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The Czech Republic – Target of Russian Propaganda

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Executive Summary

Despite the fact that Russian propaganda is already a global challenge and threatens the entire democratic world's political stability, there are several regions, where Kremlin's disinformation campaign is particularly powerful. Such geopolitical area is the Visegrad Group – one of the main spheres of Russian interest. First of all, because of the fact that historically Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic were important elements of Russian sphere of interest and later significant subjects of the Soviet Union's foreign policy. It is also worth mentioning that the Visegrad Four (V4) perspectives may provide Russia with additional instruments for increasing its influence both in the region and the entire European Union as well.

Many Russian politicians are still unable to adapt to the post-socialist order, formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the abovementioned countries from the orbital influence of Russia. In a word, after several years of passivity the Russian Federation is still active in the Eastern and Central Europe and achieves significant success. One of the main tools in this campaign is propaganda.

The below presented publication aims at reviewing the situation in the V4 in terms of growing Russian propaganda.

Another subject of our research is the Czech Republic. Consequently, the publication will focus on the Russian propaganda methodology, narratives, and actors. Also, there will be identified the goals that the Kremlin is trying to achieve throughout the country over the past few years.

Local Political Landscape towards Russia **1**

Traditionally, the Czech Republic has always been the object of the Kremlin's interest and observation. The Soviet Union and later, the Russian Federation were actively involved in the Czech political life. The Soviet Union in the Czech public memory was perceived as a "superior commissioner" and modern Russia as unpopular foreign actor.

Despite the negative perception, the Czech society attitude towards Russia is quite uneven. For example, according to Eurobarometr, 39% of the population perceives Russia positively, and according to GLOBSEC's 2017 survey, the Czech Republic is one of the most euroskeptical states in the V4: 32% of the population supports the EU membership and 24% does not. As for the 44% - they express political indifference (Milo and Klingová, 2017, 11).

Since the 2000s, the formation of a political elite by pro-Russian forces and active participation in important political processes have become sort of a tradition. Before launching a new informational front in Central Europe, the Russian Federation authorities constantly tried to distort individual historical facts in order to interpret events in Ukraine. One of these attempts was connected with the motives of the "Prague Spring" 1968. According to Russian narrative the Soviet government was „forced” to invade Prague to protect Czechs from „the NATO aggression” (Kremlin Watch Team, 2017). Foreign policy attitudes are also different in political circles - the government, the legislative body and the president.

In 2013- 2017, the Czech Republic was run by the Social Democratic Party and ANO 2011 coalition. Former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka was actively supporting sanctions to Russia, and for that reason, was severely criticized by the local pro-Russian political forces. However, it should be noted that Sobotka's government was following a pragmatic policy which sometimes meant taking extreme steps (Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015).

Mainly, the Czech government neither opposed nor favored any foreign policy vector (Kremlin Watch Team, 2017, 1). It is noteworthy that during Bohuslav Sobotka's governance in the National Security Service's annual report and Strategic Documents Russia was defined as a "threat" to the Czech national security (Security Strategy of the Czech Republic, 2015).

Also, during Sobotka's governance a special body was established - Centrum Proti Terorismu a Hybridním Hrozbám - ("Terrorism and Hybrid Threat Center"). The only governmental structure in the EU which purposefully opposed Russian propaganda and hybrid threats (Milo and Klingová, 2017, 31).

As for the Parliament, foreign policy attitudes there were expressed stronger. For example the "Civic Democratic Party" and the TOP 09 were openly expressing anti-Russian positions. These political forces are constantly criticizing the Russian Federation for conducting aggressive and imperialistic policy.

The radically different outcome was in the second parliamentary camp where the "The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia", "National Democracy" and "Freedom and Direct Democracy" openly spread the pro-Russian narrative and continuously criticize the West (especially the United States). For example,

the leader of " Freedom and Direct Democracy" Tomio Okamura supports separatist movements in eastern Ukraine and sends party representatives there (Vejvodová, Janda and Víchová, 2017, 18- 19).

Contrary to the discussed political institutions, Miloš Zeman's political orientation is unilaterally and openly pro-Russian. He is also referred to as the Kremlin's "Trojan Horse" (Janda and Špalková, 2017). The Czech research institute "European Values" highlighted Miloš Zeman's 5 pro-Russian directions:

1. Distribution of the Kremlin's narrative on the international arena;
2. Distribution of Russian narrative in the Czech Republic;
3. Being constantly in the Russian information space to support Vladimir Putin;
4. Support to separatists, extremists and pro-Russian propaganda agents.
5. Sabotage of the Czech foreign policy towards EU/USA.

Despite the fact that the president of the Czech Republic has very limited rights, Zeman is regarded as a weighty figure for Russian propaganda, because he is the chosen president of the European state who opposed the policies of Brussels and Washington and openly criticizes the existing system. Zeman was also a high-ranking politician who has never shunned Russian support statements even in the most critical situations – during the Crimean aggression.

On the one hand, with its "rebellious" strategy, he receives significant support from Russia (eg, pre-election financing and various political dividends), and on the other hand, is trying to play a role of an influential political figure on the internal arena – of a person who defends the Czech Republic from dangerous, undermining Western tendencies" (Janda and Špalková, 2017).

No less important is the factor of one more recently raised politician - Andrej Babiš. Andrej Babiš is one of the most controversial figures in the Czech politics. He is more anti-western than pro-Russian, but with its isolationist policy he willingly or unwillingly serves the Kremlin's interests. Babiš directly opposes almost all initiatives of the EU and constantly criticizes Brussels for its "harmful policy for the national interests of the Czech Republic". “

In addition, Babiš owns printed media, 2 radio stations, 3 influential web pages and 1 TV station. Accordingly, he has a lot of influence to form a public opinion in the Czech Republic (Milo and Klingová, 2017, 26).

Economic and Political Elements of the Russian Influence and Propagandistic Narrative 2

RWE Supply & Trading CZ¹ has contract with "Gazprom" up to 2035, which means that in the following years, Czech Republic will be highly dependent on Russian gas. Another area of cooperation which should be noted is nuclear energy sector where the Czech Republic has signed a contract with Rosatom (Kremlin Watch Team, 2017).

Tourism is also an important factor. According to the Czech Statistics Office's data of 2017, the Czech Republic was visited by 551 191 Russian citizens (Český Statistický Úřad, 2017).

The number of Russians interested in Czech real estate is also increasing. According to ee24.com every year in the Czech Republic, up to 1000 homes/apartments are purchased by Russian citizens. According to the most modest data released by the same agency in 2014, 6 500 units of real estate were owned by Russians (Ozerov, 2014).

As for the main narrative of Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic, it's an immigration topic. The political forces, organizations or pseudo-informational agencies loyal to Kremlin in a high voice and are spreading a number of conspiracy theories and myths: for example, "the massive inflow of Arabs will directly strike the Czech sovereignty and its traditions." "The US deliberately spreads chaos (migration) in order to run the world by chaos." Because of these reasons, the 2017 parliamentary election's main narrative was the protection of the Czech Republic from migrational threats. Immigration is associated with Islam, Islam – with the terrorism, and the terrorism - with the death (Maza, 2017).

¹RWE Supply & Trading CZ - the largest natural gas trading company in the Czech Republic



Image 1: "Tomio Okamura's Pre-election Banner: " No to Islam, No to Terrorists.



Image 2: "Miloš Zeman's Pre-Election Banner: Stop Immigrants and Refugees - This Land is Ours!"

Another direction that sticks out in the Kremlin's narrative is the demonization of democracy and the United States of America:

"The politicians are corrupted and they can't solve the critical situations - they create the crises on their own"; "The US is the empire ruled by the Jewish minorities." (Weselowsky, 2016).

The image of Russia is neutral ... sometimes positive: "Putin is a brave politician and in a liberal (morally bankrupt) world is "the only conservative, traditional alternative to the American model".

The embassy of the Russian Federation in Prague is actively working on the above-mentioned "trends". According to the Czech Security Service's 2015 report (Bezpečnostní Informační Služba, 2015), the Czech Republic is among the top targets of the Russian propaganda. Along with other evidences, the confirmation of this fact is a huge number of employees of the Russian Federation Embassy in Prague - 140 diplomats and more than 1000 employees. According to the intelligence service, most employees of the embassy perform direct orders of Russian special services (Bezpečnostní Informační Služba, 2015, 8).

The famous Czech researcher and activist Odrej Kundra explains the special mobilization of the Russian Special Forces in the Czech Republic with two factors: the history and favorable location (Kundra, 2018). Historically, Prague has always been the center of the URSS intelligence services activity in Eastern and Central Europe (and later of the Russian Federation). The Czech Republic was a state in which the Soviet Special Forces had been fighting various democracies since the 60s of the last century. As for the second reason, due to its location, the Czech Republic is a very favorable state for espionage activities. First of all, because this country has a very small number of special service workers (approximately 60 employees work on the Russian direction), and at the same time it is very easy to go to other countries within the Schengen area and then get back without being noticed by other countries' security services.

Actors of the Russian Propaganda 3

The pro-Russian narrative in the Czech Republic disseminates through various pro-Russian websites, informal groups, printed publications and TV, and radio stations (Smoleňová, 2015, 3). It is easy to determine the quality of their political bias and objectivity: even for some people with the basic level in international relations is clear that primitively explained and turned into conspiracy theories opinions,

with unbelievable assumptions or distorted facts, are highlighted unilaterally and in an anti-western way. In addition, the narrative is aggressive and vulgar.

In many cases, the photos are cut, processed and brought from different sources. Also, pro-Russian actors are directly linked to the Kremlin - have joint projects with the Russian embassy and federal funds. The purpose of the projects is the "analysis" of the Kremlin's foreign policy and advocacy of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy

Such subjects are:

- Aeronet - The popular Czech website has been one of the most prominent supporter of the Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic since 2014. It is distinguished by anti-American and anti-western rhetoric;
- Vědomí ("Knowledge") - a magazine created by the company AC24, which is mainly oriented on showing Russian foreign policy and the Kremlin from the "alternative" point of view.
- Czech Sputnik News Agency - The pseudo-informational site oriented on spreading the "conspiracy theories", which permanently provides sensational information in the Czech language.
- Zprávy ("News") - Sensational "exclusive" Czech speaking news web-portal (Syrovatka, 2017).

The research conducted by the Slovakian activist Juraj Smatana is also noteworthy, according to which 42 pro-Russian websites operate in Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Šnidl, 2015). Due to the fact that the Czech and Slovak languages do not differ very much from each other, this research and accordingly the challenge for both countries are equally relevant. There are several famous sites and Youtube channels in the above-mentioned survey: www.pro-tiproud.cz, www.novarepublika.cz, www.bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz, www.czechfree-press.cz, www.eurodenik.cz, www.ceskoaktualne.cz, www.ac24.cz, www.parlamentnilisty.cz, www.euportal.cz, www.eurabia.cz, freeglobe.cz, Česká nezávislá televize, Svobodný vysílač (Syrovatka, 2017, 4-6).

All such news agencies or so-called the research organizations have several common features:

- Emotionally weighted narrative;
- Sensational headlines;
- Manipulative photos;
- Unspecified sources;
- Generalized narrative style;

- Distorted facts;
- Unilateral interpretation of ongoing political events;
- Anti-Americanism;
- Anti-Ukrainian narrative;
- Nihilistic discourse (Syrovatka, 2017).

The vast majority of such organizations are established in 2013- 2014 and each of them strongly denies but continuously disseminates the narrative of Russian news agencies.

According to the report published by the Czech Security Bureau in 2015, the main purpose of Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic is:

1. To weaken the Czech media;
2. To strengthen Russian media outlets;
3. To increase political nihilism;
4. To concuss political system in the Czech Republic (with the creation of various non-governmental and political organizations);
5. The NATO and EU discreditation;
6. Full isolation of Ukraine and deterioration of its international reputation (Bezpečnostní Informační Služba, 2015, 9).

In a word, the Russian Federation is putting a special effort in the Czech Republic to spread a sense of nihilism, uncertainty and vulnerability in the country - to break the political stability of Central Europe, which will have a negative domino effect in the whole EU. With the propaganda operations and hybrid tactics in the Czech Republic, the Kremlin once again proves that even the slightest shifts could bring the desired result in the development of chaos.

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