the generative AI is integrated into search engines, providing lower-quality or biased information about elections. This mode of consumption undermines long-term authoritative sources of information. Consequently, generative AI destabilizes shared

reality and the sense of factuality (fifth category of arguments). The reality of content is systematically under question, further undermining public trust and fostering scepticism. The final argument revolves around a more pronounced relationship between humans and AI, which is problematic because generative AI may seem to create personalized communication with the user. This could result in an increase of persuasion and susceptibility to disinformation. The collapse of a shared reality supports the populist agenda by further eroding public trust.

The timing of the release and publication of generative AI disinformation is also crucial, as it becomes a key factor in shaping the impact of generative AI disinformation. There have been documented cases (EEAS, 2023; 2024) that indicate how synthetic or manipulated content is routinely released at the last possible moment before election day, including during legally mandated "silence periods", such as the one Croatia has.

It could be argued that this is done because the capacity of journalists, fact-checkers, and state institutions to respond in time is significantly reduced. In that way, such timing gives (bad) actors a clear operational advantage in distributing manipulative (AI) content that is difficult to verify, contextualize, or correct before the voting itself takes place. The aim is to create enough disruption and confusion when it is too late for verification and correction to effectively catch up (Bontcheva *et al*., 2024, p. 10).

Today's political communication is a sociotechnical assemblage arising from the interaction of political actors, media, platforms, algorithms, artificial intelligence, and users. In this context, generative AI multiplies existing communication patterns and creates new forms of manipulation in contemporary societies.

To better understand generative AI and its role in the broader transformation of political communication, the approach that integrates theories of populism, artificial intelligence and platformisation was developed with the aim to examine the role of generative AI in the production and distribution of disinformation during the 2024/2025 Croatian parliamentary and presidential elections. The focus is on volume, temporal dynamics, distribution channels, typology, and technical advancements, including political targeting. Based on this, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: What was the volume and timing of generative AI disinformation during the 2024 Croatian parliamentary and 2024/2025 presidential elections?

RQ2: Which types of generative AI disinformation were shared during the election, and how technically sophisticated were they?

RQ3: To what extent do observed patterns of generative AI disinformation production indicate a shift from algorithmic amplification to AI-enabled content creation and adaptation?

These research questions define the analytical scope of the original work in terms of distribution, format, and theoretical interpretation.

Methodology

In the analysis, we included cases of generative AI disinformation that were identified by fact-checking organisations in Croatia, including Faktograf.hr, Agence France-Presse, DU-Check, and other fact-checking projects under the Točno tako[1] platform, and that were available in their databases at the time of the research. After initial detection, each case was manually inspected to identify the presence of generative AI elements.

During the selection process, we used the following criteria:

- The content contained elements that were created by generative AI tools;
- The content was related to political actors, or elections, or political institutions;
- The content was published during the selected time period (electoral cycle);
- The content was publicly available or documented by fact-checkers at the time of the research.

The content that didn't clearly indicate the use of generative AI tools, lacked political context, was a variation of similar cases, had an unverifiable source, or was outside the scope of analysis was not included.

The sample of generative AI disinformation during the Croatian elections was limited to the databases of fact-checking organisations covering Croatia, including Faktograf.hr, Agence France-Presse (AFP), DU-CHECK, and other Croatian fact-checkers that publish their debunks on the collaborative fact-checking platform Točno tako. The sampling strategy encompassed publicly published debunks and also the internally detected ones that weren't necessarily formally debunked cases of AI-generated disinformation. This broader inclusion framework enabled a more comprehensive mapping of AI-driven electoral disinformation circulating during the campaign period, but should not be interpreted as a full representation of all generative AI disinformation during the Croatian elections.

Units of analysis were cases of synthetic media artefacts (video, audio, photo, or text) distributed through digital platforms during the electoral cycle.

A study-specific coding scheme was developed to classify each case, covering variables such as election cycle, electoral phase, platform of dissemination, plat-

[1] Točno tako is the central national online platform for fact-checking projects funded through the project "Uspostava sustava provjere medijskih činjenica" ("Establishment of a system for verifying the accuracy of information"), overseen by the Croatian Ministry of Culture and Media and the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM).

form labelling status (labelled/unlabelled), broad manipulation category (cheapfake/deepfake), specific generative AI technique, and political target(s). The inclusion of cases in the sample was based on the presence of generative AI elements and their political relevance. Variables such as timing, platform, labelling status, type of manipulation, technique, and political targets were then analysed as the main analytical dimensions. To classify technical sophistication and the forms of generative AI manipulation, the study adopted the taxonomy proposed by Paris and Donovan (2019, pp. 10-15, 27-38), which conceptualizes manipulated media as a spectrum ranging from deepfakes to cheapfakes and identifies techniques such as virtual performances, voice synthesis, face swapping, lip-synching, face altering, lookalikes, and recontextualizing.

Table 1 shows all coding variables, their categories, and the definitions used in the analysis. All variables were coded as mutually exclusive, except for political target, which was treated as a multiple-response variable.

Table 1. Coding Variables, Categories, and Operational Definitions Used in the Analysis

Variable	**Categories/codes**	**Operational definition**
Election cycle	(1) Parliamentary elections 2024; (2) Presidential elections 2024/2025 – first round; (3) Presidential elections 2024/2025 – second round	Each case of AI disinformation was assigned to the specific electoral round during which it circulated.
Electoral phase	(1) Pre-electoral; (2) Electoral day; (3) Post-electoral (48h after)	Pre-electoral period covered the period from the official announcement of elections (per cycle) to the day before election day (per cycle); electoral period referred to election day itself; post-electoral period covered the 48 hours following election day, in line with EEAS reports.
Platform of dissemination	Facebook; Instagram; TikTok; X(Twitter); YouTube; Reddit	The platform on which the manipulated content was detected or documented by fact-checkers as in circulation. If the same case appeared on multiple platforms, the primary documented platform of circulation was coded.

Platform labelling status of AI	0=not labelled as AI; 1=labelled as AI	A case was coded as labelled when the platform explicitly marked the content as AI-generated, manipulated, or otherwise deceptive; all other cases were coded as unlabelled.
Broad manipulation category	(1) Cheapfake content; (2) Deepfake content	Classification followed Paris and Donovan (2019, pp. 10-15, 27-38). Cheapfakes referred to lower technical or minimally transformed manipulations, while deepfakes referred to AI-generated or AI-synthetic manipulations that substantially altered identity, appearance, or voice.
Specific generative AI technique	(1) Virtual performances/ body generation; (2) Voice synthesis audio deepfake; (3) Face swapping; (4) Lip-synching; (5) Face altering; (6) Lookalikes; (7) Recontextualizing/ caption-based satire	Each case was coded according to the dominant manipulation technique identified in the content. These categories were also interpreted as reflecting different levels of technical sophistication, following the taxonomy adapted from Paris and Donovan (2019, pp. 10-15, 27-38).
Political target(s)	Multiple-response variable: named political actors targeted in the content	More than one political actor could be coded when the same item targeted multiple individuals simultaneously.

The electoral cycle was divided into three phases: pre-electoral, electoral, and post-electoral periods. The pre-electoral period is defined as the period from the official announcement of the elections up to the day preceding the election day. The electoral period refers to the election day itself, and the post-electoral period is the 48 hours following the election day. This 48-hour timeframe is proposed by the European External Action Service (EEAS) reports on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) threats (EEAS, 2023; 2024), which found that disinformation tends to increase before election day and remain active in the days after. The Croatian parliamentary elections were held on 17 April 2024, while the first round of the presidential elections took place on 29 December 2024 and the second round on 12 January 2025.

Results

The findings showed that generative AI disinformation was used during the Croatian parliamentary elections in 2024, with a total of 15 cases identified. Similarly, during the Croatian presidential elections in 2024/2025, there were a hundred cases of generative AI disinformation.

The total number of identified cases was likely underestimated, as the research relied on fact-checking organisation databases, which have limited resources for detection and therefore fact-check only the most prevalent disinformation. Furthermore, there are no other publicly available sources of such data.

Most of the generative AI disinformation (82%) (N=94) was disseminated during the pre-election period in all three electoral cycles. However, the number of generative AI disinformation cases increased during the electoral and post-electoral periods in both rounds of the presidential elections (Table 2).

Table 2. Timing of the Generative AI Disinformation During the Electoral Cycles

	Pre-electoral period	Electoral period	Post-electoral period (48h)
Parliamentary elections	14	0	1
Presidential elections – first round	34	2	9
Presidential elections – second round	46	4	5
Total	94	6	15

The weekly distribution presented in Table 3 showed that the volume of generative AI disinformation during parliamentary and presidential elections did not follow a consistent pattern. A possible explanation is that the parliamentary elections were held on Wednesday, April 17, and the first round of the presidential elections took place during the week of Christmas, so actors were more active in the preceding week. The highest activity pattern during the week of the elections was observed only in the second round of the presidential elections.

Table 3. Weekly Distribution of the Generative AI Disinformation During the Elections

	Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**	**Week 5**	**Week 6**	**Week 7**
Parliamentary elections	March 11-17*	March 18-24	March 25-31	April 1-7	April 8-14	April 15-21**	
	-	-	9	1	4	1	-

Presidential elections – first round	November 11-17*	November 18-24	November 25 - December 1	December 2-8	December 9-15	December 16-22	December 23-29**
	7	1	4	-	6	16	11
Presidential elections – second round	December 30 - January 5	January 6-12**	January 13-19				
	16	34	5	-	-	-	-
Total	23	35	18	1	10	17	11

* weeks when elections were announced

** weeks when elections were held

Tables 4 and 5 show that the leading platforms for the dissemination of generative AI disinformation were TikTok in the parliamentary elections and Facebook in the presidential elections.

Table 4. Digital Platforms Respond to Generative AI Disinformation During the 2024 Croatian Parliamentary Elections

Platform	Generative AI disinformation	Labelled	Unlabelled
TikTok	10	0	10
X (Twitter)	4	0	4
Instagram	1	0	1
Total	15	0	15

During the parliamentary elections, none of the generative AI disinformation cases were labelled by platforms as AI-generated or as disinformation, while during the presidential elections, ten cases were labelled as such. Five cases on TikTok, three on YouTube and two on X were labelled as generative AI.

During the analysed period, YouTube managed to label all generative AI disinformation, while TikTok and X managed to do it in only one-fifth of the identified cases. On Meta's platforms none of the identified cases were labelled as generative AI content, which may indicate limitations in the platforms' detection and labelling policy during the observed election periods.

Table 5. Digital Platforms Respond to Generative AI Disinformation During the 2024/2025 Croatian Presidential Elections

Platform	Generative AI disinformation	Labelled	Percentage of labelled	Unlabelled	Percentage of unlabelled
Facebook	56	0	0	56	100%
Instagram	2	0	0	2	100%
Reddit	3	0	0	3	100%
TikTok	27	5	18.5%	22	81.5%
X (Twitter)	9	2	22.2%	7	77,3%
YouTube	3	3	100%	0	0%
Total	100	10		90	

The findings showed the dominance of deepfake content (>70%) but cheapfakes were still present in 34 cases. All the cases during parliamentary elections were deepfakes, whereas presidential elections showed greater diversity as the campaigns were more personalised. The most common techniques used in 30 cases were voice synthesis, and face swapping in 43 of them, but there were also cases with the use of virtual performances (8), lip-synching without voice synthesis (12) and face altering (14). Analysis of the techniques used shows that audiovisual formats were dominant, with capabilities of growth, in the case of political disinformation.

Table 6. Types of Generative AI Disinformation and Technical Sophistication

Technical sophistication	Technique	Number of cases	
Very high	Virtual Performances / body generation	8	**Deepfake**
High	Voice Synthesis / audio deepfake	30	
High-medium	Face swapping (image/video)	43	
Medium	Lip-synching	12	**Cheapfake/ Deepfake**
Low-medium	Face altering (AI-edited images, caricatures, filters)	14	**Cheapfake**
Low	Lookalikes	2	
Lowest	Recontextualizing / caption-based satire	6	
Total		115	

Deepfake content was dominant during the parliamentary elections, while the presidential elections featured a mix of low and high sophistication, regardless of platform. It should be noted that the trend of higher technical sophistication was present in the second round of the presidential elections where deepfakes increased on Facebook and TikTok.

Table 7. Technical Sophistication of the Generative AI Disinformation During the Electoral Cycles and by Platforms

Electoral period	Platform	Cheapfake	Deepfake
Parliamentary elections	Facebook	-	-
	Instagram	-	1
	Reddit	-	-
	TikTok	-	10
	Youtube	-	-
	X	-	4
Presidential elections – first round	Facebook	12	14
	Instagram	-	1
	Reddit	1	-
	TikTok	5	6
	Youtube	-	1
	X	2	3
Presidential elections – second round	**Facebook**	**12**	**18**
	Instagram	1	-
	Reddit	1	1
	TikTok	**5**	**11**
	Youtube	-	2
	X	4	-

During the parliamentary elections, generative AI disinformation targeted Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, Croatian President Zoran Milanović, the prominent figure of the right-wing opposition party Nikola Grmoja, and the leader of the left-wing party Peđa Grbin. Similarly, during the presidential elections, the majority of generative AI disinformation targeted Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, presidential candidate Dragan Primorac, President Zoran Milanović, presidential candidate Ivana Kekin, and presidential candidate Marija Selak Raspudić. Additionally, other candidates were subjected to AI-generated disinformation to a much

lesser extent. These findings show targeted activities in which some political actors were more frequently targeted by generative AI content (Andrej Plenković, Dragan Primorac, and Zoran Milanović), demonstrating a high level of personalization in communication strategies. All data is available in Table 8.

Table 8. Targets of Generative AI Disinformation

	Parliamentary elections		**Presidential elections**	
	No. of cases	**Percentage of cases**	**No. of cases**	**Percentage of cases**
Andrej Plenković	14	93.3%	22	22%
Zoran Milanović*	7	46.7%	16	16%
Nikola Grmoja	3	20%	-	-
Peđa Grbin	1	6.7%	-	-
Dragan Primorac*	-	-	20	20%
Ivana Kekin*	-	-	10	10%
Marija Selak Raspudić*	-	-	6	6%
Miro Bulj*	-	-	4	4%
Branka Lozo*	-	-	3	3%
Tomislav Jonjić*	-	-	2	2%
Niko Tokić Kartelo*	-	-	2	2%

* presidential candidates

The results show an increase in the presence of generative AI disinformation content, which is technically sophisticated and highly personalised. These patterns suggest a transformation of communication dynamics in the electoral context, where generative AI enables the production and adaptation of content in higher volumes than in previous models of political messaging.

Discussion

The results provide empirical confirmation of the increasing presence and diversification of generative AI disinformation during electoral periods and offer insights into evolving patterns in political communication, rather than confirming ideological or populist patterns. The presence of generative AI disinformation during the Croatian parliamentary and presidential elections of 2024/2025 demonstrates that these technologies have already become a constituent part of the electoral process, regardless of the small media market and its actors. However, this does not mean

there is an absence of regular disinformation campaigns, as this research is focused on the cases of generative AI disinformation.

During the analysed electoral cycles, several emerging patterns were identified. Firstly, generative AI disinformation was more prevalent during the presidential than the parliamentary elections, suggesting that the more personalized the elections are, the greater the use of generative AI. Secondly, audiovisual formats dominated in all the analysed periods, demonstrating that synthetic media represents a strategic tool. Thirdly, the limited number of politically targeted actors confirmed a more structured, rather than random, distribution of such content.

Although the quantity of generative AI disinformation identified is relatively small, especially for the parliamentary elections, caution is warranted in reaching conclusions regarding the truth of content, due to the limited capacity of the Croatian fact-checking community and the lack of platform transparency. The actual quantity of generative AI disinformation was probably much greater, but data on such content for research purposes is limited, as there is a higher probability that sophisticated campaigns, micro-targeted content, or communication in closed groups may go undetected.

The timing of generative AI disinformation is in line with previous research emphasizing the importance of early narrative shaping (Ferrara, 2017). This phase is important as (bad) actors seek to establish interpretive frames, influence perceptions of candidates, and define key topics before the supervised electoral period. These actors use AI to position interpretive frames early, before institutional actors can respond.

At the same time, the increase in cases during the electoral and post-electoral periods may indicate communication dynamics reflecting patterns compatible with populist-style strategies aimed at challenging the legitimacy of the electoral process and reinforcing polarized interpretations of the elections results.

The personalized nature of presidential elections may create conditions that are more compatible with the use of generative AI disinformation, particularly through emotional and more visual content. In such campaigns, the credibility, image, and personal authority of candidates become the targets of attacks, and generative AI provides cheap and easy tools for crafting such messages. Generative AI is especially effective when political competence depends on an individual politician's reputation, qualities, and authenticity (Karvonen, 2010).

The platform analysis shows the dominance of TikTok during the parliamentary elections and Facebook during the presidential elections. Although these results could also be influenced by sample selection, the use of these channels was likely determined by their technical features and algorithmic advancements or limitations at the time of the elections. Facebook remains relevant as a political platform in

Croatia, and Facebook's labelling/moderation policy for generative AI content definitely played an important role in explaining why actors used this platform (Kaplan, 2025). These claims could be further supported by findings showing that during the parliamentary elections, none of the analysed content was labelled as generative AI, and during the presidential elections, only 10% was labelled. The findings confirm that platforms are active actors who, through their policies and decisions, shape the visibility and legitimacy of political messages and demonstrate structural weaknesses in existing content moderation models, not merely technical limitations.

The dominance of deepfake content and the high level of technical sophistication confirm the growing technical capability of political disinformation. Prevailing techniques such as voice synthesis and face swapping show that those creating disinformation are seeking to reduce trust in traditional audiovisual evidence and the importance of photos and videos. The parallel use of cheapfakes demonstrates that the disinformation ecosystem is heterogeneous, with different actors employing various techniques depending on the audience, platform, and objectives.

This heterogeneity confirms the blurriness that is now present in the information disorder era (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017). Table 6 shows the technical sophistication and techniques used on the content, clearly marking some of them as satire. While the creation of these deepfakes has a disinformation character and intent, their proliferation and circulation relied on their effect of humor, meaning that the users shared them as misinformation. Furthermore, such satire content, when stripped of its original context, risks being weaponized as disinformation.

One of the most important findings concerns changes in the structure of political disinformation production. In contrast to previous models, which emphasised amplification of existing messages, detected cases show widespread techniques that enable the creation of generative AI content. The dominance of techniques of voice synthesis and face swapping suggests a strong focus on content production rather than distribution. These changes do not mean the disappearance of amplification, but rather the development of new strategies that enable more political actors to produce and adapt political messages. Political disinformation is not only amplified through platforms but also generated, personalized and adapted before distribution.

The findings suggest that generative AI does not replace algorithmic amplification but adds an additional layer to algorithmic populism. The Croatian cases show that AI-generated audiovisual formats enabled the production of political disinformation before entering platform circulation. This supports the premise that algorithmic populism should be understood not only in terms of visibility and amplification but also as AI-enabled content-creation.

The strategy of targeting leading politicians with generative AI disinformation can be interpreted as a communication pattern compatible with narratives that are, in

the literature, associated with populists. The most common targets were politicians associated with executive government, institutional power, and established political parties. The frequent targeting of Prime Minister Andrej Plenković and President Zoran Milanović may be interpreted as consistent with patterns in which high-profile institutional actors become focal points of politically motivated generative AI content that are with narrative structures commonly associated with populist narratives.

By fabricating statements, behaviours, and stances, such content undermines the personal integrity of political opponents while exploiting emotionally charged and highly shareable forms of communication that tend to perform well in algorithmically curated environments. Generative AI then further expands these capacities by enabling the rapid production, adaptation, and circulation of personalised attacks, making it more difficult for citizens to distinguish between authentic and fabricated political communication. In this way, generative AI does not prove the presence of populist actors as such, but it does reinforce communicative dynamics that are structurally compatible with algorithmic populism, particularly the delegitimisation of the elites, emotional intensification, and the erosion of trust.

Conclusion

The findings show that cases of generative AI disinformation occurred during the Croatian parliamentary and presidential elections, but they should be distinguished by quantity, technical sophistication, and patterns, especially during the presidential elections, which are personalized and particularly vulnerable to the use of generative AI. Despite the limited size of the Croatian media system, generative AI has become part of the contemporary electoral process, enabling various actors to produce, personalize, and distribute fabricated political content. This confirms that AI-mediated political communication is an increasingly visible component of contemporary political communication environments. At the same time, the data we examined does not point to any coordinated or large-scale disinformation campaigns using generative AI. Rather than systematic use, the identified cases appear to be episodic and actor-specific. However, the detected cases demonstrate that generative AI tools are available and operationally usable in a political context, even in smaller media systems, e.g., in Croatia.

Furthermore, the findings reveal shortcomings in platform governance, indicating a limited level of generative AI disinformation labelling and moderation. The low level of labelling generative AI content, especially on platforms with the highest number of detected cases, suggests the need for improvement of technical and regulatory solutions. The platforms should not be viewed as neutral intermediaries but as key stakeholders whose policies influence public communication and societal resilience to disinformation.

Generative AI, combined with communication strategies compatible with populist-style narratives, has created conditions within broader sociotechnological and political frameworks that can challenge information integrity and democratic legitimacy, especially during elections.

The findings also redefine algorithmic populism as not only a phenomenon driven by message amplification but also by algorithmic production and adaptation using generative AI tools. As generative AI technologies continue to advance and see wider use in political communication, greater effort should be invested in understanding the patterns of production and distribution using algorithms to develop essential mitigation strategies to protect democratic processes.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. Firstly, the findings are influenced by the selection of the sample for analysis, which is based on cases detected by fact-checking organizations. Also, findings identify trends but not the full scale of societal impact. Secondly, selection bias cannot be completely excluded, as fact-checking organizations tend to debunk only societally relevant or high-reach cases. Thirdly, the study does not examine audience reception in terms of the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral effects of generative AI disinformation. The fourth limitation concerns the area of the reach, engagement, and audience segmentation using platform data to understand how audiences interact with generative AI disinformation. The final limitation relates to the Croatian context, which restricts the interpretation of findings to Croatia.

Based on these limitations, future research should employ platform data, audience research, neuroscience and a broader cross-national context. Additionally, research should cover a longer period to determine whether generative AI disinformation occurs episodically or develops into coordinated and systematic forms of election manipulation.

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GENERATIVNA UMJETNA INTELIGENCIJA I TRANSFORMACIJA ALGORITAMSKOG POPULIZMA: OD DIJELJENJA DO STVARANJA SADRŽAJA

Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje upotrebu dezinformacija generiranih umjetnom inteligencijom tijekom parlamentarnih i predsjedničkih izbora u Hrvatskoj 2024. i 2025. godine. Za analitički okvir korišten je pojam algoritamskog populizma s ciljem razumijevanja novih komunikacijskih obrazaca koji proizlaze iz tehnologija generativne umjetne inteligencije. Kombiniranjem algoritamskog populizma i *deepfake-cheapfake* pojmova koje su razvili Paris i Donovan (2019), ovim istraživanjem identificirano je 115 slučajeva dezinformacija generiranih umjetnom inteligencijom. Većina tog sadržaja pronađena je na Facebooku (56) i na TikToku (37), dok su najviše korištene tehnike bile zamjena lica (43) i sintetičko generiranje glasa (30). Te su dezinformacije najviše bile usmjerene na Zorana Milanovića, Andreja Plenkovića i Dragana Primorca. Rezultati ukazuju na transformaciju algoritamskog populizma u kontekstu izbora, pri čemu se upotreba širi s dijeljenja sadržaja na njegovu proizvodnju i prilagodbu.

Ključne riječi: generativna umjetna inteligencija, dezinformacije, algoritamski populizam, izbori, Hrvatska

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