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Czech-Russian Relations. Russian Disinformation Campaign

Abstract: After the start of the conflict in Ukraine and Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, the Czech Republic became fully aware of the threats posed by the Kremlin even though President Zeman has denied the presence of Russian troops in Ukraine and has criticized the EU sanctions against Russia. Czechia belongs to the category of countries through which Russia influences the EU, aiming at gradually and deliberately corrosion of its structures. Russia exerts a strong influence on the Czech Republic by using non-military means, which include disinformation and propaganda, the activities of secret services, and penetration of its economy, specifically its energy sector. The article aims to answer the question about the role of Russian disinformation and propaganda in the context of Russian influence in the Czech Republic. The role of Russian disinformation and propaganda and how Russia influences Czechia is extensively analyzed. The main hypothesis is that Russia treats the Czech Republic as a critical state for espionage and disinformation activities and as a zone of influence, in fact undermining the sovereignty of the Czech Republic and the role of NATO and the EU.

Keywords: *Czech Republic, Russia, international relations, disinformation and propaganda, resilience*

Introduction

The use of hybrid tactics to illegally annex Crimea in 2014 and destabilize Ukraine has changed our perception of European security. The Russian Federation (FR) to achieve its political goals constantly uses in both peacetime and wartime (the crisis on Belarus' eastern border with Poland and the EU, tensions in Russia-Ukraine relations, soldiers deployed on Ukraine's eastern border, joint military exercises between Russia and Belarus, and war in Ukraine in 2022) methods such as disinformation and propaganda. Disinformation is the most powerful and subversive of hybrid threats. Since 2014, there has been an outbreak of Russian disinformation campaign. In the following paragraphs, I seek to explain how

Russia takes advantage of the geographical proximity and existing social and economic ties and employs disinformation to influence the Czech Republic and its political elites.

In Russia, the role of information as a weapon has already been highlighted since President Boris Yeltsin time. In 2013, General Valeri V. Gerasimov recommended using disinformation to achieve Russian political goals. The Arab Spring as well as the wars in South Ossetia and Ukraine have shown that non-military methods of conducting conflict, can be more effective than the conventional weaponry (Герасимов, 2013). Russian strategists have developed an approach where disinformation has a permanent character, during both peace and war. Disinformation is used on a massive scale and is a prominent tool of strategic information warfare. The aim of the Russian information operations is to subjugate the elites and societies of other countries in an undetected way, using various channels (diplomatic and media services), psychological influence, ideological and political diversion.

Russia is striving to change the global order from a US hegemony to a multipolar system in which Russia is becoming one of the key actors. The restoration of its status as a world power explains the current Russian policy. Russia's disinformation is designed to influence the unity of the European Community and the integrity of the transatlantic bond. The RF seeks to rebuild its sphere of influence and to establish the new "Yalta" order.

Czechia is particularly exposed to Russia's information operations. A combination of socio-political populism and pro-Russia business links in Czechia increases its vulnerability to risks in areas beyond information security (Hornik cited in Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2020, p. 163). Czech political leaders, guided by pragmatism and profits, balance between the interests of their country and the EU against Russian interests in a way that ensures their own nation's highest possible economic benefit.

A review of the literature revealed a substantial number of sources and studies on Russian hybrid threats, Czech-Russian relations, campaigns to influence Czech political leaders and society, or measures to counter disinformation. Researchers on the subject include Galeotti (2014, 2016, 2018, 2019), Jacobs and Lasconjarias (2015), Topuria (2020), who consider the phenomenon of hybrid warfare, including the so-called Gerasimov doctrine, also stating that such a doctrine does not exist. Galeotti (2019) also justifies that Russian hybrid/non-linear warfare are not a "hybrid war" but a "political war". The author of this article, while mostly agreeing with the theses presented by these authors, prefers to use the terminology of hybrid threats as defined by the European Union and NATO and interchangeably uses the two phrases Gerasimov's narrative or Gerasimov doctrine (Jacuch, 2020). E. Rumer (2019) and A. Cohen (1997) analyse Russian doctrines by referring to Gerasimov and Primakov. Daniel and Eberle (2021) presented three narratives of hybrid war in the Czech Republic. Janda and Vichová (2017), Mareš and Rehtik (2021) consider Russian influence operations in the Czech Republic and ways to counter them. Gregor and Mlejnkova (2021) provide analyses of Russia's manipulation of Czech public opinion. Baqués – Quesada and Colom – Piella (2021) examine the links of some Czech leaders to the Kremlin and Russian economic and diplomatic pressure in the Czech Republic. Filipec (2019) presents an "organic approach"

to social resilience in relation to information warfare in the Czech Republic. Syrovátka (2021) presents the most relevant civil society initiatives to counter disinformation in the Czech Republic. Mareš and Mlejnkova (2021) identify significant security threats from disinformation and propaganda and discuss concepts for defence and protection against these threats. Kučerová (2015), Janda et al. (2017), and Holzer and Mareš (2019) analysed the Czech Republic's relations with Russia in historical perspective. Among other Czech researchers and journalists, it is worth noting the contributions of P. Vejvodová, M. Krejčí, V. Štětka, M. Majíć, A. Macková, J. Zápotocký and others.

The purpose of this article is to answer the question of the role of Russian disinformation and propaganda in the context of Russian influence in the Czech Republic. It examines the role of Russian disinformation and propaganda, how Russia influences Czech society and political leaders, and how the Czech Republic counters disinformation. Due to the topic's actuality and complexity it requires comprehensive analysis.

In the following paragraphs, I try to explain that Czechia has a key place in Russia long-term geostrategy, due to the location of the Czech Republic in the middle of trade routes, and its critical position during a possible armed conflict. The friendly/neutral attitude of the Czechs towards the Russians has also a great significance here. Russia has been influencing Czechs through energy, economy and foremost disinformation to achieve its foreign policy objective. The Czechs are pragmatic in dealing with Moscow, focusing on economic and energy interests. However, Czech policymakers have repeatedly expressed concerns about the state of democracy and the protection of human rights in Russia. Energy security is one of the particularly sensitive topics in contemporary Czech-Russian relations.

The article first presents the historical context of Czech-Russian relations, then analyses the Russian disinformation strategy and Russian influence activities in the Czech Republic, followed by measures taken by Czech governmental and non-governmental organizations, businesses and civil society in countering Russian disinformation.

This research was based on foreign policy documents, academia's sources, public opinions polls, and subsequent discussions and interviews with Czech and Polish experts. The study was conducted using time, topic and source limiters. The article deals with Czech-Russian relations in recent years until mid-2021 and focuses on the Russian disinformation campaign. Its purpose is not to discuss Russia's overall geopolitical concepts and foreign policy. It does not take into account changes resulting from the Czech parliamentary elections in 2021, the actions of the government of Prime Minister Peter Fiala, nor does it address actions taken in connection with the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The high dynamics of international relations in Central and Eastern Europe and their multifaceted nature as well as the vastness of the subject matter are the reason for limiting the analysis to the most significant components of Czech-Russian relations and Russian influence activities. The research relied on the available English – and Russian-language literature. Despite these limitations, the work presented here can provide material for further research and discussion of Czech-Russian relations.

The historical context of Czech-Russian relations

The Czech Republic's location historically contributed to its prosperity, as it was at the centre of some of the oldest trade routes in Europe. This, however, has also made it a desirable target to influence and invade. During the creation of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, up to ten languages¹ were spoken in Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovak idea eventually pushed other nationalities out of the mainstream. Interwar Czechoslovakia was an attractive place for refugees. During the Bolshevik Revolution, there was an influx of immigrants from Russia who easily obtained asylum in Czechoslovakia. Similarly, in the late 1930s, refugees from Nazi Germany were given refuge in Czechoslovakia (Čapková, 2020). The armed conflict of 1918–1919 between Hungary on the one hand and Czechoslovakia and Romania on the other, was a continuation of the First World War. As a result of the Treaty of Trianon, 3 425 000 ethnic Hungarians remained within the borders of Czechoslovakia. This event has political repercussions to this day.

During the World War II, there was the “Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia” (which was in fact not a protectorate but occupied territory) and the independent Slovak State under the dictator Jozef Tiso, who cooperated with Hitler and thereby not occupied. Later the Czechoslovakia fell into the Soviet sphere of influence. The process of communist indoctrination of Central and Eastern Europe led to formation of the Soviet bloc.

The fall of the Iron Curtain and following political liberalization allowed the countries of the Central Europe to rebuild after more than forty years of deliberately disrupted traditional economic and cultural relations. In 1993, Czechoslovakia peacefully divided itself into the independent states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In 1999, Czechia joined NATO, and in 2004, the European Union. Today, the Czech Republic is a dynamic, export-driven economy with low unemployment and strong ties with the German economy. The Czech Republic is trying to balance its membership of the European Union with the protection of its national sovereignty. So far, the Czech Republic has not joined the euro area. The Czechs deepen their ties with their neighbours from Central Europe through the Visegrád Group² (Czech Republic Profile, 2021).

Kučerová (2015) using qualitative research focusing on contextual relations in the region of Central Europe in a historical perspective, justifies the hypothesis that the countries of the region, including the Czech Republic, are an object of geopolitical interests of more powerful neighbours. Particularly The Russian Federation, with its imperial thinking, regards the countries of Central and Eastern Europe as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence and consequently tries to undermine the sovereignty of those countries.

¹ Namely Czech, German, Slovak, Hungarian, Polish, Ruthenian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Romani, Romanian.

² The Visegrád Group includes Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

Russian strategist Alexandr Dugin considers the Axis countries i.e. Germany and Italy to be Central Europe. He does not consider the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary as the countries of Central Europe, but as the East, and since the 1930s the area under the direct influence of the USSR (Dugin in Kučerová, 2015, p. 171). Contemporary Russian policy, including the one presented in the pro-government media, talks about the need to rebuild and strengthen Russian influence in the region, especially in the Czech Republic.

Czech-Russian trade has been growing despite EU sanctions since 2017. In 2018, it amounted to approximately USD 9.8 billion, and was the highest since 2014 (USD 11.7 billion). Energy security is a key topic in Czech-Russian relations and the country is hugely dependent on Russia. The Czech energy sector is of interest to Russian business, especially Gazprom, and is an area of particularly intense activity by Russian information services. The Czech Republic is at present in favour of projects reducing the negative effects of its energy dependence on Russia. Nevertheless, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade has supported the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline. The Czech Republic counts on strengthening its position as a transit country for Russian gas, which thanks to the Gazelle gas pipeline (extension of the Nord Stream gas pipeline), as well as the planned EUGAL gas pipeline in larger quantities would go to the Czech Republic, and then to Austria and Slovakia (Ogrodnik, 2019).

In the nuclear sector, the Czech Republic is now 100% dependent on Russian supplies of fuel assemblies. Rosatom is the sole supplier of fuel for the Check Temelin nuclear power plant. However, recently Czech policymakers decided to put security interests first and started to restrict Russian influences. For example, Rosatom, which is interested in building new units at the Dukovany nuclear power plant, has been excluded from a tender to expand the plant.

Janda et al. (2017) put Czech-Russian relations in historical perspective and analyse the extent of Russian influence in the Czech Republic. Holzer and Mareš (2019) analysed the Czech relationship with Russia based on its historical heritage and the Czech security dilemma, in which Czech politicians perceive Russia as a security threat but at the same time would prefer to cooperate with Russia (Chapter 1, p. 9).

Czech society reveals ambivalence towards Russia. Historical events have had an enormous impact on Czech society. The betrayal of Western Allies in 1938 and following invasion by Nazi Germany brought the positive attitude of many Czechs towards the Russians as liberators. The 1968 invasion by the Warsaw Pact, which stopped the liberalising reforms of the Prague Spring and strengthened the power of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, deepened divisions and sympathies in Czech society and delayed the democratic process for decades.

Russian disinformation strategy

The strategy of the Russian Federation (Russian Federation) is to seek to create a multi-polar world order with Russia as one of the centres of power, to reshape the European security order and its rules through militarization of the Kaliningrad region and Crimea and destabilization and subordination of Ukraine, more broadly to ensure Russian primacy in the post-Soviet space and pursue closer integration of the former Soviet republics. A full-scale war with European and NATO countries remains an unlikely scenario (Jacuch, 2020, pp. 5–26). Compared to the West, the Russian Federation has less economic or conventional military capabilities. Therefore, it attaches the highest importance to both nuclear deterrence and asymmetric methods and instruments, i.e. means of maintaining strategic parity with the West.

In Russian military doctrines, information warfare is considered a key element of modern military operations. General Valerij V. Gerasimov has been assigned the task of developing Russian capabilities in this area (Darczewska, 2015). Rumer (2019) presents Gerasimov's doctrine as a concept of Russia's operational confrontation with the West, supporting Primakov's doctrine that a unipolar world dominated by the United States is unacceptable to Russia. Primakov³ has been pushing the concept of geopolitical realism since the 1980s. Formulated as an intelligence doctrine, it also became Russia's first foreign policy concept in the 1990s. It was later announced as the "Primakov Doctrine" and became explicitly anti-American and anti-Western (Cohen, 1997). The doctrine included the following principles of Russian foreign policy: striving for a multipolar world, achieving primacy and integration in the post-Soviet space and opposing NATO enlargement. In Russian strategic understanding to reach geopolitical state of peace and stability, 'Primakov doctrine' must be fulfilled. In support of the 'Primakov doctrine', the so-called 'Gerasimov doctrine' works as a concept of operations (Rumer, 2019 p. 4), including a role for non-military means.

In 2013, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, wrote: "The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has increased, and in many cases has exceeded the effectiveness of military force". He proposed using disinformation to achieve Russian political goals. According to Gerasymov's doctrine, the Arab Spring and the South Ossetian War showed that non-military methods of conflict – including information warfare – are more effective than the power of conventional weapons. Russia sees "non-linear" actions consisting of military and non-military elements combined in an integrated, comprehensive strategy as the future of hostilities (Герасимов, 2013).

Russian strategists have developed an approach – "information confrontation" (информационное противоборство) (Шушков, 2015) – where Russian propaganda is feasible in both war and peace, reflecting its "lasting" nature.

³ Yevgeny Primakov, Foreign intelligence chief, Foreign Minister, Prime Minister (1998-99) of Russia.

In 2007, Russia created the Russian World Foundation (Russkiy Mir), formally to promote the Russian language, Russian and Eastern values. In reality, it promotes the ideological conceptualisation of Russian culture and soft power around the world. It uses the narrative that Russia is a defender of traditional culture and values against ideological aggression from the West (Davis & Slobodchikoff, 2019, pp. 58–59). Pszczel⁴ (2022) reckons the Russkiy Mir as a state-funded structure recruiting agents of influence both in countries with a Russian-speaking minority and in Western countries. Through close contacts with the special services and media agencies, the Russkiy Mir participates in disinformation activities. For example it has aimed at demonstrating the ineptitude of the fight against the Covid pandemic in NATO countries.

To outreach with its narrative globally, Russia has invested initially mostly in traditional media and then also in digital ones. At some point, the main propaganda and disinformation actors were the state media belonging to the Rossiya Segodnya conglomerate (RT, the Novosti agency, Sputnik). A supporting role is played by experts and Russian think-tanks, pretending to be independent voices (e.g. Valdai, RIAC, centres linked to MGIMO). One of the major state-controlled media outlets for the Russian government and its foreign policy is RT, a satellite news channel. It broadcasts in e.g. English; Arabic; French; German; Spanish, and it is included in the television packages of both individuals and institutions (e.g. hotels) in most countries. Therefore, RT is able to reach millions of people, including those targeted social groups that are distrustful of the mainstream media. RT has become a Russian flagship platform for spreading disinformation and sowing confusion (Pszczel, 2022).

In the current geostrategic situation, Russia is exerting an influence on the Czech Republic using non-military means, through the actions of secret services, disinformation and propaganda, as well as exploiting the country economically.

Russia's disinformation activities in the Czech Republic

Disinformation and propaganda activities are gaining particular strength with the advent of the Internet and social media. There are numerous examples of trolls used to post fabricated information on local news portals in an attempt to influence local communities and thus build resentment and prejudice against neighbouring nations. (Gliwa & Olech, 2020, p. 10). The Czech Republic found itself on the front lines of Russia's disinformation war with its developed network of influence (Morozov, 2020). Russian espionage and disinformation activities are visible in every country where the Russian Federation sees the potential to pursue its own interests. Its diversity and scale prove Russia interest in the Czech Republic and the intensity of these activities has a negative impact on bilateral relations.

⁴ Pszczel R. (2022, January 9). Interview with the former Head, NATO Information Office in Moscow (2010–2017).

The Czech Information Security Service (BIS) warns in its annual report against the infiltration of Russian capital into the Czech's shadow economy and the strengthening of the Kremlin's political influence in the Czech Republic (Janda, 2017). Due to its central geographic location, the Czech Republic has always been a convenient theatre for Russia's covert operations. According to a report by the Czech Information Security Service (BIS), Russian intelligence officers often operate under the diplomatic cover of the Russian embassy, which has more employees than embassies of other countries (Annual Report, 2016). There has been a Soviet espionage base since 1969 in Prague, which never left the country and never revived its contacts after the Velvet Revolution. These former Soviet agents are now active in organized crime circles and are trying to influence politics and increase the Czech dependence on Russia (Janda and Víchová, 2017, pp. 27–30). Galeotti (2017) emphasizes that the Russian state is highly criminalized, and the intermingling of the criminal “underworld” and the political “upper world” has led the regime to use criminals as instruments of its rule.

The Russian intelligence services finance organizations that create deceptive messages on the Internet, aimed at destabilizing the political situation. Deceptive messages gain credibility thanks to mass sharing on social media – they are usually sent out by Facebook, Twitter or Reddit users. The message prepared in this way reaches up to several million recipients and is sometimes picked up by the mass media, which at the same time make it credible. The disinformation is fuelled by politicians who cite untrue news about their opponents.

The BIS in its report for 2018, listed attempts to influence the decision-making processes in the Czech Republic, spreading disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda and attacks by Russian hackers, e.g. on the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (data theft). The legitimacy of the warnings by the Czech services is demonstrated by disrupting the network of Russian hackers, linked to the Federal Security Service and financed by the Russian state (Romea, 2019).

Russia influences the Czech Republic through: pro-Kremlin parties – Freedom and Direct Democracy, National Democracy, Workers' Party for Social Justice, most of the representatives of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, several representatives of the Czech Social Democratic Party; associations and organizations – Institute for Slavic Strategic Studies, Czech-Moravian Slavic Association, and New Republic; individual politicians – Miloš Zeman, Jan Mládek, Vojtěch Filip, Jaroslav Foldyna; and through links between Russia and Czech neo-Nazi networks and paramilitary movements – Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserves, National Home Guard. The website Neovlivni.cz has compiled a list of individuals whose opinions serve Russian propaganda (Janda et al., 2017).

The Czech President Miloš Zeman plays a key role in the Czech disinformation scene, supporting Russian interests. Although he considered the Russian annexation of Crimea to be unlawful, in a speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in October 2017, he suggested that Russia should pay compensation to Ukraine for the annexation of

the peninsula. President Zeman has repeated the disinformation and narratives originating in the Internet pro-Russian centres. For example, he repeated the untruth about the alleged act on the Ukrainian language (Hendrychová in Janda & Víchová, 2017). These websites also give him support when he needs it. President Zeman's statements and opinions are regularly repeated by disinformation centres. He is portrayed as the only person in the Czech Republic who actually cares about his citizens. Across the political spectrum there are people who usually share articles from these websites on their social networks, and sometimes they trust reports that are not factual (Víchová, 2016).

President Zeman has undermined the membership of the Czech Republic in NATO and the EU, has denied the organized military presence of Russia in Ukraine, and calls for the lifting of sanctions against the Russian Federation. Russian state media present him as an ally of Vladimir Putin, a critic of the Russian opposition and a fighter against the United States (Janda & Víchová, 2017, pp. 27–30). In addition, President Zeman maintains a friendly personal relationship with President Vladimir Putin. On the initiative of the presidents of both countries, an annual Czech-Russian Discussion Forum was launched in 2018, gathering e.g. academic circles. The President of the Czech Republic is trying to counteract the actions of critics of Russia's policy⁵. There are many people in his environment who have been associated with Russian businesses.

The coalition government of the centrist ANO and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) with external support from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which was in power from 2018 to 2021, failed to present a coherent policy towards Russia. For example, ANO leader Andrej Babiš is in favour of dialogue with Russia and sees the EU sanctions as a negative factor for the Czech economy. Despite this, he condemned the annexation of Crimea. The 2017–2021 Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic, Radek Vondráček, is considered to be the most supportive of cooperation with Russia in the ANO. He condemned Russia's international isolation and in October 2017 met with Russian politicians under EU sanctions, among others. On the other hand, the foreign minister 2018–2021, Tomáš Petříček (ČSSD) supported the expulsion of three Russian diplomats as a gesture of solidarity with the UK after the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in March 2018. However, Petříček's actions are aligned with his party line, which calls for "good, strategic relations with Russia." The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is considered an unequivocally pro-Russian party on the Czech political scene, to which the minority ANO-ČSSD government owed a vote of confidence (Ogrodnik, 2019).

As polls show, there is a remarkably elevated level of Euro-scepticism in the Czech Republic and sympathies towards Russia remain. The Czech society is susceptible to information from the Russian propaganda.

⁵ On June 6, 2022, in an interview with Radio Free Europe, President Zeman changed his position and supported sanctions as well as called for President Putin to be brought before a tribunal in connection with the invasion of Ukraine.

According to BIS, the Russians have been extremely active in the Czech Republic, spreading false information about the EU, NATO, the war in Syria, Donbas, the migration crisis and, recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The goals of Russian propaganda are sowing doubts among Czechs that democracy is the best system of exercising power; strengthening the negative image of the European Union and NATO; influencing internal social moods; discouraging the public from participating in various democratic processes, influencing the results of local, parliamentary and presidential elections. Those actions aim at changing the attitude of society towards the authorities and public institutions in order to escalate conflicts among citizens, and also at distorting the perception of other nations and immigrants.

As early as 2015, the BIS stated that Russian information operations in the Czech Republic focus on: weakening the power of influence of the Czech media (hidden infiltration of Czech media and the Internet); strengthening the information resistance of Russian recipients; influencing the Czech public, weakening the will of the public to resist or confront (overloading the audience with information and disinformation, relativization of truth and objectivity). Furthermore, these operations are also designed to create inter-industry and inter-political tensions in the Czech Republic (setting up puppet organizations, covert and open support for populist or extremist actors), disrupting the cohesion and readiness of NATO and the EU (attempts to disrupt Polish-Czech relations, disinformation and disturbing rumours defaming the US and NATO), damaging Ukraine's reputation and isolating the country on the international arena (involving Czech citizens and organizations in influential operations clandestinely conducted in or against Ukraine by Russia).

The above actions pose a threat to the Czech Republic, the EU and NATO not only in connection with the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. The infrastructure designed to achieve these goals will not disappear with the end of both conflicts. At any time, it can be used to destabilize or manipulate Czech society or the political environment, if Russia wishes to do so.

In October 2019, the BIS and the National Headquarters for Counteracting Organized Crime reported the detection and disruption of a network in the Czech Republic that had been set up by the Federal Security Service, a Russian intelligence operation (Eckhardt, 2020).

The official channels of anti-Western coverage are Russia Today TV and Sputnik News. The Sputnik website is an official Russian quasi-media project in the Czech language. There are also many others that directly or indirectly serve the interests of Russia. The strategy of Russia's information activities is often to drop a lot of very abstract information into the information space, which constitute a "smokescreen" for a real disinformation target. The information stream is being released into the media space for the sole purpose of disguising the true purpose of disinformation (Gliwa & Olech, 2020).

In synthesis, Russian information operations pose a threat to the Czech Republic, the EU and NATO, and thus to the European and global security system. Disinformation is spread

through traditional media, television, as well as new media, through Internet portals and networks, social media, and also through Russian intelligence operations in Czechia.

The BIS warned in its annual 2017 report that the Czech Republic was a target of Russian information warfare, and that Russia conducts influence operations through pro-Russian disinformation websites. Most of the disinformation sites are in Czech and are run by Czechs who argue that NATO, the EU, the US, and liberal democracy are harmful (BIS 2017, p. 8). The main disinformation groups in the Czech Republic are: OUR MEDIA a.s.; AC24.cz; Sputnik; Czech pro-Russian Facebook pages (Janda et al., 2017).

Official Russian quasi-media project in the Czech language – the website Sputnik interacts with disinformation along with many entities that directly or indirectly serve the interests of the Russian Federation. Information prepared and disseminated by Sputnik is transferred to varying degrees by other portals, which can be described as “satellites”. Using these networks, this information reaches a wider audience. These portals publish content based on facts, but they change their meaning or sense and add a negative narrative to it, which is a denial of journalistic reliability. It happens that these portals create news based on subjective opinions or unverified sources. Often, using simple and non-journalistic language and through populist slogans, they achieve the support of more radical and shocking recipients (Gliwa & Olech, 2020).

There are around 40 Czech-language websites that repeatedly publish false reports and spread manipulative narratives, often motivated by benign positive sentiment towards Russia. The most important ones include: Parlamentní listy (the most influential); AC24; AE News; Nová Republika; První Zprávy; and Sputnik CZ. Czech President Miloš Zeman supports the Parliamentary Listy, has given more than 40 interviews and provides it with exclusive information. In the past, President Zeman has repeated false Kremlin statements. The president has often been used by Russian propaganda (Krejčí, 2017).

Gregor and Mlejnkova (2021) provide analysis on Russia's manipulation of Czech public opinion, including disinformation narratives and techniques used by online media. Attempts to convey emotions and a biased view of the world rely more on manipulative techniques such as blaming, fabrication, labelling, and relativizing. Hence, social media has become a source of information for the public, and the disinformation narratives and manipulative techniques reflected in it are gaining more attention and audience by spreading virally on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms.

Most of these disinformation and manipulation websites are not transparent, not revealing the names of authors, financial resources, or owners. An analogous situation occurs in the case of social media campaigns, which more often focus not only on supporting Russia, but also on arousing social emotions. Many of these sites do not produce their own content, but translate foreign, very low-quality articles. The number of applications per week is extremely high and is strengthened by sharing them on social networks, particularly on Facebook. Disinformation disseminated on Czech-language websites and social networks often comes

from foreign servers, from official Russian channels or English-language conspiracy websites such as Global Research or Southfront (Janda & Víchová, 2017, p. 28).

One of the most radical is the Protoproudi (Upstream) website. As *Gazeta Wyborcza* writes for the Czech think-tank European Values, Russian propaganda is most active in the subject of Islam, immigration and terror, trying to spread fear among Europeans and divide the European Union. In one of the publicly available reports, BIS has stated that this is an easy task, as both opponents and supporters of accepting refugees in the Czech Republic often use “demagogic arguments and half-truths” (Kokot, 2016).

In the Czech Republic, articles spread on pro-Russian websites claiming that NATO intends to attack Russia from Eastern Europe. (MacFarquhar, 2016). In December 2016, the Russian news site Lenta.ru falsely reported that Ukraine had offered to accept migrants from the Middle East “in exchange for visa-free travel to the EU”, a fabricated story that was quickly translated and picked up by the Czech news site *Nová Republika* (“Beware of non-governmental organizations” 2016). This example of Russian-language information spreading to a Czech-language news website testifies to the global scale of disinformation campaigns at a time when borders are not a barrier against information operations conducted by state entities with recognized or contested international statutes (Helmus, Bodine-Baron et al., 2018, p. 17).

According to the Warsaw Institute, two of the most widely read pieces of disinformation of 2017 come from the well-known Aeronet website, which does not provide any information about itself. The first reported an alleged radioactive cloud over Europe from “a strange explosion at a French nuclear power plant”, accusing European governments of keeping it a secret and advising Czech citizens to buy iodine tablets and dosimeters. In fact, the slightly increased level of radioactive iodine in the air came from a different source, more to the east, and was in no way dangerous to human health, unlike the iodine tablets humans are supposed to digest. The second example illustrates very well the typical response of disinformation websites to any natural disaster or terrorist attack. Following the tragic chemical attacks in Syria, Aeronet reported that there is evidence that the attacks in Idlib were conducted by the White Helmets/Syria Civil Defence and the CIA.

On a global scale, Russia has used information activities to influence the election results. As indicated by the report “Hostile Social Manipulation Present Realities and Emerging Trends”, in 2017 the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic ended with a successful result for Russia (Gliwa & Olech, 2020). Disinformation has played a key role during the Czech parliamentary elections. Gregor (2019) provides historical insight into the Czech political scene and the development of election campaigns, highlighting the role of social media, especially Facebook and YouTube. “There seems to be an alliance between disinformation media and political parties critical of liberal democracy and the country’s pro-Western orientation. Disinformation in the Czech Republic is easy to spread and is growing over time. It is caused by critically low levels of media literacy and digital skills” (Filipec, 2019). Hladik et al. (2018) discuss the use of social media platforms by politicians

in the Czech Republic. Janda et al. (2018) point to a disinformation campaign by the pro-Zeman and pro-Kremlin disinformation community.

In conclusion, the established Russian information influence structures are evolving yet having a permanent character. Hence, it can be deduced that regardless of changes in the European as well as global security environment, they will be used to destabilise or manipulate Czech society, political or business circles. These structures employ sophisticated disinformation strategies, disseminating narratives from official Russian channels through 'satellites', also using politicians.

Half of the Czech population distrusts the mainstream media, and one in six people favour regime change to some non-democratic form (Filipec, 2019). 24% of Czechs trust disinformation platforms more than traditional media (Krejčí, 2017). The Public survey agency STEM published information that 25.5% of Czechs believe the disinformation broadcast and 24.5% believe in disinformation media more than the traditional media; for example 50.2% of Czechs believe that the USA is behind the influx of migrants from Syria to Europe (Ministry of Interior 2016), 38% believes in the responsibility of the United States and NATO for the Ukrainian crisis, and 19.6 percent is convinced that there are no Russian armed forces in the Donbass (Kokot, 2016). The impact of disinformation in the Czech Republic started to increase in 2008 and the peak of disinformation activities might be considered the Presidential elections of 2018 (Filipec, 2019).

According to the 2017 report of the International Republican Institute, as many as 27% of Czech respondents think Russia stands for traditional European values. According to OECD statistics, 46% of citizens in the Czech Republic believe that the mainstream media attempt to be impartial (Lexmann, 2017). Lack of trust of the others translates into the need to seek alternative sources of information, such as websites and social media, which often contain false or deliberately falsified content.

The disruption of the network of Russian hackers and the intensification of relations between the Czech Republic and Ukraine and the USA also contributed to the deterioration of political relations. Despite disinformation from Russia, the overall direction of Czech foreign policy remains unchanged. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs constantly supports the integrity of Ukraine and considers it a priority country for cooperation in transformation. The Czech Republic recognizes the so-called people's republics in eastern Ukraine as a gross violation of international law (Janda & Víchová, 2017).

An expression of the deteriorating bilateral relations were the disputes over monuments commemorating figures associated with the end of World War II in the Czech Republic. The first of them – USSR Marshal Koneev – was removed in 2020 by the decision of the Prague district council. The second one is the construction in 2021 commemorating the soldiers of the Russian Liberation Army (ROA) collaborating with the Third Reich, who joined the Prague uprising in 1945, just before the arrival of the Red Army, and thus contributed to the liberation of Prague. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs have criticized both initiatives. After seven years of investigation, the Czech Republic has accused Russians of causing

explosions at two ammunition depots that occurred on Czech soil in 2014. The suspected organisers behind the explosions were officers from Russia's GRU military intelligence service, the same men who have been sought by British police since 2018 in connection with the attempted poisoning of Skripals. The Czech government expelled eighteen employees of the Russian embassy in Prague on espionage charges. In retaliation, the Russians expelled 20 Czech diplomats while denying the Czech allegations. This is an escalation of the dispute that has been going on between Prague and Moscow for years. Another component of this conflict is the Dukovany nuclear power plant, where the Russians have been interested in building new units. The Czech secret service and several politicians have long warned against Rosatom's involvement, which would pose a threat to Czech security. In response to recent events, the Czech authorities have decided to exclude Rosatom from bidding for the power plant expansion.

Despite the deteriorating Czech-Russian political intergovernmental cooperation, and because of the increase in trade and the strengthening on energy integration, bilateral economic relations are developing. The Czech authorities has supported the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline (Ogrodnik, 2019). Czech decision-making centres have repeatedly emphasized that trade is harmed by the EU's policy of sanctions against Russia. The Czech Republic will oppose the maintenance of these restrictions if a significant part of the EU countries is in favour of such a solution. For the Prime Minister Babiš, economic and energy interests were of primary importance.

Czechia countering Russian disinformation

Mareš and Mlejnková (2021) identified significant security threats associated with disinformation and propaganda and discussed concepts of defence and protection against these threats. Daniel and Eberle (2021) presented three narratives of hybrid war in the Czech Republic—defence, counter-influence, and education.

Mareš & Rehtik (2021) discuss major Czech documents discussing countering hybrid threats from Russia. Including aspects of the Czech Security Strategy (2015) regarding these threats. Czech Foreign Policy Concepts (2015), which states that Russia is destabilizing the European security architecture. The Czech Republic's 2017 Defence Strategy, underlines Russia's responsibility for a number of hybrid campaigns against EU and NATO member states, including disinformation and cyberattacks. The National Security Audit assessed the state's resilience to hybrid threats and foreign influence, especially disinformation campaigns. It made recommendations, including increasing awareness of influence operations and improving resilience, creating an education system for public officials, and active media strategies (Audit Národní Bezpečnosti, 2016).

Czech governmental structures

In 2017, the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (Centrum proti terorismu a hybridním hrozbám – CTHH) was established. It is a specialised analytical and communications unit to monitor hybrid threats, including terrorism and radicalisation and foreign disinformation campaigns. It coordinates efforts in different ministries to counter hostile influences, and training and education of civil servants. The answer to the disinformation activities and propaganda of the Russian Federation is presenting reliable information in the free press and transmitting it via social media; informing the public that certain information is fake news and counteracting disinformation (Janda & Vichová, 2017). The creation of the CTHH increases resistance to disinformation campaigns. It recommended the creation of a strategic communication system, which has not yet been fully implemented. The lack of a public information strategy seriously affects the democratic process in the Czech Republic (Majič, 2021). Concluding, the Czech government is taking a number of steps to increase resilience against disinformation and counter Russian influence operations. The BIS plays a particularly vital role and the establishment of the CTHH is a major step. However, there are shortcomings in the public information strategy. Active media strategies should also include explanatory narratives targeting pro-Russian sympathisers and Russians.

Czech civil society initiatives

Czech civil society is actively countering disinformation campaigns through centres such as: European Centre for Security Policy Values, Prague Institute for Security Studies, Association for International Affairs, and People in Need NGO. Initiatives monitor Russian activities and block the Russian Federation from spreading its influence in the Czech Republic. The Czech think-tank Evropské hodnoty has a Kremlin Observation Program (Kremlin Watch) that monitors disinformation activities in the Czech Republic. The Prague Institute for Security Studies monitors disinformation and raises awareness about the dangers of Russian influence in Central and Eastern Europe (Krejčí, 2017). The Czech organization Člověk v tísni provides teachers with educational materials on disinformation campaigns and organizes workshops and lectures on media literacy. The Masaryk University conducts research on techniques of manipulation by websites used for disinformation. Moreover, the Zvolši.info initiative shows young people how to validate their sources and select objective and credible news and show manipulation and teach them how to disclose them. Individual journalists conduct research to reveal the origins and connections of people behind disinformation projects in the Czech Republic (Kremlin Influence, 2017). In conclusion, Czech civil society, through a number of initiatives, is actively countering disinformation campaigns. These initiatives raise awareness of the risks of Russian influence, educate teachers, promote media literacy, and conduct research on manipulation techniques.

Czech media and industry contributions

Czech media are engaged in fact-checking and investigative journalism exposing disinformation (Manipulatori.cz; Hoax.cz and Demagog.cz). The Department of Political Science at Masaryk University in Brno analyses propaganda tactics and provides media literacy training. People in Need provides educational programs, such as “One World” for teachers on countering disinformation. The organization ELPIDA actively promotes media literacy and education to help older people, “Czech elves” track down the authors of disinformation online (Majić, 2021). Czech businesses have also become a target of disinformation. Emerging associations are supporting businesses to fight disinformation and build resilience, such as the Sleeping Giants group on Twitter and the Conspiratori. Associations such as “Nelež” and the Prague-based company Semantic Visions offer disinformation consultation to companies (Majić, 2021).

The EU and NATO response

The European Union and NATO are committed to fighting disinformation, including through such instruments and organisations as the Action Plan Against Disinformation, the Code of Practice, Disinformation and the Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence and the European Centre for Countering Hybrid Threats. The Action Plan Against Disinformation calls for a unified, multi-stakeholder response to disinformation, including participation from governments, civil society and the private sector. To counter disinformation it is critical to improve disinformation resilience, the legal resilience, and strategic communication in media and online. Strategic communication serves deterrence and defence. The key is to increase resilience of national societies, information and cyber resilience, use strategic communications as an ongoing and overarching narratives. Building resilience is the primary responsibility of each nation.

Filipec (2019) defines resilience as the mental capacity and ability of citizens to recognize and work more effectively with manipulative information. To increase resilience there should be close cooperation between key actors and a comprehensive strategy at the state level, increasing digital literacy among seniors and media literacy among all social groups, and education plans. Majić (2021) analyses Czech practices in countering disinformation by governmental and non-governmental organizations and the private sector. In conclusion, increasing the Czech Republic’s resilience to disinformation requires a change in policy and approach, strong political will, and more concrete actions such as strategic communication. More communication and cooperation between companies and civil society organizations is a key element to make progress in this area. Social media should collaborate with local actors to combat disinformation, and international organizations should encourage and support these efforts (Majić, 2021).

Strategic communication should include a strategic narrative aimed at the Czech population, as well as explanatory narratives aimed at pro-Russian sympathisers in the Czech Republic and the Russian population. Further measures need to be taken to increase the credibility of the Czech media and strengthen the resilience of the Czech public, politicians, administration, security and defence structures, industry and other actors to disinformation.

Conclusions

In today's globally interconnected world, aggressive and malicious state and non-state actors extensively use information operations. Strategic communication and informational resilience allowing, through identification, monitoring and countering disinformation and fake news, to resist and recover from any kind of information operations of potential opponents are of a fundamental importance.

The paper answers the question of the role of Russian disinformation in the context of Russia's influence activities in the Czech Republic. The disinformation strategies and techniques in which Russia influences Czech society and political leaders and the ways in which the Czech Republic counteracts disinformation, including Czech governmental and non-governmental organisations, business and civil society initiatives, are analysed. Conclusions on countering influential activities are presented. The research indicates that the Czech Republic is particularly vulnerable to Russian disinformation operations.

Since 2011, the priorities and objectives of the Czech foreign policy have identified Germany and Poland as key European partners. The USA and NATO play the role of national guarantors of the Czech Republic's security, while the EU countries are seen as main economic and political partners. For Russia, the Czech Republic may be one of the elements of the buffer zone stretching between Western and Eastern Europe. Russia has considered the Czech Republic to be a Russian satellite (Kratochvíl & Kuchyňková, 2010, p. 199). Russia has three main goals in the Czech Republic: influence the country's domestic decisions, detach it from the EU and NATO, and erode both organisations.

Until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian hybrid threats were not considered a serious threat in the Czech Republic. President Zeman legitimized the Russian regime and its aggressive behaviour (Majić, 2021). Nowadays, the authorities of the Czech Republic are fully aware of the threat posed by Russia, yet many currently active Czech politicians are openly sympathetic to Russia. A sizeable portion of the Czech population remains pro-Russian (Baqués-Quesada & Colom-Piella, 2021).

From a geopolitical point of view, the Czech Republic belongs to the category of countries where Russia is trying to achieve supremacy in Europe, and the way to do this is through the gradual and deliberate corrosion of the structure of the entire European Union. Due to the geographic position of the Czech Republic and its past, 'less Europe' automatically means 'more Russia'. The Russian Federation has a strong influence on the Czech Republic

by using non-military means, which include the activities of secret services, disinformation and propaganda operations.

The Czech Republic is a target of Russian disinformation and propaganda (Filipec, 2019). The Czech Republic is gradually recognizing the dangers of disinformation. The government, civil society, and businesses have recognized disinformation as a threat and are taking a number of actions to counter that threat. A number of policy documents outline the necessary actions. However, incomplete implementation of the tasks outlined in the Czech strategic documents and a lack of transparency hinder progress in this area. Regarding civil society involvement, the Czech Republic is taking numerous steps (Majić, 2021). However, better cooperation between three sectors – government, society and business in order to increase disinformation resilience – is recommended. Majić (2021) recommends the creation of a strategic communication system, which has not yet been fully implemented. The lack of a public information strategy seriously affects the democratic process in the Czech Republic.

The Czech expert, Jamný⁶ considers Russia's disinformation and propaganda as highly effective and dangerous. It is based on the use, manipulation and hypocrisy of historical events and wrongs against Czech citizens. A significant percentage, 30%, are so indoctrinated that they believe Russian propaganda regardless of other sources of information and facts. The expert considers that the Russian disinformation machine also has an extraordinarily strong influence on Russian society, which reproduces and disseminates information increasing the range of its influence. Hence, strategic communication should include a strategic narrative aimed at the Czech population, as well as explanatory narratives aimed at pro-Russian sympathisers in the Czech Republic and the Russian population.

The Czechs have been an object of interest for Russian intelligence services for years. The Czech Informational Security Service (BIS) regularly warns of increased Russian and Chinese activity within the Czech Republic. In 2018, the BBC pointed out that the Russian embassy in Prague employed forty-four accredited diplomats and seventy-seven support staff. In addition, eighteen people (including seven diplomats) worked at the consulates in Brno and Karlovy Vary.

Increased infiltration in the Czech Republic is also discussed in a report prepared in 2019 by the Polish think tank Warsaw Institute. In the publicly available report – published on 30 November 2020 – the Czech Informational Security Service summarises its activities in 2019. In it, the counterintelligence service identifies threats to the Czech Republic. The report warns of increased Russian (and Chinese) activity within the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic has been the target of Russian cyber-attacks by entities affiliated with the Russian state. Although Russia is increasingly using unconventional means to pursue its interests, the Russian intelligence services still play a key role in this process (they supervise and control hostile activities, even if they are conducted by entities not directly subordinate

⁶ Jamný, D. (Jul. 2021). Interview with the President of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Group.

to the Russian government). The number of Russian agents operating under diplomatic cover has not changed significantly since many years. The report draws attention to the fact that the Russian diplomatic mission has for a long time been disproportionately large compared to the Czech mission in Russia.

A danger to Czech interests is the disinformation scene made up of media that present themselves as independent or alternative sources of information. These media try to shed the label of disinformation and attempt to gain legitimacy in the mainstream media. Such activities can be seen as part of a larger phenomenon – conspiracy theories, pro-Russian narratives and anti-Western opinions are deliberately moved from the periphery to the mainstream media. The aim of such actions is to increase the polarisation of Czech society, the decline of trust in the democratic processes and Czech institutions, and growing support for Russia's foreign interests. The aim of the pro-Russian activists is to criticise the current political situation in the Czech Republic and to undermine the sense of Czech participation in the EU and NATO. "Most of the issues they focused on corresponded to the priorities of the Russian authorities" (the Warsaw Institute report).

The Czechs are the most Eurosceptic in the Visegrád region, but NATO still has dedicated support, with the exception of locating NATO facilities on Czech soil. According to the Czech Centre for Public Opinion Research (CVVM), the Czechs support for the country's membership in the European Union is falling. In 2019, only two fifths of Czech citizens (37%) expressed satisfaction with the Czech Republic's membership of the European Union, and more than a quarter (26%) were dissatisfied (Hanzlová, 2019).

According to a 2017 survey by the Slovak think-tank GLOBSEC, the Czechs believe that they should geopolitically stand somewhere between the West and the East and remain as neutral as possible. According to this poll, 30% of Czechs also believe that the best political system would be an autocracy, and 49% do not believe the mainstream media (Vulnerability Index, 2017).

Czech-Russian political relations are deteriorating despite the pro-Russian activity of President Zeman. They have been influenced by the local government authorities and the BIS counterintelligence that are supervised by the Czech parliament.

To briefly sum up, Russia's influence activities in the Czech Republic pose a threat to the country's national security. Among other activities, the RF applies disinformation, propaganda and economics to inflame conflicts in Czech society, discredit state structures, support populist movements, spread anti-NATO, anti-European and anti-American sentiments, and to support the 'compatriots' and sympathizers' environment. Czech policymakers began securitizing Russian disinformation campaigns (Mareš & Rehtik, 2021).

Finally, political, economic and social stability protect against all forms of aggression, including in the information and cyber space. In addition to actions at the national level, it is crucial to further strengthen cooperation at the EU and NATO levels, and between countries facing similar threats, which would allow for synergizing their efforts to counter them.

The experts interviewed agreed that the new centre-right government with the Prime Minister Fiala, formed in December 2021, will actively work in concert with others to make the Czech Republic more resilient to Russian and other countries' hostile influence activities. The new government's policies, Jamný⁷ stresses, are guided by the Havelian principle of supporting democracy, human rights and civil society.

The 2022 war with Ukraine is a game changer heavily impacting European security environment and requiring adequate reaction. The work presented here can provide material for further research and discussion on Czech-Russian relations. It will be particularly important to follow the RF's attitude towards the disinformation environment in the Czech Republic and the use of hybrid tools against targets in the Czech Republic, on the one hand, and the reaction of Prime Minister Petr Fiala's government and security actors on the other.

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⁷ Jamný D. (10 Feb. 2022).

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