



# DISINFORMATION

## DISINFORMATION PRACTICES IN CEE



4liberty.eu is a network of several think tanks from CEE (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, and Germany) and our partners from EaP countries. Our goals: to make the Central European perspective accessible to an international audience, to be a reliable source of information on regional issues, and act as the voice of the region. Our authors are experts, intellectuals, and researchers. We publish high-quality analyses, polemics, and articles in English, building bridges between nations to further understanding among experts from particular countries. Our website, 4liberty.eu, is designed to become a platform where experts and intellectuals representing liberal thought from Central and Eastern Europe can share their opinions and ideas.

#### EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF 4LIBERTY.EU REVIEW

Olga Labendowicz

#### CONTENT EDITORS OF 4LIBERTY.EU REVIEW NO. 13

Daniela Oberstein and Máté Hajba

#### PUBLISHER

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REVIEW

L I B E R T É !

Friedrich Naumann  
STIFTUNG FÜR DIE FREIHEIT



# DisinforNation: Getting Disinformed in CEE

Nowadays, getting your facts straight may prove more challenging than anticipated – especially when there are actors (be it individuals, collectives, or foreign powers) that have various agendas motivating them to seed disinformation. Their intent could be malicious in nature, or driven by sheer obliviousness to the consequences of spreading inaccurate or fake information. This has been even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Oftentimes, we keep hearing the same messages over and over again – after all, *repetita iuvant!*<sup>1</sup>, – first, they are getting manufactured, and then absorbed by our unsuspecting minds. It is, therefore, our responsibility to make sure we have the necessary skill set and ability to discern the falsehoods from actual facts. However, we should not be left alone in the fight for a straightforward and truthful world, where information is not being weaponized to mislead target audiences.

Once disinformation ceases to be the sole domain of malicious external forces and becomes a tool used by our own governments, it is high time to get even more concerned. After all, if our own authorities feel audacious enough to try to confuse their own citizens, is there anything we can still be certain of? And we should have the right to inhabit spaces (both in real life and virtual) that are devoid of distortions; to be a worldwide nation free of disinformation.

Alas, we know this not to be the case. Russia and China, the two most notable seeders of disinformation, are not the only ones to attempt sowing discord within its borders and/or abroad. Recently, Poland and Croatia, among others, have become the battlefields for the hearts and minds of their citizens, who are continuously bombarded with concocted stories that have no basis in reality.

In this spirit, we present you the 13<sup>th</sup> issue of *4liberty.eu Review*, which investigates both the existing, well-established spheres of spreading disinformation and these recently developing in CEE. By offering a broad, yet specific, spectrum of themes, we trust this publication shall bring the Reader some much needed clarity, as well as offer solutions to the most pressing issues. In these times, when nothing can be taken for granted, we hope the information presented here might bring us all some much needed solace. Let the facts and the truth prevail!

Enjoy your reading,

*O. Labendowicz*

Editor-in-Chief of the *4liberty.eu Review*  
Coordinator of the 4liberty.eu network



<sup>1</sup> Latin for “repetition is useful”.

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# Understanding the EU's Role in the Fight Against Disinformation: A Public Policy Perspective



\*  
MÁRTON  
SCHLANGER

**P**ublic Policy is the science of what a government does or does not do in reaction to a particular social problem<sup>1</sup>. For a phenomenon to *become* a social problem, it must affect a wide range of citizens or hinder the functioning of the state. This is precisely why one must talk about disinformation, as it has grown into a real – not only state-wide, but global – problem over the past two decades.

In the current day and age, sharing and finding information is exceptionally easy. A few decades ago, there was no way for us, regular citizens, to monitor the credibility of every piece of information we are being told. As citizens were not connected by the Internet the only way to reach out to an entire population was through education, television, mail, telephone, newspapers, books. Meanwhile, the spread of information by means of these methods was very costly, and so governments had considerable control over information flow in their respective countries. This is also exactly why in the past, the entities spreading large-scale disinformation this way were the governments themselves. Back then, the average person did not have the means to fact check the information they receive. Nowadays, “disinformation policy” constitutes a brand-new wave of governmental and even supranational policy that did not exist in its current form in the past.

False information harms its recipients, and if the damage is done to a large number of citizens or households, this causes problems for governments too. An example would be a foreign country using disinformation to influence the outcome of elections in another country. In this study, I resorted to methodology used in the field

<sup>1</sup> Birkland, T. A. (2001) *An Introduction to the Policy Process*, Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.

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of Public Policy, to define the truly social problem of disinformation. I use a combination of tools in order to create a model in which disinformation policy can be interpreted. The main questions I will be asking are, firstly: How can we combat disinformation?; secondly: What could be called a “liberal” approach in disinformation regulation?; and finally: Where does the EU stand in all this?

## THE FIVE ELEMENTS OF DISINFORMATION

In this study, we are looking at disinformation as a combination of five main elements: source of disinformation, spread, reception, regulation, and implementation. This article attempts to model disinformation as an interaction between actors; each actor having a role in any of the five key elements of the interaction. The policy process of disinformation regulation starts with:



1. **Source:** Those who come up with the false information;
2. **Spread:** Those who both intentionally and unintentionally spread false information, and;
3. **Reception:** The people who are affected by false information and who we want to protect from disinformation, as they could become future spreaders

These three elements demonstrate how disinformation has become a social problem. Actors associated with these three elements of the interaction are the main *subjects* of disinformation policy. Citizens on the receiving end of disinformation are the most critical ones – this is the element where the damage is done. Even though their ignorance causes many problems, the people being lied to are not the source of the problem. Disinformation regulation should not focus on the actions of the receiving individual, but rather, it should be

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aimed at sources and spreading actors. The only type of regulation that is meant to target reception would be an information campaign. Recipients would most likely not have to be held accountable for their actions caused by disbelief, as one would not hold a baby accountable for being dirty.

The second half of the interaction (4. regulation: creating laws; and 5. implementation: compliance with passed laws) is where policymakers and states are most likely getting involved. They are also the ones that define what is *real* and what is *false* information, which, in turn, also causes a number of problems.

### ORGANIZED DISINFORMATION

There are two main cases where disinformation spread can go as far as being organized crime. While spreading disinformation is not considered to be a crime in every country, as it is not regulated, the European Union has implemented a policy to combat it. And while one person spreading false information does not require its own regulation, when disinformation is spread intentionally and in an organized manner, policymakers and governance might have to take extra steps. Organized disinformation refers to private, civil, or state-funded, but not state-run organizations (e.g.: large media or international organizations, etc.) that intentionally spread false information to citizens about current events.

Governments and governmental institutions have the means to combat organized disinformation, should they want to, in their own jurisdiction, and supranational associations such as the European Union (EU) have the means to regulate organizations even beyond borders. The only two concerns are country governments' weak influence over social media and the issue of human rights – freedom of speech, as

a basic human right, is being challenged by disinformation regulation<sup>2</sup>.

### INSTITUTIONALIZED DISINFORMATION

Institutionalized disinformation is a sub-type of organized disinformation, and is the trickiest type of disinformation by far. State-level disinformation, or institutionalized disinformation refers to false information that is being spread not only in an organized manner, but with the involvement of state institutions, and with the intention to hurt other countries, international legislative bodies (such as the EU), or to forge political capital for the governing political force, both internationally and domestically.

This kind of institutionalized disinformation is by far the hardest to combat. Most countries, especially in Eastern Europe have the authority needed in their own country to be able to define what *facts* and *truths* are, and governments have the influence to make *their truth* the majority opinion.

The resources available for a country to actively spread disinformation are virtually infinite. Regulating the flow of false information channeled to the countries' own citizens is near impossible; just as extracting valid information from those countries, which is quite hard in itself.

When Hungarian's governing party Fidesz's membership in the European People's Party (EPP) was suspended in 2019, PM Viktor Orbán, state communications, and state-financed news media claimed Fidesz unilaterally suspended its own membership, while publicly accessible sources could easily prove the contrary. This example shows us that even though correct infor-

<sup>2</sup> See: Nunez, F. (2020) "Disinformation Legislation and Freedom of Expression", [in]: UC Irvine Law Review, pp. 784-798.

mation is available, it falls short of accessibility compared to state news. Because of this, the majority of Hungarians woke up to the news that Fidesz once again showed their strength in the EU, while the rest of the European Union knew what had actually happened. What mattered to the Hungarian government was that its voters did not take notice of this.

### THE ROLE OF PRIVATE AND CIVIL SECTORS

With the introduction of social media, the spread of information exploded. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are great tools for anyone looking to spread false information without spending too much money, and it can be done very quickly. At first, big tech companies assumed little to no responsibility for the validity of information that was spreading on their platforms, but in the last few years, not only did they

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give in to pressure, they took incentive in the fight against false news. With this, social media is in a special place when it comes to disinformation: Their existence alone assures the steady spread of false information, but at the same time, they play an enormous role in disinformation regulation and implementation.

The implementation of EU disinformation regulations<sup>3</sup> may be done by three actors. First, state governments can implement regulations at home (even if they cannot effectively be forced to do it). Second, private social media companies, who play a large role in both spread and regulation, can implement regulation on their platforms (they, unlike states, are forced to do it, if they want to continue operating undisturbed in the EU). A third actor, civil organizations, is also connected to implementation. While they have no authority over media, they can be contracted to do news watching, fact-checking, and other similar activities for EU institutions.

### STAKEHOLDERS OF EUROPEAN DISINFORMATION

The term *stakeholder* is generally used in the field of management, and may be described as: "People or small groups with the power to respond to, negotiate with, and change the strategic future of the organization"<sup>4</sup>. Stakeholders are actors that can influence, or are influenced, by a certain policy or lack thereof. With each actor, the aim is to estimate how much influence they have over policy action, and how much it is in their interest that policy action is taken. This division is most commonly used to see if there are any actors that are against policy

<sup>3</sup> Eden, C. and F. Ackermann (1998) *Making Strategy: The Journey of Strategic Management*, London: Sage Publications, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup> See: *Brzeziński v. Poland* Available Online: <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/cases/brzeziński-v-poland/>

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action that have enough power to sabotage implementation.

For example, Russia and China are the main disinformation sources and their influence is immense in the region. However, the EU cannot restrict them directly with policy, since these are large countries that are not members of the EU, and it is in the European Union's interest to cultivate a good diplomatic relationship. Affected persons can appeal to the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice, and if disinformation regulation were harsh on freedom of speech, this would most definitely occur<sup>5</sup>.

EU Member states collectively make up the heart and soul of EU legislation, in the form of prime ministers and finance ministers.

<sup>5</sup> Based on Hajnal, G. and G. Gajduscek (2010) *Közpolitika. a gyakorlat elmélete és az elmélet gyakorlata*, Budapest: HVG-ORAC.

While most EU member states can be expected to support the fight against disinformation, member states can cause problems if the policy is controversial. Other actors such as social media companies and the EU's own agencies pose little threat to policy action and their role in implementation is most crucial.

In the collective European disinformation policy, member states, social media companies, civil organizations, and EU legislative bodies can be involved in both policymaking and implementation. Given the willingness of these actors and their influence on the disinformation interaction, not to have means of cooperation and coordination between them or to exclude anyone from implementation would prove ineffective.

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Now that the kind of actors that should be involved in the policy process has been laid out, let us introduce a regulation typology that could be applicable, when trying to decide the proportionate policy response to social problems. Later, this basis of evaluation is used to try and define what a liberal disinformation policy would look like.

### REGULATION: RESPONSIBILITY AND INTENTIONALITY

Talking about policy tools, it is crucial to look at a few characterizing factors of disinformation source and spread. The first, most important factor when appointing the regulation subject is defining responsibility. Responsibility usually presumes intentionality, but can come from bad observation too. In disinformation policy it can be extremely hard to appoint responsibility, as it is usually difficult to find the source and differentiate it from the actors that spread it. Cases of organized spread are the most important focal points of policy.

Regulation and implementation in not just disinformation policy, but any legislative action, always has to look at intentionality and responsibility to be proportionate to the crime itself. In an area of policy such as disinformation, where most of the wrongdoings (spreading of disinformation) are unintentional, most of the policy budget will probably go into tools that are less on the punishment side and are more focused on limiting the spread as much as possible.

Unintentional spread could be punished more harshly, in an attempt to incentivize Internet users to double check for credibility before sharing anything online. Regulation like this would be controversial to say the least, but considering we see an ever-growing crowd of people that support stricter regulation of social media and Internet communities, especially in the wake of recent hate crime tragedies, it is worth

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## THE EU USUALLY HAS NO AUTHORITY TO DIRECTLY CENSOR MEDIA OUTLETS

mentioning such a regulation alternative. In social media it does not matter that one did not know if the shared information was fake, all that matters is that they wrote one's own post about it instead of sharing the source.

### REGULATION: POLICY TOOLS

When looking at policy tools, it must be ascertained that the policy is proportionate to the volume of the problem. The EU usually has no authority to directly censor media outlets. State-funded propaganda media (which is a recurring problem in Hungary, for example) cannot be censored by EU bodies. Regional private news media outlets can only be bought out or, very rarely, censored or prohibited by local governments and state institutions. While directly censoring false information or propaganda in news media is problematic and raises concerns with regards to freedom of information, speech, and democracy, disinformation can still be monitored and suppressed.

Although we cannot censor the news outlet itself, social media companies can block most of the traffic, since most of the traffic on online news media sites is generated by people *coming in* from social media. The EU does not directly prevent or prohibit the spread of disinformation in the media, it just

provides funding, contracting, and so on, to other actors that are directly involved, such as social media companies.

Direct regulation can target social media companies in the EU, because they are in the private sector – social media companies can be forced, as they already are, to comply with some EU guidelines, if they want to operate in the EU seamlessly. Apart from that, though, direct regulation tools are limited and less effective when one tries to suppress the spread of disinformation.

Regulative authority of the EU is limited over news media, since a lot of disinformation media sources are funded by member states or other countries (e.g.: Russia, China), and the EU's regulative competence is mostly aimed to control international trade and the private sector. As far as economic tools go, the EU's power is uncontested.

The volume of the EU budget can be presented as a recent example: in July 2020, the EU leaders agreed on a comprehensive budget of EUR 1 824.3 billion (!), which combines the multi-annual financial framework (MFF) and an extraordinary recovery effort – Next Generation EU (NGEU). The package helps the EU rebuild after the COVID-19 pandemic and will support investment in the green and digital transitions. Out of this, EUR 750 billion takes up just the recovery budget<sup>6</sup>.

If the EU is capable of such an extreme level of resource allocation, introducing mobilization and incentive economic tools, and setting up organizations to combat disinformation should not be a matter of “Do we need this?” The EU already answered this

<sup>6</sup> As a side note, like I said, regulative action was needed for EU bodies to even be able to free up such a big portion of their budget to go into crisis management, so regulative and economic tools went hand in hand in this case too.

question, as we will see in the final segment of this study. By showcasing all these different policy tools, the “How can we combat disinformation?” part of the question is answered.

Now, we have everything we need in order to look at existing disinformation policies and evaluate them by checking: 1) If it suppresses the spread of disinformation; 2) If the policymaker and implementation have sufficient authority; 3) If the policy action taken is proportionate to the volume of the problem; and 4) If the right policy tools are being used.

Using what has been laid down, we can attempt to define a kind of liberal disinformation policy that meets our criteria, along with the criteria of being “liberal”.

### LIBERAL DISINFORMATION POLICY

One central question here is: “What core values define liberalism, which must be taken into account, when the European policymakers' aim is to solve a social problem in an ideologically compatible way?” For this, we might as well quote the Polish *Liberté!* magazine, which refers to: “(...) widely understood freedom, free economy, open society, as well as European integration”<sup>7</sup>.

A liberal disinformation policy would presumably make little use of preventive tools and binding regulation. The same goes for censorship. Since disinformation policy in itself is pushing the boundaries of current freedom of press and freedom of speech, a liberal approach would have to resort from going near that gray area too. Because of this, liberal policy must rely heavily on the private and civil sector for implementation, or at least for monitoring.

<sup>7</sup> See: <http://liberteworld.com/about/>

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## MOST DISINFORMATION IS NOT ORGANIZED OR INSTITUTIONALIZED; MOST OF THE SPREAD IS UNINTENTIONAL

In an economic sense, withdrawal of resources, punishing preventive economic measures, extra taxation, and – especially because of the open society and freedom of information aspect of liberal policy criteria – it should not have heavy state or supranational level supervision. Instead of creating a new institution inside the governmental hierarchy and endowing it with control powers, the correct way would be the development of a transparent and public funding system that relies on tenders and innovation, to supervise this policy. Pre-existing supervisory institutions, such as Media Authorities, could also receive funding to extend their intelligence services to flag disinformation. It would not be fitting, with a liberal perspective, to doubt the civil and private sector's ability to combat disinformation when it is in their absolute interest to fight it. For those who are looking to make a profit on organized disinformation, and hence it is in their interest to spread false information, however, the Competition Authority of their country of operation should proceed as usual, as in any other case of economic foul play. Liberal disinformation policy should not rely on creating new





## THE MAIN ELEMENTS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S DISINFORMATION POLICY ARE: EUVSDISINFO, THE CODE OF PRACTICE, THE ACTION PLAN, AND SOMA

institutions and passing new binding legislation, but rather, it needs funding and organization, and the cooperation of the three sectors (public, civil, and private). Since we live in the European Union, we must also try and make sure that whenever something of importance happens in the EU, the citizens of every state hear about it, and that they all hear the same version of the story. In today's age, this is only a matter of reach. And reach is only a matter of money.

It is also crucial to remember that most disinformation is not organized or institutionalized; most of the spread is unintentional. Because of this, liberal policy can benefit from information tools and any soft incentive tools that encourage citizens and journalists to double check the facts before they spread them.

An example of liberal disinformation policy would be an open access database where

private, public and civil sector actors are funded to collect disinformation. From there, based on the nature of the spreader and the source of disinformation, if available, the data is forwarded to the institution or actor which practices authority over the actor that is responsible for spreading. Many times the source is from outside of the EU (Russia, China), but the platform for this disinformation is mostly social media. After the appropriate authority deals with that disinformation, it is organized that the factual information gets to people, or is at least easy to reach, possibly in the form of an EU-funded news outlet that is widely available to European citizens.

This is not to be taken as a word-for-word policy proposal, but rather, a combination of policy elements that are compatible with liberal values and comply with our other requirements, organized into one package.

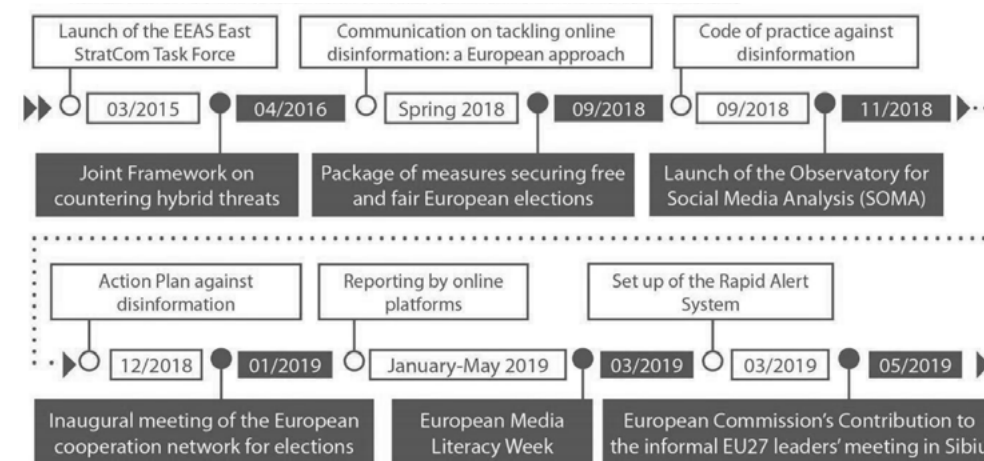
### EUROPEAN DISINFORMATION POLICY: ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

The main elements of the European Union's disinformation policy are: EUVsDisinfo, the Code of Practice, the Action Plan, and SOMA. We need to be able to tell where and how these policies exert their effect. For this, an impact-process analysis of the European disinformation policy is presented, based on open-access EU data<sup>8</sup> [See: Figure 2].

Upon drawing the impact-process map of EU disinformation policy, I first had to define the problem itself. The approximate numbers in the 'problem' bracket are based on the Action Plan progress report – this is only the amount of disinformation cases

<sup>8</sup> See: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/factsheet\\_disinfo\\_elex\\_140619\\_final.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/factsheet_disinfo_elex_140619_final.pdf); <https://ec.europa.eu/inea/en/connecting-europe-facility/cef-telecom/apply-funding/2020-edmo>; <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/action-plan-against-disinformation>; <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>

Figure 1: Overview of EU joint and coordinated action against disinformation



Source: European Commission (2020) Tackling Online Disinformation. Available [online]: <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation>

that have been identified and dealt with in the first year of the Code of Practice. We can imagine that the magnitude exceeds these numbers, since it is near impossible to filter everything. These are essentially the indicators used to define the problem causes, the causes, not the problem itself.

The problematic elements of negative effects are what we see in the lower half of Figure 2's problem bracket. The essence of the problem is very comprehensively described in the Commission's *Shaping Europe's Digital Future* strategy:

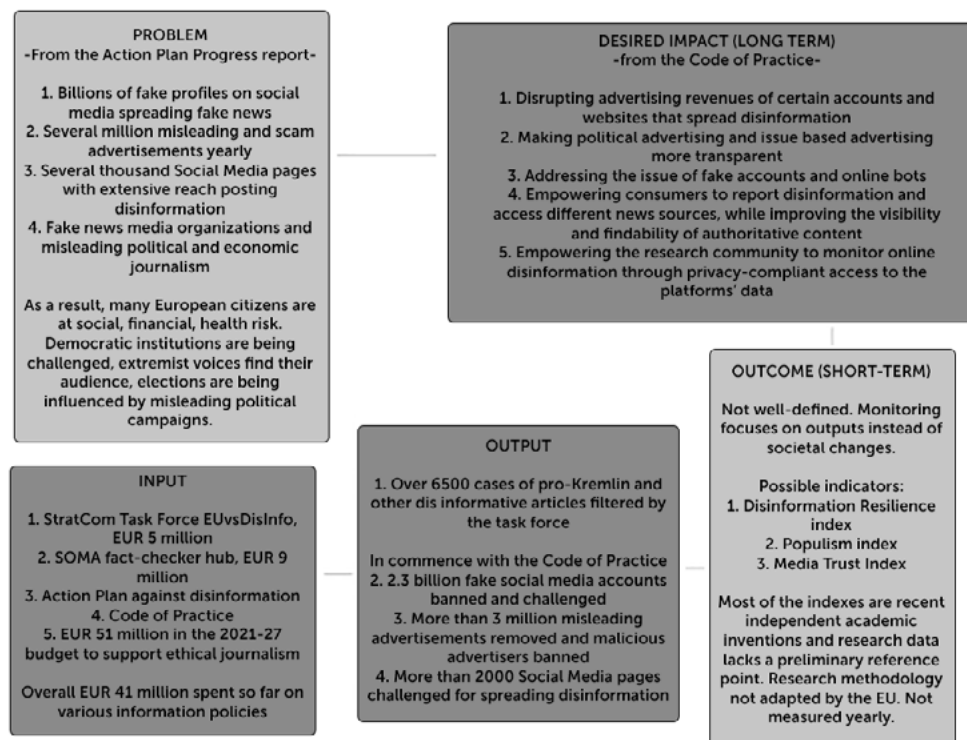
*"Disinformation can cause public harm, be a threat to democratic political and policy-making processes, and may even put the protection of EU citizens' health, security and their environment at risk. Disinformation erodes trust in institutions and in digital and traditional media and harms our democracies by hampering the ability of citizens to take informed*

*decisions. It can polarize debates, create or deepen tensions in society and undermine electoral systems, and have a wider impact on European security. It impairs freedom of opinion and expression, a fundamental right enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union"*<sup>9</sup>.

The Code of Practice Roadmap mentions five elements, which are what the EU defines in the five desired impact points [See: Figure 2]. The Action plan's progress report, however, focuses on the outcomes of the policy and decides to hit readers with big numbers, instead of showcasing how much progress has or has not been made towards the desired impact. The numbers we know only tell us how much disinformation cases were flagged and challenged by the policy

<sup>9</sup> Humprecht, E., F. Esser, and P. Van Aelst (2020) *Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-National Comparative Research*.

Figure 2: Impact-process analysis of European disinformation policy



Source: Own elaboration

tools, and not how much, if at all, disinformation “decreased” in the past years. Because of this, the outcome bracket can only feature indicators adapted from academic life<sup>10</sup>.

However, as seen in the figure, we have no preliminary data to serve as reference, nor are there clear intentions from the publishers of the studies to do yearly surveys. The EU could potentially adapt these indicators and use them to define outcomes later on. From this impact process analysis, we can see that the EU has created policies with measurable and significant output, but we

have no way of telling as of yet, how much actual impact the policies had, because we cannot tell how much disinformation “goes through the cracks”. One possible way to get around this would be to adapt one of the many indicators introduced by academics of the field.

Finally, we need to check if European disinformation policy meets our other criteria we set up in the study. Namely: 1) if it suppresses disinformation spread; 2) if the policymaker and implementation have sufficient authority; 3) if the policy action taken is proportionate to the volume of the problem; and 4) if we are using the right policy tools.

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THE EU SET UP A ROBUST NETWORK AND A POLICY PACKAGE TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION, WHICH IT DOES WELL, BUT NOT ENOUGH ATTENTION IS PAID TO THE SCALE OF THE SOCIAL PROBLEMS CAUSED BY DISINFORMATION, LIKE POPULISM, EXTREMISM, DIS-TRUST IN MEDIA

had pre-existing terms of services, that punished violation of terms in a similar way as it does now. The difference is that they report their progress to the EU, and possibly there is an extra incentive.

The big problem, when we try to tell if disinformation spread was really suppressed, is that we have no outcome indicators and no knowledge of the volume of disinformation that slips through the cracks. To give a definitive answer: EU policy *does* suppress the spread of disinformation, but we do not know if it does enough. Based on what we can observe, we can say that more needs to be done, as the problem of disinformation has not yet diminished.

#### 4. Does the policymaker and implementation have sufficient authority?

EU disinformation policy consists of several different but intertwining elements – the Task Force, the Code of Practice, etc. The Task Force and SOMA use agencies that are funded by the EU, with SOMA making good use of a tender system I advocated for earlier.

Both the Task Force and SOMA incorporate open access databases, which ensure transparency. The Code of Practice is a prime example of outsourcing from EU institutions to the private sector, and this also ensures that implementation always has sufficient authority.

With this contract between the EU and advertising giants, the authority problem over source and a large considerable portion of disinformation spread dissolves. In many ways, the EU implemented policies similar to what I discussed in the ‘liberal policy approach’ segmentare similar to my ideas of liberal disinformation policy, coordinating with private and civil sectors. Pre-existing organizations took on new roles – instead

#### 1. Does it suppress disinformation spread?

Based on our impact-process analysis, we saw that EU policy was successful in monitoring and filtering disinformation. Most of this was due to the Code of Practice and social media companies, and the StratCom Task Force, and while the numbers are high, we should not forget that these platforms

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. See also: Ukrainian Prism (2018) *Disinformation Resilience Index*, Kyiv: EAST Center.

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of the EU forcing another wedge into the institutional hierarchy, they provided funding for outside actors and initiated cooperation where intelligence is shared.

### 3. Is the action taken proportionate to the problem?

Proportionality is difficult to determine because the volume of the problem is not known. The EU set up a robust network and a policy package to combat disinformation, which it does well, but not enough attention is paid to the scale of the social problems caused by disinformation, like populism, extremism, distrust in media, etc. Similarly, we cannot yet monitor our outcome “variable”. This does not mean that

the action taken is not proportionate to the problem, as the anti-disinformation budget multiplied over the years, but at this point, it certainly isn't enough to just make large-scale disinformation – it just means that we have no idea if it is.

The other side of proportionality is proportionate punishment, which is handled well in EU policy. Appointing blame and defining consequences is done as it is supposed to be, with a ‘crime’ that is mostly unintentional. Actors with great responsibility (social media companies) are closely observed and monitored, with progress reports and during a 12-month period when they first join the Code.

### 4. Are the right policy tools used?

As mentioned before, EU disinformation policy uses a wide variety of distributive, mobilizing, incentive, information, and regulative tools – as much as regulation is needed for any other policy action in the European Union. As with any policy in the EU, their main tools are distributive.

The EU is built around (re)distribution of funds and joint economic effort, and most of the time regulation means implementing laws about how resources are allocated. I did mention that fighting disinformation requires two things: funding and organization. By deciding what and how to fund, the EU legislative bodies also define how policy implementation is organized. As the EU's main policy tool is distribution, and distributive tools are the backbone of setting up an anti-disinformation network, we can safely say the right tools are used. What is uncertain, though, is if these distributive tools are used in the right way.

*Ex ante* (preliminary) problem evaluation, and the integration of academic research of disinformation into the policy process

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IN THE PAST  
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needs more attention, and these endeavors need more funding. Focusing on disinformation monitoring is a good practice, but to truly measure our impact, it is not enough. To sum up, the right policy tools are definitely being used, but their area of impact, or what the subjects of distribution are, allocation and policy focus could be improved upon.

### CONCLUSIONS

In the presented overview, we put on the Public Policy goggles and inspected disinformation as an interaction between actors, which consists of five elements: source, spread, reception, regulation, and implementation. Different stakeholders are associated with different elements of the interaction, and the European Union has everything an actor would need to have a positive impact on this interaction. The introduced policy and analytic tools may prove useful in laying out the structure of this interaction and to define the necessary impact points of policy action.

In the past five years, European disinformation policy evolved and expanded, and we saw a slow but steady increase in funding from legislation. We have a sample of what this anti-disinformation network can do

with additional resources, and we also see that there are several aspects of the fight against disinformation that could benefit from more funding. As this is a Public Policy analysis, the purpose of this study is not so much to define what the next step should be, but rather it is a thorough look at where we currently stand.

If we must absolutely synthesize the contents of this analysis and conclude with an observation, it is that EU policymakers need to direct increased attention towards measuring policy impact instead of policy magnitude. Since the sheer volume of disinformation in the media makes it either impossible or extremely costly to supervise all of it, it is more effective to set social impact goals and monitor how much closer we get periodically.



\*

MÁRTON  
SCHLANGER

Political Science graduate of ELTE Budapest, currently pursuing a Masters' degree in Public Policy and Management at Corvinus University Budapest. Former Republikon Institute associate and contributor



# No One Is Safe: The Information Battlefield of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century



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ALEKSY  
PRZYBYLSKI

The European Union (EU) as a community of nation states was weakened after the immigration crisis in 2015 and after the crisis in the Eurozone in 2010, where Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Greece recorded the greatest recessions. According to the Pew Research Centre surveys conducted among EU member states, a temporary drop in trust in the EU may be observed<sup>1</sup>. At the turn of 2013 and 2014, when huge protests erupted in Ukraine against corruption, breaking promises, and generally denying society's hope for a better tomorrow by Viktor Yanukovich, the then pro-Russian president, the weakening of the European Union was exploited by Vladimir Putin's Russia with the invasion on Ukraine<sup>2</sup>.

The phenomenon of so-called "fake news", information war, or disinformation in societies, had already existed. Part of the information war was Radio Free Europe, which was used to transmit a Western narrative in societies behind the Iron Curtain<sup>3</sup>, or false information about Black people spread by supporters of slavery in the United States when slavery was still legal<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, it may be said that the Russian propaganda around Maidan and the subsequent war in Donbass made these concepts appear in the public consciousness. The wars of disinformation between countries continue, and more and more information about other states and their activities is coming to the surface. However, because of the importance of these countries, the actions carried out by Russia and

the People's Republic of China seem to be the most interesting and, at the same time, dangerous for the freedom of the West.

Information wars have gained more significance in the Internet age than they had in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the main sources of information for societies were books, television, and press. As a rule, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was easier for governments to control an information war in their own backyard, because it was enough to shut down a newspaper, television, or accuse a journalist of spying, or to put pressure on the editorial staff – of course, the application of such measures was dependent on the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/the-european-union/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20180910030305/http://libertarianin.org/o-co-tak-naprawde-chodzi-z-tym-majdanem/>

<sup>3</sup> Weiner, T. (2007) *Legacy of Ashes*, Doubleday.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1996/10/thomas-jefferson-radical-and-racist/376685/>

determination of the governments, legal issues, values, or sentiments in a society, only the technical aspect is involved.

One example of such a practice is, though perhaps not very glorious, McCarthyism and the so-called "witch-hunt", i.e. the search for communists in American society by Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and his special subcommittee of inquiry in the Senate<sup>5</sup>. In the Internet age, however, it is possible to create a strongly decentralized network of propaganda centers, whose founders and owners will be difficult to locate, and even more so, to be stopped by the authorities – even if they are outside the jurisdiction of a given country.

### RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA ON THE FRONTLINES

The Russian model of disinformation warfare is based, at least in part, on spreading false information, imposing its own narrative, and influencing political groups and the media – both created by Russians, and those already in existence. The Russian government targets not only extreme right-wing and left-wing parties, but also libertarians and general opponents of the *status quo* are not free of Russia's tentacles<sup>6</sup>. It can be concluded that the goal of the Kremlin is not so much to seize power in a given country, as to deepen the chaos and divisions between Western countries or within individual countries. Therefore, let us take a look at selected elements of Russian propaganda addressed to individual political centers. One can also point out the propaganda activities of the Russian gover-

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.authentichistory.com/1946-1960/4-cwhomefront/1-mccarthyism/>

<sup>6</sup> See: [https://cia.media.pl/rosja\\_hakerzy\\_wlamali\\_sie\\_na\\_mail\\_aleksandra\\_dugina](https://cia.media.pl/rosja_hakerzy_wlamali_sie_na_mail_aleksandra_dugina); <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/03/pro-russian-extremists-observe.html?>; <https://www.tango-noir.com/2018/06/16/full-list-of-members-of-the-european-parliament-who-voted-against-the-resolution-on-political-prisoners-in-russia/>

ment which are not aimed at a particular group, but at entire societies, such as Russia's assistance to Italy in the form of providing equipment and military specialists to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. However, after a few days, it turned out that most of the equipment was useless or almost unnecessary, which was also true for Russian specialists, who – according to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* – are experts in chemical weapons rather than healthcare. The aim was to show Western societies that the Russian model of "democracy" is more effective, and that in case of problems one can count on Russia rather than NATO<sup>7</sup>.

### THE RIGHT WING UNDER ATTACK

During the time of EuroMaidan, a narrative driven by nationalist and right-wing politicians and publicists appeared on the Polish Internet, according to which, Maidan was dominated by "Banderites", Nazis, Jews, and LGBT movements. An attentive reader will immediately catch the contradiction between the Nazis versus the Jews and the LGBT movements<sup>8</sup>, whose extermination was one of the goals of the Third Reich. The "Banderites" were addressed primarily to the Polish right, since it is a term used to describe the sympathizers of Stepan Bandera, a Ukrainian nationalist who co-founded the organization responsible for the slaughter of the Polish people of Volhynia during WWII<sup>9</sup>. The Polish right was also addressed with suggestions to divide Ukraine between Poland, Russia, and

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1223/Artykul/24-81704.Wlosi-krytykuja-pomoc-Kremia-Rosyjski-ambasador-jatrzy-kto-wam-przychodzi-z-pomoca>; <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25821028,koronawirus-we-wloszech-podejrzana-pomoc-z-rosji.html>

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.iarex.ru/interviews/44745.html>; <http://www.nawolyniu.pl/artykuly/lysiak.htm>

<sup>9</sup> See: Motyka, G. (2011) *Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji Wista*, Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie; Mucha, W. (2014) "Oddziały Putina w Polsce", [in:] *Gazeta Polska* No. 50 (1114), Warsaw.

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## THE RUSSIAN MODEL OF DISINFORMATION WARFARE IS BASED, AT LEAST IN PART, ON SPREADING FALSE INFORMATION, IMPOSING ITS OWN NARRATIVE, AND INFLUENCING POLITICAL GROUPS AND THE MEDIA

Hungary<sup>10</sup>, which was reflected in the feelings of resentment that have still existed in Poland and Hungary<sup>11</sup>. The aim of this was also to sow discord between the Poles

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rp.pl/Konflikt-na-Ukrainie/181009974-Telewizja-Rossija-1-Polsko-rosyjski-rozbiór-Ukrainy.html>

<sup>11</sup> Before World War II, Polish territory included today's Ukrainian lands, mainly those around Lviv. Previously, for several centuries, even larger areas of land in today's Ukraine were within the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Many Poles miss those times which are being identified with the peak of Polish power, hence the desire of some to regain, among others, Lviv. The same can be observed in Hungary, whose territory was much larger before the treaty of Trianon in 1920. See, for example: <https://www.dziennikwschodni.pl/lublin/lwow-odzyskamy-banderowcow-ubijemy-skandal-na-meczu-polska-ukraina-na-arenie-lublin.n.1000017997.html>

and Ukrainians<sup>12</sup> – as the Volhynian massacre was also used in Ukraine<sup>13</sup>. Needless to say, right-wing circles are the victims of Russian propaganda not only in Poland, but also in other European countries.

A good example is the German far-right party Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD), which is known for its nationalist and anti-Islamic stance<sup>14</sup>. AfD is an interesting case for liberal circles, because it was initially a pro-market, pro-American, and pro-NATO party<sup>15</sup>, followed by a turn in the party platform in 2015, which was opposed by one of its founders, Bernd Lucke<sup>16</sup>.

The party representatives had contacts with the staff of the Russian embassy at joint conferences and attended pro-Russian events, such as the one devoted to the liberation of Yugoslavia from Nazi occupation in Serbia<sup>17</sup>. AfD admitted that Russia wanted

<sup>12</sup> In 1943, groups of Ukrainian nationalists attacked Poles in Volhynia, where tens of thousands of people died. The Polish inhabitants of Volhynia retaliated against the Ukrainians, killing several thousand of the latter. There is still a dispute between Poles and Ukrainians about the interpretation of these events. See, for example: <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/andrzej-duda-chce-odbicia-lwowa-prezydent-ofiara-propagandy/tepp99>; <https://dorzeczy.pl/kraj/58637/Polacy-chca-odebrac-Ukraincom-Lwow.html>

<sup>13</sup> <https://kresy.pl/wydarzenia/regiony/ukraina/fake-news-ukrainie-polska-chce-rb-onz-uznania-rzezi-wolynskiej-ludobojstwo/>

<sup>14</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/world/europe/germany-afd-alternative-bjorn-hocke.html>; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/interview-with-frauke-petry-of-the-alternative-for-germany-a-1084493.html>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37337927>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-migrant-anti-muslim-and-anti-merkel-germanys-afd-set-to-enter-parliament/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://m.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afd-bernd-lucke-spricht-sich-fuer-afd-beobachtung-durch-verfassungsschutz-aus-a-1250739.html>

<sup>17</sup> See: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>; <http://www.thelocal.fr/20141124/fran-ces-far-right-turns-to-russia-for-9-million-loan>; <https://www.facebook.com/annavero.wendland/posts/578-087682366813>

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## AFD IS AN INTERESTING CASE FOR LIBERAL CIRCLES, BECAUSE IT WAS INITIALLY A PRO-MARKET, PRO-AMERICAN, AND PRO-NATO PARTY

to bribe them with loans and gold, although they claim they refused. In March 2016, the party received generous donations from anonymous donors, including thousands of election signs and millions of copies of a free campaign newspaper. AfD's treasurer does not rule out that the donations were financed by Russia<sup>18</sup>. The members confirmed that in 2017 a delegation of the party flew a private jet to Moscow, which had been paid for by the Russian government<sup>19</sup>.

Alexander Gauland, the then vice president of AfD, was a guest at the Russian embassy in Berlin and took a trip to Russia in 2015, financed by Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian Oligarch. There he met with, among others, Alexander Dugin, a Russian neo-fascist who

<sup>18</sup> See: <http://europe.newsweek.com/putins-envoys-seek-influence-european-radicals-297769>; <http://europe.newsweek.com/putins-envoys-seek-influence-european-radicals-297769>; <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.thelocal.de/20180522/russian-payment-for-afd-leaders-private-jet-is-shocking-critics-say>

is regarded as the Kremlin's chief ideologist and has contacts with many pro-Russian politicians and activists in the West<sup>20</sup>. Gauland is also known for his infamous words that "Crimea has already been Russian once, and is Russian again. It will never return to Ukraine"<sup>21</sup>.

Udo Hemmelgarn, a member of AfD and German parliament, is known for his support for the Assad regime and his demand that Germany support the Russian presence in Syria. In 2019, Hemmelgarn organized a secret trip of four AfD parliamentarians to Syria<sup>22</sup>.

The media also reached documents according to which Marcus Frohnmaier, an AfD MP and a former head of the party's youth group, was to be supported by Russia. The correspondence between a former Russian counterintelligence officer and a member of the Russian Parliament, which the media has acquired, shows the idea of organizing meetings between Russians and representatives of right-wing political parties from Europe, supporting their media campaigns, and organizing demonstrations. He was also a guest of the Russian side in the occupied Crimea and in occupied Donbass, where he met with Manuel Ochsenreiter, a neo-Nazi, an observer of the 2014 elections in Crimea, and the president of the German Eurasian Research Center<sup>23</sup> – *nota bene*,

<sup>20</sup> See: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/greek-syria-deep-ties-russian-eurasianist-dugin/26818523.html>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/ndr-wdr/afd-syrien-103.html>

<sup>23</sup> See: <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>; <https://www.dw.com/pl/afd-dementuje-pow%C4%85zania-z-mateuszem-piskorskim/a-40152456>

AfD asked for a "like" for the Center on its official fanpage<sup>24</sup>. Later, Manuel Ochsenreiter became Frohnmaier's assistant. The AfD MP focused, among others, on the opposition to sanctions on Russia, the status of the Crimea, and the war in Ukraine<sup>25</sup>.

Frohnmaier also fostered a partnership between AfD youth and Young Guard (YG), the youth of Putin's party. YG is known for its anti-Western and anti-LGBT views<sup>26</sup>.

The Russian television channel RT, a propaganda tube outside Russia, has promoted AfD politicians in programmes for the German and international audience<sup>27</sup>. They also invite to their programs, for example, Ken Jebsen – who is linked to the magazine *Compact*, which is associated with AfD<sup>28</sup> – and was presented as an independent journalist in the RT. Jebsen said on air, among other things, that the West must "act on the case of the fascists from Kyiv"<sup>29</sup>. During the 2017 election, Russian television stations in Germany promoted AfD exclusively, and also distributed disinformation that hit the Merkel government<sup>30</sup>. For example, Russian

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/afdgrzabg/posts/z6775-78315714929?\\_rdc=16\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/afdgrzabg/posts/z6775-78315714929?_rdc=16_rdr) Available [online]: June 26, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/rosyjski-wywiad-oplaca-niemieckiego-posla-i-polskich-nacjonalistow-6373470089799297a>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-populists-forge-deeper-ties-with-russia-a-1089562.html>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/medien/auftritt-im-propagandasender-russia-today-wie-der-mdr-der-afd-und-moskau-zugleich-half/21101090.html>

<sup>28</sup> P.A. Simpson – Mobilizing meanings: Translocal identities of the far right web. German Politics and Society, (2016)

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2014-11/rt-deutsch-russland-propaganda-luegen/seite-2>

<sup>30</sup> See: <http://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/swiat/1-721430,1,rosja-ingerowala-w-niemieckie-wybory-sa-niepokoja-sygnaly.read>; <https://forsal.pl/artykuly/10-05463,jak-putin-steruje-europa-dezinformacja-zbiera-zniwo.html>

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## DURING THE 2017 ELECTION, RUSSIAN TELEVISION STATIONS IN GERMANY PROMOTED AfD EXCLUSIVELY, AND ALSO DISTRIBUTED DISINFORMATION THAT HIT THE MERKEL GOVERNMENT

TV station *Channel One* reported that a 13-year-old girl from a Russian-immigrant family was being raped by asylum-seekers for over a 30-hour period. According to German police, the girl was not raped and not abducted. These "fake news" incidents fueled anti-migrant protests in Germany.<sup>31</sup> *The Washington Post* reported that Russian support for AfD was provided by anonymous accounts on the Internet that promoted anti-immigrant messages from AfD<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-eu-35413134>

<sup>32</sup> <https://wiadomosci.wp.pl/washington-post-o-sukcesie-afd-rosjanie-mieli-mobilizowac-wyborcow-6170288025638529a>



It is also worth mentioning the vision of Russia that President Putin is selling to the right wing in the West. According to John R. Schindler, a former NSA analyst, Putin can be called “an Orthodox Jihadist”. Russian propaganda presents Putin as the last crusader, a true defender of “Western values”, freedom of speech, masculinity, family, nation states, Christianity, opposition to political correctness, Islam, decadence, and moral decline of the West<sup>33</sup>.

### THE LEFT IN MOSCOW'S SERVICE

Although the Russian propaganda apparatus presented Maidan as a gang of anti-Polish nationalists, Jews, and LGBT+, it did not prevent them from directing a slightly different messaging to the left-wing movements. In this way, the Ukrainians fighting the government, and later the new government with Poroshenko at the helm, became fascists and – again – Nazis<sup>34</sup>. Yanukovich (and later the separatists) supported by Russia were portrayed as anti-fascists<sup>35</sup>, even though on the separatist side fought the declared fascists and Nazis<sup>36</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, not only the right-wing parties are the targets of Russian intelligence activities. One of the left-wing parties that have connections with the Russian state is Syriza. This Greek party won power in 2015 with its socialist and

## “ONE OF THE LEFT-WING PARTIES THAT HAVE CONNECTIONS WITH THE RUSSIAN STATE IS SYRIZA

anti-austerity program<sup>37</sup>. After winning the election, Syriza formed a coalition with Independent Greeks, a right-wing party that opposes the austerity required by the European Union (EU)<sup>38</sup>. The victory of Syriza could have been a positive change for Russia because of its anti-saving policies, which could have jeopardized the stability of the Eurozone and the interests of the Northern EU countries, which were creditors of Greece.

According to an e-mail leak in December 2014, Syriza was in contact with the Kremlin's neo-fascist ideologist Alexander Dugin and with Konstantin Malofeev, the Russian oligarch who is suspected of sponsoring separatists in Donbass<sup>39</sup> and has been accused by the Bulgarian government for his efforts to turn Bulgaria towards Russia<sup>40</sup>. Dugin and Malofeev aimed to create a circle of politicians and intellectuals friendly

to Russia. The Russians and Syriza were to “work closely together on strategy, PR, etc.”<sup>41</sup>. For instance, important Syrian documents about their political positions were to be forwarded to Dugin for his opinion. Syrian representatives were on the list of potential partners of their network of intellectuals that Dugin presented to the oligarch in February 2014<sup>42</sup>.

Further news also include Nicolas Laos, Syriza's Greek adviser and businessman with business connections in Russia, or Panos Kammenos, the head of the Independent Greeks party, who later became the Minister of Defense, and whose Institute for Geopolitical Studies began working with the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, formerly part of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service<sup>43</sup>. Kammenos was also opposed to the agreement with Macedonia to change the country's name to North Macedonia, so that Greece would not block North Macedonia's NATO candidacy<sup>44</sup>. Dugin also has connections with the Foreign Minister in the then Syriza government, Nikos Kotzias, a former member of the Communist Party. Dugin was invited by Kotzias to give a lecture at International Politics and the Eurasianist Vision, where he said that Greece should not join the Eurasian Union, but should play a role in “reconstructing Europe's architecture” and create an “eastern pole of European identification” in the European Union with other countries, including Serbia<sup>45</sup> (an EU candidate country). Kotzias, in

his rhetoric, rejected the EU's tough line of sanctions against Russia and demanded an active role for Greece in negotiations with Moscow<sup>46</sup>.

Then Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras, the Minister of Energy and Panagiotis Lafazanis, the leader of the far left in Syriza, were also against further sanctions against Russia in the coalition government of Syriza and Independent Greeks. Tsipras accused Kyiv of being a haven for the Nazis, and said that “it is a regress for us to have fascists and neo-Nazis in European governments and that the European Union accepts this”<sup>47</sup>.

As mentioned at the beginning, Russia is trying to reach everyone who wants, or is able, to disturb the *status quo* in the West. From this perspective, other interesting groups are the so-called “hackers”, “libertarians”, and “radical liberals”.

### OPPONENTS OF THE STATUS QUO: HACKTIVISTS

Julian Assange, an Australian citizen, decided to launch the “WikiLeaks Party”, which was to give him a place in the Australian Senate<sup>48</sup>. From the beginning, WikiLeaks has tried to give the impression of a completely neutral project, aimed only at fighting for the transparency of all countries. Although, according to TechCrunch, the first time when they published something that actually concerned Russia was in 2017<sup>49</sup>, it was nothing that could cause an earthquake<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> <https://reason.com/2017/07/07/russias-global-anti-libertaria/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.km.ru/world/2014/01/24/protivostoyanie-na-ukraine-2013-14/730706-evromaidan-krizis-demokratii-i-priznaki-f>

<sup>35</sup> <https://natemat.pl/119319.polak-z-wielkiej-brytanii-dolaczyl-do-separatystow-w-donbasie-jestem-antyfaszysta>

<sup>36</sup> See: <https://jagiellonia.org/winston-churchill-przyszli-faszysci-beda-nazywac-siebie-antyfaszystami-fotogaleria/>; <https://natemat.pl/114667.bartosz-bekier-walczy-o-doniecka-republike-ludowa-jak-polski-student-dolaczyl-do-prorosyjskich-separatystow>

<sup>37</sup> <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2015/01/12/syriza-leader-tsipras-promises-restoration-of-returnee-expatriates-pensions/>

<sup>38</sup> [http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_wsite1\\_1\\_26/01/2015\\_546550](http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_26/01/2015_546550)

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/greek-syriza-deep-ties-russian-eurasianist-dugin/26818523.html>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.expatica.com/ru/russia-banker-gets-10-year-ban-from-bulgaria-spy-affair/>

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/\\_w\\_articles\\_wsite1\\_1\\_26/01/2015\\_546550](http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_26/01/2015_546550)

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/greek-syriza-deep-ties-russian-eurasianist-dugin/26818523.html>

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/greek-syriza-deep-ties-russian-eurasianist-dugin/26818523.html>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.ekathimerini.com/233729/article/ekathimerini/news/greek-pm-accepts-kotzias-resignation-takes-over-as-foreign-minister>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/greek-syriza-deep-ties-russian-eurasianist-dugin/26818523.html>

<sup>46</sup> <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/grecja-nie-moze-zerwac-swoich-historycznych-wiezow-z-rosja-ra511208>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/a87747de-a713-11e4-b6bd-00144feab7de>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2012/12/12/assange-Wikileaks-party-australia>

<sup>49</sup> <https://jagiellonia.org/totalna-inwigilacja-uzyt-kownikow-internetu-przez-rosyjskie-sluzby-wikileaks-po-raz-pierwszy-wypuszcza-materiały-na-rosję/>

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/wikileaks-spy-files-russia/>

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## RUSSIA IS TRYING TO REACH EVERYONE WHO WANTS, OR IS ABLE, TO DISTURB THE STATUS QUO IN THE WEST

However, when browsing through the official fan page of Assange's party, one can find posts that fit into the pro-Russian narrative. Up to now, one can read there that "Ukraine is at war with their own people"<sup>51</sup>, "Israel Special Forces are training American cops despite history of rights abuses"<sup>52</sup>, or that "American helicopters are transporting Daesh fighters in eastern Syria"<sup>53</sup>. From their profile, one can also learn that the MH17 flight was interrupted by a rocket launched from territory controlled by Ukraine and not by Russian puppet *quasi* states<sup>54</sup>. There are also videos where a man accuses John McCain of treason<sup>55</sup> or clips from RT, a propaganda television sponsored by the Russian

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1339-305472833678>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1342-116572552568>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1325-287180902174>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1333-357976761761>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1333-340750096817>

government that operates outside Russia<sup>56</sup>. We can also see a photo of unknown origin that shows an infant with a deformed body who, according to the provided description, is a child from Fallujah in Iraq – thus its appearance is blamed on the United States<sup>57</sup>. These are just a few consecutive posts. However, it is difficult to prove that it was supposed to work in favor of Russian propaganda, only on the basis of entries in social media. But there is more.

Julian Assange was in hiding at the Ecuadorian embassy in London for several years, from where – according to the report of the Spanish consulting company, UC Global, created on behalf of the Ecuadorian government – he was supposed to be in contact with Russian secret services. According to the report, Assange personally supervised the leakage of e-mails from Hillary Clinton (who, at the time, was Donald Trump's opponent in the U.S. presidential race) and had previously been in contact with Nikolai Bogachyichin, the head of RT's London branch<sup>58</sup> and the people who donated the stolen materials<sup>59</sup>.

According to Robert Mueller, an American official investigating Russia's interference in the U.S. presidential election, Assange met altogether with twelve Russian intelligence officers<sup>60</sup>. The information about Assange's planned escape from the United Kingdom

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1334-177200013172>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/WLParty/posts/1324-552910975601>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.newsweek.pl/swiat/zalozyciel-wiki-leaks-wspolpracowal-z-rosja-mial-wplynac-na-wyniki-wyborow-w-usa/g6zkvwy>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.infosecurity24.pl/wikileaks-czescia-rozgrywki-rosyjskiego-wywiadu>

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/us/politics/mueller-indictment-russian-intelligence-hacking.html>

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## FROM THE BEGINNING, WIKILEAKS HAS TRIED TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF A COMPLETELY NEUTRAL PROJECT, AIMED ONLY AT FIGHTING FOR THE TRANSPAR- ENCY OF ALL COUNTRIES

to Russia<sup>61</sup>, which the Russians were supposed to help him with, was suspicious, but allegedly the plan was viewed by Russians as too risky<sup>62</sup>. Assange also ran his program on Russian propaganda television RT<sup>63</sup>. The founder of WikiLeaks has been supported in the past by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, among others, according to whom Assange deserves the Nobel Peace Prize. Wikileaks also criticized the documents published by Panama Papers, according to which, among other things, Russian businessmen had ties to companies in tax

<sup>61</sup> <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/media-julian-assange-chcial-uciec-do-rosji-ra869166-2582579>

<sup>62</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,23952854,rosjanie-chcieli-pomoc-assange-owi-w-ucieczce-z-wielkiej-brytanii.html>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/01/world/europe/wikileaks-julian-assange-russia.html>

havens. This criticism was later used by Vladimir Putin to deny the truth of the Panama Papers' report about Russian corruption and oligarchs and to calm the Russian society<sup>64</sup>.

### FRIENDS OF FREEDOM AND RUSSIA

The next groups are libertarians and radical liberals. The most noteworthy are the libertarians from the Ron Paul Institute and those associated with the American Mises Institute. The most important representatives of both communities include Ron Paul, the founder of the Ron Paul Institute and a former member of the US Congress<sup>65</sup>; Lew Rockwell, the founder of the Mises Institute and the website [lewrockwell.com](http://lewrockwell.com)<sup>66</sup>, and Justin Raimondo, the co-founder of [antiwar.com](http://antiwar.com)<sup>67</sup>.

Ron Paul is known for his many controversial statements criticizing US foreign policy and justifying Russia's actions. He publicly stated that a *coup d'état* took place in Ukraine in 2014, and that the sanctions imposed on Russia are "criminal" and constitutes an act of war<sup>68</sup>. He also justified the so-called "Crimean referendum", claiming that he saw no reason why it should not be fair and that everyone should have the right to secession<sup>69</sup>. He also accused the US government of funding a change of government in

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/apr/07/putin-dismisses-panama-papers-as-an-attempt-to-destabilise-russia>

<sup>65</sup> <http://ronpaulinstitute.org/about-us/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.lewrockwell.com/about/>

<sup>67</sup> [https://original.antiwar.com/antiwar\\_staff/2019/07/05/justin-raimondo-rip-1951-2019-2/](https://original.antiwar.com/antiwar_staff/2019/07/05/justin-raimondo-rip-1951-2019-2/)

<sup>68</sup> See: <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/03/06/ron-paul-crimea-has-right-to-join-russia-obamas-sanctions-criminal>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/15/ron-paul-crimea-russia-sanctions-act-of-war>

<sup>69</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20140814075502/http://blog.panamapost.com/alexander-mccobin/2014/03/24/ron-paul-gets-it-wrong-when-he-speaks-about-secession-and-crimea/>

Ukraine, with the National Endowment for Democracy, an American fund that distributes grants to organizations in authoritarian and emerging democracies<sup>70</sup>. In one of his speeches, he suggested that the MH17 plane that was shot down was a “false flag” by Ukraine<sup>71</sup> and that it is the United States<sup>72</sup> that was to blame. Ron Paul has appeared many times in RT, just like his colleagues from the Institute<sup>73</sup>.

As Anton Shekhovtsov, a Ukrainian researcher on the European extreme right and its links to Russia, reported on his blog<sup>74</sup>, at least three of Ron Paul Institute’s associates were associated with the now-defunct British Helsinki Human Right Group (unrelated to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights) – known for its claim that elections in authoritarian Belarus meet democratic standards. They are Daniel McAdams, Executive Director of the Institute and associated with antiwar.com, as well as RT, Mark Almond (former President of the BHHRG; speaking in RT and associated with another Russian propaganda channel, the Voice of Russia) and John Laughland, a British opponent of the European Union (formerly associated with the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation in Paris, where Natalya

Narochnitskaya, a Russian national-conservative, was the head). Daniel McAdams is responsible, among other things, for an article according to which the Ukrainian government is carrying out ethnic cleansing or arguing with the Ukrainians living on the battlefield, ridiculing them for thinking that, “separatists kill their own people”. He also ridiculed information about Russian military drones on Mariupol, a Ukrainian seaside town that was the target of a pro-Russian offensive<sup>75</sup>. Paul’s institute takes the same position on the issue of Maidan and the war in Ukraine<sup>76</sup>. As Anton Shekhovtsov, a Ukrainian researcher on the European extreme right and its links to Russia, reported on his blog<sup>77</sup>, at least three of Ron Paul Institute’s associates were associated with the now-defunct British Helsinki Human Right Group (unrelated to the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights) – known for its claim that elections in authoritarian Belarus meet democratic standards. They are Daniel McAdams, Executive Director of the Institute and associated with antiwar.com, as well as RT, Mark Almond (former President of the BHHRG; speaking in RT and associated with another Russian propaganda channel, the Voice of Russia) and John Laughland, a British opponent of the European Union (formerly associated with the Institute of Democracy and Cooperation in Paris, where Natalya

<sup>70</sup> In fact, there was information that the US government spent more than five billion dollars on Euromaidan. However, in reality, the amounts covered the period since 1992 and concerned expenditure on, among others, support for the fight against drug smuggling, support for the rule of law, humanitarian aid, and economic aid. Find out more: <https://www.politifact.com/factchecks/2014/mar/19/facebook-posts/united-states-spent-5-billion-ukraine-anti-government/>; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/ron-paul-is-supporting-russias-illegal-occupation-of-crimea>

<sup>71</sup> <http://ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/featured-articles/2014/july/24/ron-paul-whats-so-bad-about-a-split-up-ukraine.aspx?>

<sup>72</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/ron-paul-defends-russia-after-malaysian-plane-crash-2014-7?IR=T>

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.rt.com/trends/ron-paul-us-politics/>

<sup>74</sup> <https://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/02/pro-russian-network-behind-anti.html?>

<sup>75</sup> See: <http://ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/peace-and-prosperity/2014/march/11/geoffrey-pyatt-the-outlaw-as-sheriff.aspx>; <http://www.ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/neocon-watch/2014/march/26/did-students-for-liberty-leader-really-attack-ron-paul/>; <https://ukraine-atwar.blogspot.com/2014/08/rpi-executive-director-daniel-mcadams.html>

<sup>76</sup> See: <http://ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/featured-articles/2014/january/23/ukrainian-opposition-and-the-west-%E2%80%98playing-with-fire-siding-with-extreme-nationalists.aspx>; <http://ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/featured-articles/2014/january/22/-radicals-in-riots-euromaidan-failed-to-separate-from-neo-nazis.aspx>

<sup>77</sup> <https://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/02/pro-russian-network-behind-anti.html?>

national-conservative, was the head). Daniel McAdams is responsible, among other things, for an article according to which the Ukrainian government is carrying out ethnic cleansing or arguing with the Ukrainians living on the battlefield, ridiculing them for thinking that “separatists kill their own people”. He also ridiculed information about Russian military drones on Mariupol, a Ukrainian seaside town that was the target of a pro-Russian offensive<sup>78</sup>.

Similar articles appeared on a page related to Lew Rockwell, where even articles directly from RT appeared<sup>79</sup>.

### CHINA, (SELF-)CENSORSHIP IN POP CULTURE, AND OTHER INFORMATION-WARFARE STORIES

The Chinese model of information war with the West differs from the Russian model. It does not focus so much on aggressive promotion of politicians sympathizing with China, but instead puts emphasis on building a positive image of China in the West, imposing its narrative on Western companies or gradually buying out companies in the West. The Chinese model of information war with the West differs from the Russian model.

<sup>78</sup> See: <http://ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/peace-and-prosperity/2014/march/11/geoffrey-pyatt-the-outlaw-as-sheriff.aspx>; <http://www.ronpaulinstitute.org/archives/neocon-watch/2014/march/26/did-students-for-liberty-leader-really-attack-ron-paul/>; <https://ukraine-atwar.blogspot.com/2014/08/rpi-executive-director-daniel-mcadams.html>

<sup>79</sup> See: <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2015/03/michael-s-rozeff/what-russian-aggression-in-ukraine/>; [https://www.lewrockwell.com/2018/01/no\\_author/ukraine-libya-syria-and-now-iran-we-have-seen-this-song-and-dance-before/](https://www.lewrockwell.com/2018/01/no_author/ukraine-libya-syria-and-now-iran-we-have-seen-this-song-and-dance-before/); <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2015/07/russia-today/was-there-a-2nd-aircraft-in-the-mh-17-disaster/>; <https://www.lewrockwell.com/2015/04/ron-paul/us-sends-troops-to-ukraine/>; [https://www.lewrockwell.com/2019/11/no\\_author/ukraine-for-dummies/](https://www.lewrockwell.com/2019/11/no_author/ukraine-for-dummies/)

## “THE SELF-CENSORSHIP GOES BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY

By forcing Western filmmakers to censor their works before they are released on Chinese screens, the aim is to ensure that Western versions would be already devoid of elements that depict China in a negative light in the future. The censorship includes minor changes – from the name of the antagonist in “Iron Man 3” from “Mandarin” to “Man Daren” to avoid Chinese connotation, or by inserting Chinese life-saving surgeons Tony Stark, by silencing the words “Russia” and “Russian” in “Iron Man 2” due to the common socialist past of China and Russia. Even “Django” did not escape being censored and was banned from the cinema – according to Zhu Dake, a Chinese film critic, probably because of the fact that “[Django] is an outside force inciting people to rise up against slavery, which may be reminiscent of Chinese social reality.”

Interestingly enough, Marvel self-censored itself in the film “Doctor Strange”, where in the comics of the 1960s the Doctor was a Tibetan monk, which was changed to a white woman – according to one of the filmmakers, it was caused, among other things, by the fear of Chinese censorship, which would link it to the political situation in Tibet. Captain America has also fallen victim to censorship – he does not use an



American iPhone, but a Chinese Vivo. This is likely because China is a huge market for cinematography, sometimes surpassing the American one<sup>80</sup>. Of course, on the other end of the spectrum, there are also films made in China, such as "Wolf Warriors", where heroic Chinese commandos fight the drug traffickers supported by the American Navy Seals<sup>81</sup>.

The decision of the American video game developer, Blizzard Entertainment, who organized a tournament in his game "Hearthstone", also received a loud echo. One of the players, a Hong Kong resident known as "Blitzchung", was interviewed during the tournament and wore a mask similar to that used by the protesting Hong Kong residents and said: "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times", which is the slogan of the protesters. A moment later the streaming was interrupted. Blitzchung was kicked out of the tournament on the second day, his winnings were taken away, and he was banned from the big tournaments for a year. The two streaming hosts were also fired by Blizzard<sup>82</sup>. However, the self-censorship goes beyond the boundaries of the entertainment industry and has even reached the American Ivy League universities – Harvard and Princeton professors will use special vocabulary to protect their students from the new National Security Law, as they say<sup>83</sup>.

<sup>80</sup> See: <https://www.cnet.com/features/marvel-is-censoring-films-for-china-and-you-probably-didnt-even-notice/>; <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hollywood-is-increasingly-normalizing-censorship-china-report-finds-1305935>

<sup>81</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7.75399.25917992.zachod-oskarza-chiny-o-pandemie-pekin-odpowiada-animacja.html>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.theverge.com/2019/10/8/20904308/hearthstone-player-blitzchung-hong-kong-protesters-ban-blizzard>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/08/21/ivy-league-schools-self-censor-for-china/#23e86ae814a5>

## “CHINESE DISINFORMATION EFFORTS WERE VERY VISIBLE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Another element of China's model of waging an information war with the West is mass purchases of businesses and real estate in other countries. They have several goals: taking over patents and know-how, increasing their influence on the country, and taking over strategic points. A good opportunity for shopping was the crisis in the Eurozone, when many countries were looking for additional money, such as Greece<sup>84</sup>.

Another good moment for China came along with the coronavirus, which led to the current recession in many economies<sup>85</sup>. For example, COSCO, a Chinese transport company with shares in many European ports, such as Rotterdam<sup>86</sup>, purchases, among others, Western innovative

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/economics/11511653/Isolated-Greece-pivots-east-to-Russia-China-and-Iran-But-will-it-work.html>

<sup>85</sup> <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/04/investing/china-markets-coronavirus/index.html>

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/04/18/watch-out-for-china-buying-sprees-nato-warns/#4e72ed0a1758>

companies<sup>87</sup> – for example in the north of Europe<sup>88</sup>, – or top brands, including film companies<sup>89</sup>. This is to allow China to impose a positive vision of the Chinese regime on the unconscious public by directly influencing films, advertising campaigns, and brand communication. Investment and cheap investment loans in Africa, a continent which for years has been Europe's sphere of influence, are also part of this battle, but with growing investment in African countries, their political leaders are making a turn towards China<sup>90</sup>.

Part of the Chinese economic war against the West are also companies producing electronics, symbolized by Huawei and its 5G systems, which are banned by some countries, whereas the United States impose further sanctions on the company itself<sup>91</sup>. The Chinese Communist Party also uses the popular TikTok application, whose moderators are to follow the Party's censorship line, such as in Taiwan, Tibet, or the protests

<sup>87</sup> See: <https://hbr.org/2011/04/the-globe-how-china-reset-its-global-acquisition-agenda>; <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-is-buying-a-lot-of-foreign-companies-2016-2?IR=T>; <https://justthenews.com/world/asia/made-china-owned-china-20-deals-show-how-china-gobbling-us-assets>

<sup>88</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/15/china-is-bargain-hunting-and-western-security-is-at-risk/>

<sup>89</sup> See: <https://www.industryweek.com/the-economy/article/22024894/should-we-allow-the-chinese-to-buy-any-us-company-they-want>; <https://variety.com/2020/biz/asia/china-tencent-music-buying-stakes-in-universal-warner-1234644387/>

<sup>90</sup> See: <https://www.bruegel.org/2019/07/chinas-investment-in-africa-what-the-data-really-says-and-the-implications-for-europe/>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/05/the-next-empire/308018/>; <https://qz.com/africa/1825914/chinas-investment-in-africa-more-influential-than-uk-france/>; <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/what-does-chinas-investment-africa-mean-europe>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2020/04/18/watch-out-for-china-buying-sprees-nato-warns/#4e72ed0a1758>

in Hong Kong<sup>92</sup>. For example, the account of Feroz Aziz from the US was censored when she published a video on the persecution of the Muslim minority in China<sup>93</sup>. Although there is a separate version of TikTok for the Chinese market, according to the agreement between the government and the application's owners, there are accounts of Chinese governmental institutions on the global TikTok. The presence of the Chinese state on TikTok can be used to promote its own narrative, e.g. in the scope of the previously mentioned Muslim minority.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, China sponsors educational centers known as the "Confucius Institute" in the West, but they have been closed down in the US, Canada, Sweden, and Australia for a few years now because of being a tool for projecting China's soft power<sup>95</sup>. They are also accused of restricting academic freedom, suppressing criticism outside China, and spreading Chinese propaganda<sup>96</sup>.

Another element of Chinese soft power is... the panda. Pandas are used both as political gifts or elements of deals between states<sup>97</sup>, but also as China's mascots for the outside world. It is not without reason that state

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.wionews.com/world/tiktok-entertainment-platform-or-chinese-propaganda-company-299518>

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/nov/27/tiktok-makeup-tutorial-conceals-call-to-action-on-chinas-treatment-of-uighurs>

<sup>94</sup> See: <https://www.scmp.com/abacus/culture/article/3029515/china-tiktok-another-tool-government-spread-its-message>; <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-parent-company-bytedance-spreads-chinese-propaganda-report-2019-11?IR=T>

<sup>95</sup> <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/3b7190f79e-314332-39689307.html>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.vaticannews.va/pl/swiat/news/2019-09/chiny-instytut-konfucjusza-propaganda.html>

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-22/why-pandas-are-part-of-chinas-diplomatic-strategies/10630298>

media are eager to promote various recordings of pandas. The association of fluffy, sweet, and perhaps slightly clumsy pandas with China makes foreign societies not so easily associate China with aggression<sup>98</sup>.

Chinese disinformation efforts were very visible in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Disinformation began to appear when the first infections were detected at the turn of 2019/2020, when censorship was strictly imposed on doctors from Wuhan<sup>99</sup>. People who break the information blockade are being actively fought, e.g. a well-known Chinese blogger critical of the authorities, disappeared<sup>100</sup>. According to the investigation of the Associated Press, the World Health Organization (WHO) was helpless against China's reluctance to cooperate with the WHO, and despite this, the UN agency publicly praised China<sup>101</sup>. Its deputy director refused to say the word "Taiwan" in a TV interview<sup>102</sup>. This probably has to do with China's financial potential for WHO<sup>103</sup> or China's relationship with the WHO Director General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus<sup>104</sup>. According to the Chinese narrative, the coronavirus appeared in

China after contact with a person who came back from abroad or the United States who are to be blamed for the outbreak<sup>105</sup>. The Chinese authorities want to be perceived by the rest of the world as leaders in the fight against the pandemic, so they share their knowledge, publicize small humanitarian aid, and, above all, sell the necessary equipment. China is trying to convince Western societies that its authoritarian model of state is more effective than Western democracies and international organizations like the EU<sup>106</sup>. This is illustrated by a Chinese animation of LEGO figures in which China ridicules Western concern for human rights or the US policy towards COVID-19<sup>107</sup>. In addition to social media and its own media, China uses purchased advertisements in foreign newspapers that have published articles written by Chinese diplomats<sup>108</sup>. Advertisements in Western newspapers were also a tool to build a negative image of the protesters in Hong Kong<sup>109</sup>. Moreover, China uses its English-speaking media, such as the *Global Times* or *People's Daily*, or its diplomats' social media accounts, as well as false accounts on Twitter and Facebook. Surveys of public opinion show that in some societies, sympathy for China and Russia has increased, whereas it has decreased toward the EU and NATO<sup>110</sup>. Chinese

<sup>98</sup> See: <https://www.ft.com/content/8a04a532-be9211-e7-9836-b25f8adaa111>; <http://www.chinauncensored.tv/panda-propaganda/>

<sup>99</sup> [https://pism.pl/publikacje/Dezinformacja\\_Chin\\_i\\_Rosji\\_w\\_trakcie\\_pandemii\\_COVID19](https://pism.pl/publikacje/Dezinformacja_Chin_i_Rosji_w_trakcie_pandemii_COVID19)

<sup>100</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25791687,w-chinach-korowirus-slabnie-ale-nasila-sie-propaganda-sukcesu.html>

<sup>101</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,26006015,sledztwo-ap-chiny-ukrywaly-kluczowe-informacje-o-nowym-koronawirusie.html>

<sup>102</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25832180,who-tajwan-o-chinach-juz-mowilismy-bulwersujacy-wywiad-wicedyrektora.html>

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/what-influence-does-china-have-over-the-who/a-53161220>

<sup>104</sup> See: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-22/pompeo-tells-u-k-mps-china-bought-who-chief-tedros>; <https://theprint.in/opinion/who-and-china-tedros-past-worrying-how-india-fell-for-it/400945/>

<sup>105</sup> <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/western-media-falls-chinas-propaganda-trap>

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Koronawirus-ofensywa-propagandowa-Pekinu-7841497.html>

<sup>107</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25917992,zachod-oskarza-chiny-o-pandemie-pekin-odpowiada-animacja.html>

<sup>108</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/497185-dyplomacja-maseczkowa-chin-poniosla-kleske>

<sup>109</sup> <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2019/09/04/chinska-propaganda-protesty-hongkongu/>

<sup>110</sup> See: [https://pism.pl/publikacje/Dezinformacja\\_Chin\\_i\\_Rosji\\_w\\_trakcie\\_pandemii\\_COVID19](https://pism.pl/publikacje/Dezinformacja_Chin_i_Rosji_w_trakcie_pandemii_COVID19); <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/08/china-serbia-aleksander-vucic-xi-jinping-coronavirus/>

## “CHINA IS TRYING TO CONVINCE WESTERN SOCIETIES THAT ITS AUTHORITARIAN MODEL OF STATE IS MORE EFFECTIVE THAN WESTERN DEMOCRACIES AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS LIKE THE EU

lies and manipulations about the COVID-19 pandemic were also reported at length by the French daily, *Le Figaro*<sup>111</sup>.

When we try to create the Russian information war model we can see that Russians are diversifying their propaganda activities and trying to adapt the message to a specific part of society. Looking at examples of Syriza and AfD, one can see that they offer their narration to both the left and right side, produce both dull and direct propaganda and are more sophisticated – like a good marketer. For the right, Russia is

a defender of Western values and the only real opponent of (radical) Islam. For the left, the Russian state is peaceful, anti-fascist and pro-social spending. The radicalism of the supported political groups suggests that the Russians do not care about the mere takeover of power by controlled politicians, but about the paralysis of Western countries by chaos.

One can see that the Russian government is not fighting hard against the image of Russia as a corrupt and authoritarian state. Rather, it tries to show Western societies that their governments are no better and that Russia is at least more effective, tolerant and caring for the people.

The Chinese model of leading the information war is different from the Russian model. China is building soft-power through its influence on the entertainment industry, the purchase of large companies, cheap loans and huge investments. They try to convince the rest of the world that the Chinese model of state and economy is the best. In contrast to Russia, China does not target the message and does not influence politicians directly on a mass scale. The Chinese government is trying to present China as a more economically efficient state, but also more effective in managing the pandemic. However, this is a false image built on disinformation.

Both regimes refer to human emotions and needs. They try to say: "with us life is easier, maybe without a bit of freedom, but thanks to that it is safer and with a higher standard of living. And the West? The West is responsible for all the crises and unrest in your life, from the Arab Spring to the war in Syria and Ukraine, to COVID19 and economic crises." Their message is the more attractive to the average person, the less he/she knows about what is happening inside these countries and the bigger chaos is in the West.

<sup>111</sup> <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,25912084,wszystkie-chinskie-klamstwa-o-koronawirusie-le-figaro.html>



### NO ONE IS SAFE, INDEED

In fact, liberals do not have many opportunities to counteract informational attacks by authoritarian regimes, because many actions would involve restrictions on freedom of speech, one of the fundamental values of the liberal order. Of course, supporting fact-checking institutions is an important element of defense. We cannot expect every citizen to verify all information, so we need specialized organizations that, according to the theory of comparative advantage, will be more effective.

It is a good practice for social media owners to close fake accounts, label so-called "fake news", or add information about financing the most popular profiles. The media should be pressured at the grassroots level and urged to change their business model, so that they no longer accept sponsored articles from authoritarian governments. Educational activities aimed at the public shall be carried out in order to increase awareness of, among others, the operation of information bubbles.

However, the most effective and desirable course of action is to build and support a narrative that portrays China and Russia as they are – aggressive, authoritarian regimes that want to overthrow the liberal order in the West and threaten the freedom of us all. It is important to continue to show how the Russian government treats the opposition or ordinary businessmen, what China does with the opposition and minorities and how it uses its businesses to put pressure on them.

The key to the victory against authoritarian regimes must not be censorship and restrictions on freedom of speech by governments, but winning the battle for people's hearts and minds, by proving that, indeed, liberal democracies are the true defenders of security, freedom prosperity, and social stability.

After all, let us remember that all political groups fall victim to the information war and no one is safe<sup>112</sup>.

<sup>112</sup> See: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/05/republicans-seem-more-susceptible-to-fake-news-than-democrats-but-liberals-dont-feel-too-comfy-yet/>; <https://www.colorado.edu/today/2020/06/17/who-shares-most-fake-news-new-study-sheds-light>



\*

ALEKSY  
PRZYBYLSKI

Currently works as a financial analyst. The co-author of comic books about Kapitalis. A blogger at Kulturozofia.pl



# Access to Information in Times of Crisis



\*  
TANJA  
PORČNIK

**T**he coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is a global health crisis that inevitably spills into other areas of people's lives. In responding to the exigencies of the coronavirus pandemic, governments around the world have made vast and unprecedented decisions to combat the spread of the virus and protect lives. These state emergency measures, which are, on the one hand, vital to public health and lives, on the other hand, impact not only the economic performance of countries but also, in many ways, present a threat to human rights and freedoms.

In these extraordinary circumstances, governments need to exercise prudence in the introduction of emergency measures, weighing carefully what limitations to impose on human rights and freedoms.

This article will not explore the question of lawfulness, legitimacy, or necessity of state emergency containment measures, such as lockdown or curfew, international border closure, domestic travel restrictions, school and kindergarten closures, limits on public gatherings and other human contacts during a public crisis that severely threatens the lives of the population. It does, however, explore the state of freedom of expression through a lens of access to information during the ongoing global public health emergency. In such times, more than ever, people need and expect to be timely, accurately, and comprehensively informed about the pandemic and the state of the healthcare system, as well as not be prevented from fully scrutinizing the government's emergency measures in response to the pandemic. Thus, freedom of expression directly needs an additional layer of protection.

Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic should not be used by state authorities as a pretext for limiting freedom of expression,

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including suspension of the right to information and attacks on media freedom. In this endeavor, it is of particular importance for governments to accept and uphold the crucial role of independent media having access to first-hand information. Such a stance is paramount to keeping the public timely and factually informed about an evolving pandemic and its risk to people's safety, as well as to prevent general panic and fostering people's understanding for and cooperation with a necessary restriction on their rights and freedoms.

## COVID-19: A PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY

Since the end of 2019, people around the world are facing exceptional circumstances. Like in any other public crisis, such as wars, terrorist attacks, natural and human-





## THE PUBLIC'S ACCESS TO OFFICIAL INFORMATION SHOULD FOLLOW THE EXISTING PRINCIPLES OUTLINED IN THE EUROPEAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS' CASE LAW

made disasters, the coronavirus pandemic is severely threatening people's lives.

In a time of a pandemic, it is the government's responsibility not just to secure their right to life, but also to protect the rest of their rights and freedoms. Governments, while combating a health crisis and protecting lives, need to keep in mind that the threat is the COVID-19 virus, not the citizens.

### ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Access to information, along with the freedom of expression and freedom of the press, is a critical pillar of liberal democracy. Unhindered access to information for the citizens, coupled with independent, free media, is a precondition for open, transparent, and responsible government during a crisis such as the one we are all currently facing.

Access to information encloses freedom to seek and receive information. The former is defined as freedom to access information in various forms, through different channels, and from local and foreign sources. One of the sources is the internet, which plays a crucial role in allowing people to access information and remain informed during a pandemic. As the #KeepItOn campaign<sup>1</sup> stresses, access to the internet and social media platforms enables people to access information and safety protocols being rolled out by the World Health Organization and other health experts aimed at containing the COVID-19 virus<sup>2</sup>. Blocking access to these tools puts lives in danger.

As the *Human Freedom Index 2019*<sup>3</sup> documents, more than half of countries analyzed worldwide do not restrict citizen's freedom to seek information. Among those 71 countries with a perfect score of 10 are 32 European countries. Seven European countries, however, do impose restrictions: Croatia (9.2), North Macedonia (9.2), Poland (9.2), Moldova (7.5), Ukraine (7.5), Russia (6.7), and Belarus (5.8) [See: Figure 1].

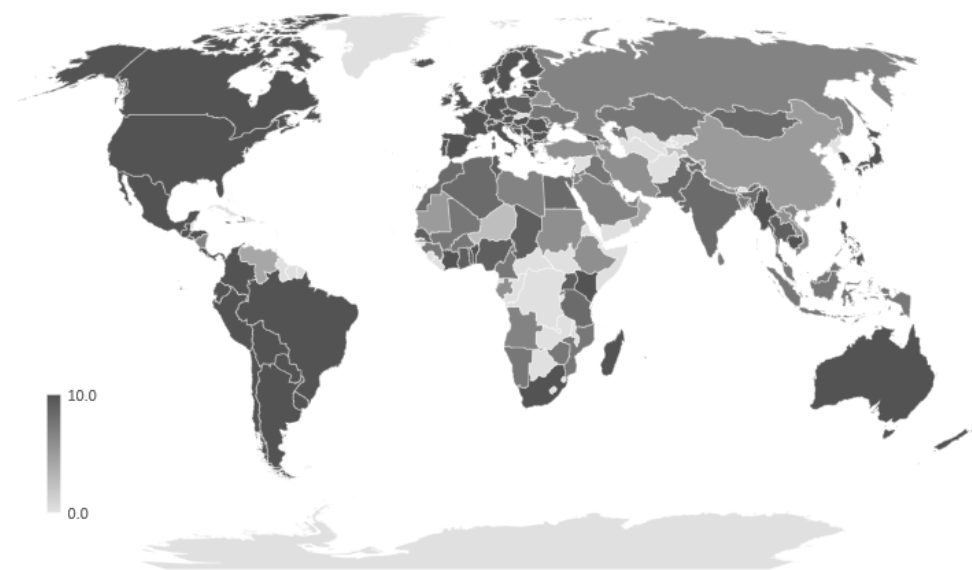
On the other hand, freedom to receive information is defined as freedom to access data held by national government that is information of public nature. The Council of Europe's *Convention on Access to Official Documents* ("The Tromsø Convention") underlines that exercise of a right to

<sup>1</sup> The #KeepItOn campaign, convened by Access Now, consists of 210 organizations from 75 countries that are united in their effort to end Internet shutdowns. The campaign launched at RightsCon Silicon Valley in 2016. See [www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/02/KeepItOn-2019-report-1.pdf](http://www.accessnow.org/cms/assets/uploads/2020/02/KeepItOn-2019-report-1.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [www.accessnow.org/keepiton/](http://www.accessnow.org/keepiton/)

<sup>3</sup> The Human Freedom Index includes three indicators measuring freedom to seek information for 136 countries: i) access to cable/satellite, ii) access to foreign newspapers, and iii) state control over internet access. See: [www.visio-institut.org/index-clovekove-svobode-2019/](http://www.visio-institut.org/index-clovekove-svobode-2019/)

Figure 1. Freedom to Seek Information



Source: [www.visio-institut.org/index-clovekove-svobode-2019/](http://www.visio-institut.org/index-clovekove-svobode-2019/)

access documents held by a government does not only provide a source of information for the public. It also indirectly assists the public to form an informed opinion on the state of government affairs, as well as fosters the integrity, efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability of public authorities. Therefore, the official documents and other government materials are, in principle, public and can be withheld subject only to the protection of other rights and legitimate interests<sup>4</sup>. To protect public health, restrictions on access to official information must be exceptional and proportionate. As such, the public's access to official information should follow the existing principles outlined in the European Court of Human Rights' case law.

<sup>4</sup> Council of Europe (2009) *Convention on Access to Official Documents*, Tromsø, June 18. Available [online]: <https://www.coe.int/fr/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680084826>

Tracking the strength of the legal guarantee and protection of the right to public information in 128 countries globally, the *Right to Information (RTI) Rating*<sup>5</sup> found that among the top 10 are four European countries: Serbia (3<sup>rd</sup> place), Slovenia (5<sup>th</sup>), Albania (6<sup>th</sup>), and Croatia (8<sup>th</sup>). Significantly, none of the Western countries ranks even in the top 25, although eight rank in the bottom 25. Further, four European countries rank among the bottom 10: Austria (128<sup>th</sup>), Liechtenstein (126<sup>th</sup>), Monaco (125<sup>th</sup>), and Germany (120<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>5</sup> The Access Info Europe and the Centre for Law and Democracy's *Right to Information (RTI) Rating* measures the strength of the legal guarantee and protection of the right to information in 128 countries globally with 61 distinct indicators divided into seven categories: Right of Access (3 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.04), Scope (9 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.20), Requesting Procedure (15 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.20), Exceptions & Refusals (8 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.20), Appeals (14 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.20), Sanctions & Protections (4 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.05), and Promotional Measures (8 indicators; a cumulative weight of 0.10). See: <https://www.rti-rating.org/>

Table 1: Freedom to receive information held by national governments

RTI CATEGORY		SERBIA	SLOVENIA	GERMANY	MONACO	LIECHTEN-STEIN	AUSTRIA
		3 <sup>rd</sup> place	5 <sup>th</sup> place	120 <sup>th</sup> place	125 <sup>th</sup> place	126 <sup>th</sup> place	127 <sup>th</sup> place
Right of access	6	5	3	0	1	0	2
Scope	30	30	30	19	13	17	14
Requesting procedures	30	22	26	7	5	10	8
Exceptions & refusal	30	26	25	11	15	5	2
Appeals	30	29	28	15	9	1	6
Sanctions & protections	8	7	4	0	0	0	1
Promotional measures	16	16	13	2	0	4	0
Total	150	135	129	54	43	37	33

Source: Right to Information Rating

Comparing RTI scores for the four bottom European countries (Austria, Liechtenstein, Monaco, and Germany) with those for top two countries (Serbia and Slovenia), it is revealed that RTI laws in the former countries provide a weaker legal guarantee and protection of the right to information in all seven analyzed categories [See: Table 1].

The findings of the *RTI Rating* analyzed on a country level also reveal that, in general, more recent RTI laws provide better legal guarantee and protection of the right to information, which is recorded in higher RTI scores. As an example, Liechtenstein scores 37 out of 150 points with Information Act passed in 1999 and Austria scores 33 points with Duty to Grant Information Act from 1987 (last modified in 1998). Consequently, the quality of RTI legislation, de-

fined as a *protection of access to information*, has been on a global level improving steadily since 2000, which is reflected in the average RTI score of laws adopted in each five-year period being stronger than the previous five-year period. Accordingly, today a considerable number of countries in all regions of the world have legislation guaranteeing and protecting the right to information.

### ACCESS TO (TIMELY, FACTUAL, ACCURATE, AND COMPREHENSIVE) INFORMATION DURING CRISIS

During a health crisis, more than ever, it is vital that the right to access information held by national governments is protected.

First, people need and expect to be informed about the dimensions and implications of

Table 2: Temporarily altered or suspended the right to access information in the time of COVID-19

DATE	COUNTRY	MEASURE
March 14, 2020	Spain	Based on the Royal Decree 463/2020 of March 14, 2020, declaring the state of emergency, the Council of Transparency and Good Governance, which is the RTI oversight body, has issued a notice that processing of cases is postponed, however, that they will continue to work to meet the requests of citizens. <sup>6</sup>
March 16, 2020	Romania	The presidential decree of March 16, 2020, enacted the state of emergency and provided that the deadline for processing and responding to RTI requests is doubled during the crisis (20 days instead of 10 days and 48 hours instead of 24 hours for requests from journalists). <sup>7</sup>
March 17, 2020	Italy	Under Decree-Law No. 18/2020, of March 17, 2020, includes a provision of the suspension of all activities related to access to information requests are suspended unless they are urgent and cannot be postponed. Requests for information about the pandemic and health emergency are excluded from the suspension. <sup>8</sup>
March 24, 2020	Serbia	The Serbian government on March 24, 2020, with a decree extended deadlines for state institutions to respond to the right to information requests, providing them up to 30 days after the state of emergency is lifted to respond. <sup>9</sup>
March 25, 2020	France	An Ordinance dated March 25, 2020, suspended all statutory time limits, which expire starting on the March 12, 2020, until one month after the date on which the state of emergency ends. <sup>10</sup>
March 31, 2020	Poland	The package of amendments responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, so-called the "anti-crisis shield", suspended several administrative proceeding deadlines, which could be the legal basis for the suspension of the right to information timelines <sup>11</sup> . On May 16, 2020, Poland passed the Anti-Crisis Shield 3.0 definition that any administrative and procedural time limits suspended under previous COVID-19 legislation would begin to run seven days following the Act's entry into force. <sup>12</sup>
May 4, 2020	Hungary	Under Decree No. 179/2020, issued on May 4, 2020, requests for information cannot be submitted in-person or orally, and the period for responding to these requests is extended from 15 days to 45 days, which may be again extended once for another 45 days. <sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> El Consejo de Transparencia y Buen Gobierno (2020) *Aviso sobre la actividad del Consejo*. Available [online]: [https://www.consejodetransparencia.es/ct\\_Home/comunicacion/actualidadnoticias/hemeroteca/2020/Primer-semester/20200313.html](https://www.consejodetransparencia.es/ct_Home/comunicacion/actualidadnoticias/hemeroteca/2020/Primer-semester/20200313.html) [in Spanish]

<sup>7</sup> President of Romania (2020) Decret no. 195 of March 16, 2020. Available [online]: <http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/223831> [in Romanian]

<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Public Administration (2020) *Press Release from the Civil Service Department*. Available [online]: <http://www.fun-zioneubblica.gov.it/articolo/dipartimento/27-03-2020/comunicato> [in Italian]

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.poverenik.rs/sr-yu/>

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, C. (2020) *FOI Requests Under Threat During Coronavirus Crisis*. Available [online]: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000041755644>

<sup>11</sup> Kassel, T., J. Tokarski, M. Woźniak, and G. Kuś (2020) *COVID-19. The Anti-Crisis Shield Law Published*. Available [online]: <https://studio.pwc.pl/aktualnosci/english/insights/measures-in-order-to-protect-individuals-and-companies-facing-the-covid-19>

<sup>12</sup> KPMG (2020) *Suspension of Procedural Deadlines During the COVID-19 Pandemic Not Always Used in Practice*. Available [online]: <https://home.kpmg/pl/en/home/insights/2020/06/frontiers-in-tax-suspension-of-procedural-deadlines-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-not-always-used-in-practice.html>

<sup>13</sup> Makszimov, V. (2020), *Hungarian Government Suspends EU Data Protection Rights*. Available [online]: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/news/hungarian-government-suspends-eu-data-protection-rights/>

the crisis, along with the government's policies and measures to combat the spread of the virus and protect lives.

Second, as people are informed of how they can engage in a discussion on, and later participate in, the execution of government's measures to combat the virus, the right to access information has the potential to play a major role in ensuring a successful response to the crisis through prevention of general panic and people's understanding of, and cooperation with, these measures.

Third, the right to access information may be a powerful mechanism for enforcing the government's accountability during the crisis. During such times, when internal checks and balances on institutional powers are weakened, and government decisions are made at extraordinary speed, it is imperative that media, professional journalists, medical professionals, civil society activists, and members of the general public are not limited in the exercise of their freedom of expression and information to scrutinize the emergency measures.

### STATE LIMITATIONS ON THE FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

International human rights law, as defined in the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, presents three conditions for measures that carry state derogation of the right of expression and information<sup>14</sup>. Legal restrictions on the freedom of information a) must be provided by law, b) must have a legitimate interest set out in international law: the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, public health, or public morals; and c) must be necessary.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations, *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

In the time of a national crisis, emergency measures imposed to protect against threats to the life of the citizens may derogate certain human rights and freedoms<sup>15</sup>. The right to information is one of those rights that under international law may be restricted. In such times, an emergency measure that restricts freedom of expression needs to meet four conditions: i) only be taken to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation; ii) not be inconsistent with other obligations under international law; iii) be time-limited, and iv) not discriminate<sup>16</sup>.

Furthermore, when it comes to the European states, they may not introduce any restrictions beyond the limitations granted by Article 10 of the *European Convention on Human Rights*, guaranteeing that *"[e]veryone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers"*<sup>17</sup>.

Emergency is not a blank check empowering the government to act outside of the frame of the law. Therefore, measures that restrict the right to freedom of information simply must fall within the rule of law. Further, they should be the least restrictive and intrusive actions required, and should be proportionate. If the government is consumed in efforts to deal with the crisis and, in turn, is unable to deal with RTI requests that are not crisis-related, such

<sup>15</sup> No derogation is permitted from the right to life and other certain specific rights.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations, *COVID-19 and Human Rights. We are all in this together*, [https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/sites/www.un.org.victimsofterrorism/files/un\\_-\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_covid\\_april\\_2020.pdf](https://www.un.org/victimsofterrorism/sites/www.un.org.victimsofterrorism/files/un_-_human_rights_and_covid_april_2020.pdf), p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Council of Europe, *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, [https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Convention_ENG.pdf)



## THE RIGHT TO ACCESS INFORMATION MAY BE A POWERFUL MECHANISM FOR ENFORCING THE GOVERNMENT'S ACCOUNTABILITY DURING THE CRISIS

restriction may be legitimate (an example is Mexico<sup>18</sup>). However, if the government is taking advantage of the situation to push back against the right to information, this is not legitimate.

Blanket measures tend to be illegitimate, as not all requests are of equal importance, and not all public bodies are equally immersed in the crisis. Hence, actions should be limited to the parts of government that are not impacted by the crisis, while RTI requests related to the government's accountability should not be denied or slowed down during such times<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Ortiz, A. (2020) *Inai suspende plazos para atención de solicitudes de información por coronavirus*, El Universal. Available [online]: <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/politica/inai-suspende-plazos-para-atencion-de-informacion-por-coronavirus>

<sup>19</sup> <https://gfmd.info/right-to-information-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>

### RESTRICTIONS ON THE RIGHT TO ACCESS INFORMATION IN THE EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, several EU member states decided to restrict the right to information [See: Table 2]. It is imperative that these measures are reversed as soon as the health emergency ends, as this is when the conditions used to justify the restrictions are no longer valid.

### MEDIA FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

Media and professional journalists play a key role in upholding freedom of information by providing the public with timely, accurate, and reliable news about the development of the pandemic, the state of healthcare accessibility, and the government emergency measures imposed to contain a pandemic.

In a time of great public health concern, it is of paramount importance for government, as well as everyone else in the society, to embrace the crucial role of independent media in keeping the public informed about an evolving global pandemic, its risk to people's safety, and measures taken by the government in its response<sup>20</sup>.

Responsibility of media professionals – those engaged in the gathering, handling, and dissemination of information – is to adhere, especially in the times of crisis, to the highest professional and ethical standards in delivering timely, factual, accurate, and comprehensive information to the public. Professional reporting on the crisis is not

<sup>20</sup> Not just media and professional journalists, medical professionals, civil society activists, and citizens play a crucial role in scrutinizing the government's emergency measures. Protection of their right to expression and information is particularly important during the crisis when internal checks and oversight on institutional powers are weakened, or even non-existent.

only critical in countering the public panic and fostering people's understanding of and cooperation with necessary emergency restrictions, but also can be a constructive partner in countering rumors and disinformation about the pandemic.

Media organizations and journalists should give priority to authoritative sources on the COVID-19 pandemic, report without bias, and refrain from publishing (and thus amplifying) unverified stories. In their commitment to transparency, professional journalists should proactively tackle rumors, misinformation, and disinformation by state or non-state actors<sup>21</sup>, which are likely to cause harm to health safety, sow confusion among the public, and foster distrust in government's emergency measures. By relying on news and information from trusted sources, notably those communicated by public health authorities, and verifying information from non-official sources before publishing it, media can be a powerful force in pushing back against falsehoods<sup>22</sup>.

Finally, media organizations and journalists have one additional critical role to play in a crisis like the current COVID-19 pandemic. Namely, it is up to them to give a voice to relevant stakeholders such as governmental bodies, regulatory authorities, medical professionals, and non-governmental organizations with relevant information about the crisis, as well as provide a platform for them to publicly exchange views on the topic, no matter if they agree or disagree with the government's positions or measures. Such efforts on the part of the media organizations would not only yield a more

<sup>21</sup> For WHO's COVID-19 mythbusters, see: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters>

<sup>22</sup> ARTICLE 19, *Viral Lies: Misinformation and the Coronavirus*, p. 16. Available [online]: <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Coronavirus-final.pdf>

## “ EMERGENCY IS NOT A BLANK CHECK EMPOWERING THE GOVERNMENT TO ACT OUTSIDE OF THE FRAME OF THE LAW

informed and empowered population, but also assist governments in surmounting the exceptional challenges of the day.

### GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSIBILITY

At any time, not just during the crisis, the government needs to commit to the transparency of its decision-making and public disclosure of official documents to encourage informed participation by the public in matters of general interest.

During a public health emergency, the government should communicate timely and comprehensive information relating to the virus and its circulation, risks of contamination, number of illnesses, and deaths. Likewise, government decisions and emergency measures to combat a health crisis and protect lives, which must be temporary, proportional, and aimed at protecting people, should be communicated regularly and comprehensively through the Internet, the media, and other information channels.

The government needs to approach the emergency situation strategically, deciding

who is responsible for such communication and giving priority to freedom of information requests about COVID-19 preventative measures when responding to the public's inquiry.

In these extraordinary times, governments need to keep in mind that the threat is the COVID-19 virus, not the citizens. Indeed, in setting up the Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund or so-called PM Cares Fund to fight COVID-19<sup>23</sup> the Indian Prime Minister Modi and his government have forgotten that they have an obligation to their citizens to increase—rather than restrict—access to information during the crisis. The same type of amnesia was detected in Albania, where the government is disregarding requests to disclose information on the funds spent for the procurements approved during the pandemic<sup>24</sup>. Likewise, Serbian authorities hid the number of deaths and infections from coronavirus and publicly announced multiple-times lower numbers ahead of the June 21 parliamentary, provincial, and local elections<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, the Turkish Ministry of Justice hid the number of COVID-19 patients in prisons<sup>26</sup>. Finally, the Brazilian Federal Government is already being brought at the Inter-

<sup>23</sup> BBC News (30. June 2020), *Coronavirus: Secrecy surrounds India PM Narendra Modi's '\$1bn' Covid-19 fund*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-53151308>

<sup>24</sup> Alice Taylor, *Albanian Government Accused of Ignoring Freedom of Information Requests about COVID-19 Pandemic*, Exit News, 21. July 2020, <https://exit.al/en/2020/07/21/albanian-government-accused-of-ignoring-freedom-of-information-requests-about-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>25</sup> Sandra Maksimović, *Serbian CSOs and media demand access to official COVID-19 information*, 22. July 2020, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/22/serbian-csos-and-media-demand-access-to-official-covid-19-information/>

<sup>26</sup> Stockholm Center for Freedom, *CHP deputy: COVID-19 statistics for prisons not announced for 48 days*, 6. August 2020, <https://stockholmcf.org/chp-deputy-covid-19-statistics-for-prisons-not-announced-for-48-days/>

American Commission on Human Rights to answer charges of the systematic violation of access to information and transparency during the COVID-19 crisis<sup>27</sup>.

No matter how much the government desires to control public narratives about the crisis, government communication cannot be the only information channel about the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese government's suppression of information and control of the narratives surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan, in Hubei province, is an evidence of the danger of withholding information from the public, stage-managing state media reporting, under-reporting the number of infections, detaining whistleblowers, and harassing individuals sharing information about the disease<sup>28</sup>. The measures taken by the Chinese government have damaged the response to the outbreak<sup>29</sup>, which contributed to the spread of the epidemic worldwide in 2020.

Taking a lesson from the Chinese failure, many governments, especially those in liberal democracies, like New Zealand and South Korea, understood the importance of embracing the freedom of expression and information when developing policies and responses to the outbreak. After all, there can hardly be a lawful justification for (ex ante) censorship of certain topics, blocking of access to online platforms, closing off digital spaces, engaging in cyber-police, online surveillance, or even arrests,

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.article19.org/resources/brazil-civil-society-charges-government-at-iachr-for-violating-access-to-information-and-transparency-during-coronavirus-crisis/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/01/30/china-respect-rights-coronavirus-response>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/01/early-mistakes-state-secrecy-china-likely-allowed-coronavirus-spread-farther-faster/>



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## UPHOLDING INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY IS THE FIRST AND PRIME RESPONSIBILITY OF A GOVERNMENT IN A LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

detentions<sup>30</sup>, and prosecution of individuals exercising their freedom of expression or other freedoms under the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>31</sup>.

Likewise, governments should not limit media freedom by making attempts on media independence, engage in the closure of media outlets, enhanced surveillance measures compromising the confidentiality of journalistic first-hand sources of information, limit movement for media professionals accredited by their media organizations, and other forms of interference. The bottom line is that governments need to be accountable to the people, even when they

are protecting their lives from a pandemic or any other threat. On the other hand, it is within the government's power to impose proportionate measures, subject to regular oversight, to combat the malevolent spreading of disinformation. The latter may be tackled with governmental information campaigns and, if needed, with (*ex post*) targeted, proportional sanctions. Finally, the government's full commitment not just to access to information, but also to freedom of the press, goes a long way in combating disinformation.

Rather than information control or even information blackout and attacks on freedom of the press, which some governments might be tempted to pursue during a pandemic, upholding individual liberty is the first and prime responsibility of a government in a liberal democracy. In this endeavor, it is of particular importance for governments to be open and transparent in their decision-making, as well as willing to listen to and address critique. In doing that, they need to accept and uphold the crucial role of independent media having access to first-hand information, which is paramount to keeping the public timely and factually informed about an evolving pandemic and its risk to people's safety.

Freedom of expression and information, along with media freedom, are the core principles underlying any liberal democracy, no matter if its society is facing times of a crisis or not. When the protection of these human rights and freedoms does not directly threaten the right to life and safety, the governments should not use the crisis as a pretext for their limitation or denial. Therefore, legally guaranteeing and securing the right to information means that governments are not only going to allow for the surmount of this great challenge currently facing countries globally, but will also uphold the foundation of liberal democracy.

<sup>30</sup> In countries including Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Egypt, and Venezuela, people have been arrested and detained for expressing their opinion about Covid-19 on social media. See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/02/submission-inquiry-implications-covid-19-pandemic-australias-foreign-affairs>

<sup>31</sup> Council of Europe, *Respecting democracy, rule of law and human rights in the framework of the COVID-19 sanitary crisis. A toolkit for member states*, <https://rm.coe.int/sg-inf-2020-11-respecting-democracy-rule-of-law-and-human-rights-in-th/16809e1f40>, p. 7.

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## WHEN THE PROTECTION OF THESE RIGHTS AND FREEDOMS DOES NOT DIRECTLY THREATEN THE RIGHT TO LIFE AND SAFETY, THE GOVERNMENTS SHOULD NOT USE THE CRISIS AS A PRETEXT FOR THEIR LIMITATION OR DENIAL

COVID-19 pandemic is a threat to a free society. Such state measures carry specific and immense perils for the very foundations of liberal democracy. Hence, governments should close to never engage in censorship of certain topics, closure of media outlets, blocking of access to online platforms, closing off digital spaces, cyber-policing, online surveillance, or even arrests, detentions, and prosecution of individuals exercising their freedom of, including human rights defenders, healthcare workers, and journalists.

Rather than using the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext for limiting the right to information, state authorities should embrace the freedom of expression and information to respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. That way, freedom of expression and information will not be the first casualty of the crisis, but rather the one that gets an additional layer of protection during it.

### CONCLUSIONS

In these extraordinary circumstances, people need and expect from the government to be timely, accurately, and comprehensively informed about the pandemic and the state of the healthcare system, as well as not be prevented from fully scrutinizing the government's emergency measures in response to it.

To control public narrative, governments' strides to quell whistleblowing, dissent, or criticism under the exigencies of the

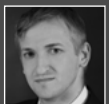


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TANJA  
PORČNIK

President of the Visio Institute. She is the co-author of *The Human Freedom Index*

# How Pro-Kremlin Disinformation Exploits Minority-Related Conflicts Between Ukraine and Its Neighbors



\* PATRIK SZICHERLE



\* DORKA TAKÁCSY



\* DOMINIK ISTRATE

Russian active measures, particularly the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns, generally focus on exploiting existing faultlines within and between societies. Throughout history, countries, regions, and settlements in Central and Eastern Europe went through several changes in allegiance or borders, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, several nations ended up with a considerable number of ethnic minorities from neighboring countries. The administrations of the "home" nations of these minorities, naturally, seek to protect them from real or perceived

threats and secure the legal protection of their rights. These efforts are often interpreted by host nations as foreign interference in their affairs.

Moreover, in host nations, local minorities are often the targets of legal initiatives seeking to prove the nationalist credentials of political forces, often resulting in restricting minority rights. One example of such an attempt is Romanian President Klaus Iohannis's claim that the opposition would "give Transylvania to Hungarians"<sup>1</sup>. These factors often led to open conflict between the host and home countries, offering Moscow an opportunity to advance its own agenda by focusing on sowing discord in the international community.

Ever since tensions started to escalate between Moscow and Kyiv over the Maidan Revolution in early 2014, Russia's leadership has been actively courting far-right organizations and extremist figures in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), prompting them to pay more attention to geopolitical issues, such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. Such far-right groups often express revisionist views, seeking to revert post-World War I territorial developments. Extremist groups from Ukraine and its neighbors, pro-Kremlin NGOs and intense disinformation campaigns have been used by Moscow to provoke ethnic conflicts between the Ukrainian majority and minorities living in the country. Russia is courting organizations whose goals are in line with the Kremlin's strategy of the destabilization of the CEE region via direct influence (e.g. political and business ties) and indirect action (e.g. spreading misleading narratives via official Russian media).

” IN HOST NATIONS, LOCAL MINORITIES ARE OFTEN THE TARGETS OF LEGAL INITIATIVES SEEKING TO PROVE THE NATIONALIST CREDENTIALS OF POLITICAL FORCES, OFTEN RESULTING IN RESTRICTING MINORITY RIGHTS

<sup>1</sup> Barberá, M.G. (2020) *Romanian Opposition 'Giving' Transylvania to Hungarians*, *President Claims*. Available [online]: <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/29/romanian-opposition-giving-transylvania-to-hungarians-president-claims/>

The NGOs, extremist groups, individuals approached by Russia, in turn help amplify the Kremlin's messages and attempts to stir up intra-state and interstate conflicts<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, Russia has also been working on exploiting tensions between the government of Ukraine and those of neighboring nations, especially Hungary and Poland, which Kyiv itself fueled by approving a highly controversial education bill in 2017 and the corresponding language bill in 2019 that can potentially restrict minority language rights. One of the main instruments in these efforts of sowing discord, is using disinformation to turn Ukrainian public opinion against minorities living in the country.

#### VLADIMIR PUTIN AND MINORITY CARDS

The expansionist foreign policy of Russian President Vladimir Putin began to take shape in 2008 when the Russian army invaded South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with the two Georgian breakaway territories being controlled by Moscow ever since. Modern-day Russian aggression became even more visible to Europeans after covert Russian forces annexed the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014 and Russia started providing military support to pro-Russian rebels in the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Although Russian efforts to weaken Ukraine and prevent its Euro-Atlantic integration can be considered hard power tools, the Kremlin is using its entire arsenal of hybrid warfare to achieve its aims, including economic pressure, cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns. The main channels of such efforts are official pro-Kremlin media, which spread narratives controlled completely by the Putin administration. These messages then frequently make their way into pro-Kremlin portals run by devout, voluntary followers of Moscow

or click bait sites, as well as extremist blogs, forums, and so on. Pro-Kremlin actors in Russia, Ukraine and other countries of the CEE region have also mounted significant disinformation campaigns against the Ukrainian leadership<sup>3</sup>.

Experiences of the past six years suggest that a considerable proportion of these campaigns were aimed at minority-related issues. Already in 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin justified the annexation of Crimea, among other reasons, by the potential infringements on the minority rights of ethnic Russians that the new, "banderist" regime of Ukraine might implement<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, it is unsurprising that Moscow and its media empire never forgets to report on alleged and real anti-minority activities in Ukraine. Consequently, several of these efforts were aimed at igniting tensions between Ukraine and its neighbors by exploiting existing political conflicts between Ukrainians and ethnic communities living in the country; exaggerating lower-scale political issues or creating the appearance of such conflicts.

In particular, two pieces of Ukrainian legislation and their consequences gave room for minority-related disinformation targeting Ukraine:

- On September 5, 2017, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukraine's parliament) approved an education bill, abolishing the right of national minorities to receive education in their mother tongue from the 5<sup>th</sup> grade of public education onward

<sup>3</sup> Gigitashvili, G. and R. Osadchuk (2020) *Backlash Against the Controversial Peace Deal Spun On Ukrainian and Russian Media*. Available [online]: <https://neweast-erneurope.eu/2020/01/13/backlash-against-the-controversial-peace-deal-spun-on-ukrainian-and-russian-media/>

<sup>4</sup> President of Russia (2014) Address by President of the Russian Federation. Available [online]: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

## “IT IS UNSURPRISING THAT MOSCOW AND ITS MEDIA EMPIRE NEVER FORGETS TO REPORT ON ALLEGED AND REAL ANTI-MINORITY ACTIVITIES IN UKRAINE

to secondary school studies and higher education<sup>5</sup>. An amendment to the aforementioned legislation approved in January 2020 requires that the transfer from education in minority languages to the Ukrainian language should gradually<sup>6</sup> take place for minorities speaking EU languages<sup>7</sup>;

<sup>5</sup> Information Department of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine Secretariat (2017) *Ukraine's Law 'On Education' out Now*. Available [online]: <https://www.rada.gov.ua/en/news/News/149413.html>

<sup>6</sup> According to the law, minorities speaking official EU languages will be educated in their mother tongue until grade 4. From grade 5, they would learn 20% of their subjects in Ukrainian and this proportion will reach 40% by grade 9. Then, in grades 10-12, it will reach 60%. See: <https://www.valaszonline.hu/2020/02/05/ukrajna-oktatasi-torveny-nyelvtorveny-karpatalja-szabalyozas/> [in Hungarian]

<sup>7</sup> Unian (2020) *Ukraine's Parliament Passes Bill on Secondary Education*. Available [online]: <https://www.unian.info/politics/10833062-ukraine-s-parliament-passes-bill-on-secondary-education.html>

- On April 25, 2019, Ukrainian MPs voted to approve a new countrywide law on the use of the Ukrainian language, granting Ukrainian language a new special status while essentially restricting the use of minority languages everywhere except during private conversations and religious ceremonies<sup>8</sup>. Former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, who was among the key supporters of the bill, signed it into law only five days before his predecessor, incumbent President Volodymyr Zelensky, was inaugurated as head of state;
- both the education and language laws were aimed at strengthening Ukraine's national identity in the wake of Russia's actions in the Donbas, and to counter pro-Kremlin propaganda. An estimated 17% of Ukraine's population are Russians; however, the use of the Russian language – due to the country's Soviet roots – is much more significant;
- besides being constantly criticized by Russia, the new laws also came under scrutiny from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Poland, as ethnic minorities speaking their languages live throughout Ukraine in considerable numbers<sup>9</sup>.

#### HUNGARIANS BECOME THE MAIN TARGET

Almost immediately after the controversial education law was approved by the Ukrainian parliament, the Hungarian government led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán became

<sup>8</sup> Grigoryan, A. (2019) *Ukraine: Legislature Adopts Language Law*. Available [online]: <https://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/ukraine-legislature-adopts-language-law/>

<sup>9</sup> UK Home Office (2019) *Country Policy and Information Note Ukraine: Minority Groups*. Available [online]: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/812080/Ukraine\\_-\\_Minority\\_Groups\\_-\\_CPIN\\_-\\_v2.0\\_June\\_2019.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812080/Ukraine_-_Minority_Groups_-_CPIN_-_v2.0_June_2019.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the harshest critic of the Ukrainian legislation. Hungary later announced that it would block Ukraine's path towards NATO membership<sup>10</sup> and initiated a review of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement<sup>11</sup>. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov used the Hungarian government's response as evidence that the education law is "ill-conceived and does not meet European standards"<sup>12</sup>. Hungary's decision was also praised by Russian propaganda channels to discredit the Poroshenko administration for failing to deliver on its main foreign policy priority<sup>13</sup>, that is, joining the Western alliance system<sup>14</sup>.

Disinformation is also being used to increase bilateral tensions between the two countries along the minority row, as well as between the Hungarian and Ukrainian ethnic groups within Ukraine. For instance, Hungarian pro-Kremlin<sup>15</sup> and government-controlled<sup>16</sup> me-

dia, as the government<sup>17</sup> itself, were heavily pushing the narrative that Ukraine's decision to redeploy troops to Transcarpathia constituted a threat to the local minority population<sup>18</sup>, even though the official Ukrainian justification for it was to protect the locals from increasingly frequent provocations. It was, in fact, earlier provocations by actors close to Russia that posed a security threat to Hungarians in the region.

The headquarters of the Cultural Alliance of Hungarians in Subcarpathia (KMKSZ), the primary organization advocating for ethnic Hungarians in Ukraine, was attacked in Uzhhorod twice in early 2018<sup>19</sup>. According to the Polish and Ukrainian authorities, the two attacks were committed by pro-Russian members of the Polish extremist Falanga group and perpetrators arriving from Russian-occupied Transnistria, respectively<sup>20</sup>. The first attack was allegedly financed by Manuel Ochsenreiter, a German far-right, pro-Russian journalist and the former consultant for an AfD MP<sup>21</sup>. Regardless of this evidence, Hungarian Foreign Minister

Péter Szijjártó did no more than summon the Ukrainian ambassador to Hungary over the attacks<sup>22</sup>.

These reactions indicate that the official Hungarian narrative is focusing on only one side of the story – existing problems in Ukraine, such as the rise of nationalism – but completely disregards the other side of it, namely Russia's role in encouraging and exploiting these issues via disinformation and intelligence methods, presumably to avoid damaging the flourishing bilateral ties between Budapest and Moscow.

### THE CASE OF MIKLÓS KEVEHÁZY

The statements and decisions of the Hungarian government regarding Ukraine and bilateral tensions between Budapest and Kyiv are immensely useful for Russian disinformation efforts. The Kremlin cares little about the safety of the Hungarian community in Ukraine and uses their situation to put it in parallel with the allegedly grave predicament of ethnic Russians, which is strongly interconnected with Russia's aim for advancing its foreign policy priorities.

Relations between Hungary and Ukraine were again corrupted in September 2018, shortly after a video in which ethnic Hungarians in northwestern Ukraine took a naturalization oath and received their second, Hungarian citizenship, went viral. Responding to the event, then Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin decided to expel a Hungarian consul based in Berehove, giving way to a reciprocal response from Budapest and months of bilateral diplomatic spats.

”THE OFFICIAL HUNGARIAN NARRATIVE IS FOCUSING ON ONLY ONE SIDE OF THE STORY – EXISTING PROBLEMS IN UKRAINE, SUCH AS THE RISE OF NATIONALISM – BUT COMPLETELY DISREGARDS THE OTHER SIDE OF IT, NAMELY RUSSIA'S ROLE IN ENCOURAGING AND EXPLOITING THESE ISSUES VIA DISINFORMATION AND INTELLIGENCE METHODS

<sup>10</sup> Krekó, P. and P. Szicherle (2018) *Why Is Hungary Blocking Ukraine's Western Integration?* Available [online]: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-is-hungary-blocking-ukraine-s-western-integration/>

<sup>11</sup> *Daily News Hungary* (2017) "Hungary to Initiate Review of EU-Ukraine Association Agreement," Available [online]: <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-initiate-review-eu-ukraine-association-agreement/>

<sup>12</sup> TASS (2019) *Hungary's Response to Ukraine's Education Law Indicates It Is Ill-Considered – Kremlin*. Available [online]: <https://tass.com/politics/969875>

<sup>13</sup> *Sputnik International* (2018) "Not on My Watch: Hungary Vetoes NATO-Ukraine Summit - Sputnik International" Available [online]: <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201710291058630471-hungary-vetoes-nato-ukraine-summit/>

<sup>14</sup> RT (2019) *Budapest Vetoes Ukraine-NATO Summit, Says Kiev's New Law a 'Stab in the Back'*. Available [online]: <https://www.rt.com/news/408080-hungary-ukraine-nato-bid/>

<sup>15</sup> *News Front Hungary* (2018) "Kljátaja Uhorscsina! – Az istenverte Magyarországot". Available [online]: <https://hu.news-front.info/2018/08/12/kljajaja-uhorscsina-az-istenverte-magyarorszag/> [in Hungarian]

<sup>16</sup> Pallagi, M. (2020) *Aggódnak a magyarok, amiért ukrán katonákat telepítenének Kárpátaljára*. Available [online]: <https://magyarnemzet.hu/archivum/hataron-tul/aggodnak-a-magyarok-amiert-ukran-katonakat-tel-epitenenek-karpataljara-3852937/> [in Hungarian]

<sup>17</sup> *Unian* (2019) "Ukrainian MFA: Deployment of Troops to Zakarpattia Is Ukraine's Sovereign Matter". Available [online]: <https://www.unian.info/politics/10050179-ukrainian-mfa-deployment-of-troops-to-zakarpattia-is-ukraine-s-sovereign-matter.html>

<sup>18</sup> *Orosz Hírek* (2018) "Elhagyta a Donbasszt és Kárpátalja felé indult az ukrán hadsereg legnagyobb egysége," Available [online]: <https://oroszhirek.hu/2018/01/23/elhagyta-donbasszt-es-karpatalja-fele-indult-az-ukran-hadsereg-legnagyobb-egysege/> [in Hungarian]

<sup>19</sup> *Political Capital* (2019) *How Was the Diplomatic Feud Between Ukraine and Hungary Portrayed in and Fuelled by the Russian Disinformation Networks?* Available [online]: [https://politicalcapital.hu/russian\\_sharp\\_power\\_in\\_ee/publications.php?article\\_id=2388](https://politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_ee/publications.php?article_id=2388)

<sup>20</sup> *UAWire* (2020) *Kyiv: Russia Behind the Attacks on the Office of the Union of Hungarians in Uzhhorod*. Available [online]: <https://uawire.org/russian-involvement-seen-in-the-attacks-on-the-office-of-the-union-of-hungarians-in-uzhhorod>

<sup>21</sup> *RFERL* (2020) *Far-Right German Journalist Implicated In Firebombing Of Hungarian Center In Ukraine*. Available [online]: <https://www.rferl.org/a/far-right-german-journalist-implicated-in-firebombing-of-hungarian-center-in-ukraine/29708843.html>

<sup>22</sup> *Daily News Hungary* (2018) "Hungary Summons Ukrainian Ambassador over Attack against Hungarian Cultural Association's Office". Available [online]: <https://dailynewshungary.com/hungary-summons-ukrainian-ambassador-attack-hungarian-cultural-associations-office/>

When tensions between Hungary and Ukraine reached a new low, Miklós Kehézy, a never-before-seen "Hungarian





## THE STATEMENTS AND DECISIONS OF THE HUNGARIAN GOVERNMENT REGARDING UKRAINE AND BILATERAL TENSIONS BETWEEN BUDAPEST AND KYIV ARE IMMENSELY USEFUL FOR RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION EFFORTS

political consultant” appeared on Russian state media to further complicate an already troublesome situation. Despite being entirely unknown to both television viewers and the political scientist community, Keveházy made an eventful entrance on *60 Minutes*, a prime-time political talk show on Rossiya 1, the main Russian public media news channel<sup>23</sup>. While on screen, he had a highly impactful performance and made a number of statements that later became widely cited in Ukrainian media. Interesting enough, Keveházy:

- stated that the Hungarian army – if instructed by the country’s leadership and if Ukraine is fine with it – could reach the city of Lviv, and clean the water there as a part of a UN peacekeeping operation. It is hard to understand why Keveházy would focus on the claim that Hungary would lead a peacekeeping core to Lviv to clean the water; one possibility is that the Hungarian Foreign Ministry frequently advocates for Hungarian expertise on water technology and using it in third world countries<sup>24</sup>. “Hungary announced two months ago that it wants to put things in order in Transcarpathia. Not on their own, but by inviting blue helmets there,” he told the audience;
- when asked whether Hungary was planning to annex Transcarpathia, the northwest Ukrainian region heavily populated by ethnic Hungarians, he responded that he is almost sure about the fact that unknown advisers are telling PM Orbán to “try, [to] go ahead”;
- reminding the audience that Kyiv stopped purchasing Russian gas directly and the country is now supplied from Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, he effectively threatened Ukraine that if the bilateral situation escalated, Hungary might just close the gas tap [to Ukraine], and then people would just freeze<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Hungarian Foreign Ministry (2019) *Vízügyi minisztereket fogadott Szijjártó Péter*. Available [online]: <https://www.kormany.hu/hu/kulgaszdasagi-es-kulugyminiszterium/hirek/vizugyi-minisztereket-fogadott-szijjarto-peter> [in Hungarian]

<sup>25</sup> <https://rueconomics.ru/353264-prosto-perekroem-gaz-a-u-vas-uzhe-kholodno-ekspert-iz-vengrii-prigrozil-ukraine-zamerzaniem-i-pokhodom-do-lvo-va-pod-flagom-nato> [in Russian]

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXgaAcmksqk> [in Russian]

With such claims, the prime-time show did not go unnoticed. The already worrisome statements were altered and distorted in Ukrainian and Russian media, prompting Ukrainian nationalist forces to use them to reinforce their narrative that Hungary is dangerous and threatens Ukraine.

For instance, Keveházy’s claims concerning unknown advisers telling PM Orbán to try annexing Transcarpathia went viral in Russian media, but were misquoted as “the Hungarian leader Orbán received the ‘go-ahead’ from Washington and Brussels: Try it if you can, to ‘bite off’ part of Ukraine”<sup>26</sup>. Only the first part of Keveházy’s allegation that “The Hungarian army could reach Lviv (...)” made it to the headlines in Ukraine. Subsequently, claims began circulating in some Ukrainian media outlets describing Hungary as a potential threat<sup>27</sup>.

Moreover, articles with titles such as “Just cut off the gas – and it’s already cold for you: an expert from Hungary threatened Ukraine with freezing and marching to Lviv under the NATO flag” were also published<sup>28</sup>. Ukrainian media outlets published these quotes without checking their credibility and completely failed to check the background of the so-called “Hungarian expert”<sup>29</sup>, which would have made it clear to them that Keveházy’s opinion is completely marginal and should neither be trust-, nor newsworthy.

<sup>26</sup> <http://rusonline.org/opinions/raskrytyi-plany-vengrii-po-ukraine-perekroem-gaz-i-vvedem-v-zakarpate-golubye-kaski-oon> [in Russian]

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.obozrevatel.com/abroad/dojdem-do-lvova-propagandist-vengrii-prigrozil-ukraine-na-rostyv> [in Russian]

<sup>28</sup> <https://rueconomics.ru/353264-prosto-perekroem-gaz-a-u-vas-uzhe-kholodno-ekspert-iz-vengrii-prigrozil-ukraine-zamerzaniem-i-pokhodom-do-lvo-va-pod-flagom-nato> [in Russian]

<sup>29</sup> <https://politua.org/novosti/51004-armiya-vengrii-mozhet-dojti-do-lvova/> [in Russian]

Given all these claims, one is right to ask: who is this Miklós Keveházy? What our efforts to uncover his background suggest is that not much information is available about him. There is little evidence about his activities in Hungary or how he ended up commenting on Ukrainian and Hungarian affairs in pro-Kremlin media. There is no record of him being active in politics or political consultancy in Hungary, but there are signs to suggest his potential right-wing affiliation. Two pictures show him sitting next to Gábor Vona, the former chairman of Jobbik, a far-right-turned-conservative Hungarian party that was highly supportive of Russia until a major inner-party political change.

At the time, Vona met the leadership of Rodina, a strongly right-wing political party in Russia in July<sup>30</sup> and November<sup>31</sup> 2014. Although Keveházy was present, his role in these meetings is unknown. There is also a record of Keveházy working as a paid audience-member and a guest in various Russian talk shows before his sudden emergence as a “political expert” in the media. He has only been active as a “political consultant” since October 2017, which is incidentally the date when debates between Budapest and Kyiv about the Ukrainian education law started to heat up. Keveházy first appeared in an article published by the close-to-Kremlin NTV channel, bearing the title “Russians do not belong here: Ukraine continues to break ties with Russia, rewriting laws”<sup>32</sup>. In the article, he was quoted on how hard the Ukrainian education law is hit-

<sup>30</sup> <https://rodina.ru/novosti/ZHuravlyov-Amerika-vtyagivaet-ne-tolko-Rossiyu-no-i-vsyu-Evropu-v-bolshuyu-voynu?fbclid=IwAR3RQ4nBnutL1CRMMsMIE8unQmtO70jzebGlciP8CHA-usjFrY3d4Ghffn0> [in Russian]

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.stalingradclub.ru/component/content/article?id=583%3Apatioty-evrazii-ob-edinyayutsya&fbclid=IwAR3BVBzZu7druXZmNrwFqRBstvAUhVap71NikP2sdd1JR8gGiWRGz1Z0kqk> [in Russian]

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1941303/?fb> [in Russian]

ting Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia. He then appeared on Russian prime-time television.

From the moment of his appearance on Rossiya 1, Keveházy has frequently been featured by *News Front*, a Russian site established in November 2014 as a mouthpiece for the self-proclaimed "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk, allegedly supported by Russian intelligence services and operated from Crimea. Keveházy is a "prominent" commentator on Ukraine-related issues, sometimes going live on *News Front* TV as an expert. According to stopfake.org, a Ukrainian investigative platform, *News Front* was visited by almost 5 million people in March 2019. Half their audience is in Russia, while 22% of them are in Ukraine.

Interestingly enough, Keveházy's appearances are exclusively available on the Russian version of the *News Front*'s website, on the Hungarian site there are no results for his name in the search bar. In his interviews and statements on the site, in addition to recounting the hardships experienced by Transcarpathian Hungarians, he uses the well-known pro-Kremlin messages, primarily bashing the US, Ukraine and its leadership in all possible aspects, while praising Russia. He gave these interviews in front of Hungary-themed visual elements to highlight that he is Hungarian, potentially not only to proudly emphasize his nationality, but also to give the impression that he represents mainstream Hungarian way of thinking about Ukraine.

- Since he was discovered, Keveházy has written articles for other pro-Kremlin Russian sites too<sup>33</sup>, criticizing, threatening, and ridiculing Ukraine. His activity as a political commentator is

largely periodical, but his materials are still being quoted<sup>34</sup> and he has continued pushing for a pro-Kremlin narrative. Among others, Keveházy claimed in July 2019, that "there is a consensus" among European countries that Ukraine cannot join the European bloc due to its poor minority policy<sup>35</sup>. While Hungary and Romania indeed criticized the Poroshenko-endorsed education law, several European countries criticized Hungary – in particular – for standing in the way of Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The most notable example happened in February 2020, when – besides the United States and Canada – several ambassadors of NATO-allied European countries negotiated with Hungarian foreign ministry officials to protest Budapest's blocking of Ukraine's aspirations to come closer to the alliance<sup>36</sup>;

- commenting on a visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin made in Budapest in October 2019, Keveházy said that many Hungarians recently started to realize that their country "chose the wrong path of development"<sup>37</sup> when they decided to support further integration with Europe. Following a seven-month pause, he returned to speak on *News Front* and blasted the United States, adding, "we are calmly

awaiting the death of a fantastically evil empire"<sup>38</sup>.

His fear-mongering, US- and Ukraine-bashing contents are apparently only being served to the Russian-speaking audience, with his comments prominently appearing on Russian news engine and news portal *Yandex*, among others.

None of Keveházy's comments reached the Hungarian mainstream media and they did not really storm Ukrainian state media, either. After his prime-time debut on Rossiya 1, only a handful of Ukraine-language outlets reported on his statements

<sup>38</sup> <https://news-front.info/2020/06/08/my-spokojno-ozhidaem-gibel-fantasticheskoi-zloj-imperii-miklosh-kevehazi-o-situacii-v-ssha/> [in Russian]

“SINCE HE WAS DISCOVERED, KEVEHÁZY HAS WRITTEN ARTICLES FOR OTHER PRO-KREMLIN RUSSIAN SITES TOO, CRITICIZING, THREATENING, AND RIDICULING UKRAINE

as those coming from a "Hungarian propagandist." Keveházy's comments appeared on two better-known Ukrainian national news outlets – ZIK TV and Obozrevatel. At the same time, the example of Keveházy's Rossiya 1 appearance serves as proof that his statements could have a major impact on bilateral ties and has the ability to penetrate the Ukrainian information space because of the low language barrier between the two.

Resulting from all these appearances, Keveházy has become an *established expert* on Ukraine, Hungary, and minority policies in the Russian media, and one can assume that next time when the Kremlin needs to play the minority card in Ukraine, they will know who to call. The strong emphasis placed on Keveházy's Hungarian origins, and his narratives on the Hungarian minority's purported plans of autonomy, and Hungary's alleged schemes to annex Transcarpathia, constitute a potential threat to the Hungarian minority itself, and these have the potential to turn Ukrainian public opinion against local Hungarians and provoke Ukrainian extremist groups into committing physical violence against minorities. The ultimate aim of the narrative, however, is to push the Ukrainian public against not just ethnic Hungarians in the country, but also the Euro-Atlantic community as a whole.

### NONEXISTENT TERRITORIAL DISPUTES WITH UKRAINE

While most Russian efforts to increase tensions between ethnic groups and Ukrainian authorities have been focused on the alleged aspirations of ethnic Hungarians for breaking away from Kyiv, the situation of other minorities was also used by pro-Kremlin actors. The latest example of this push involved ethnic Bulgarians, whose number is estimated at above 200,000 within the Ukrainian population.

<sup>33</sup> <https://regnum.ru/news/2494065.html> [in Russian]

<sup>34</sup> <https://matveychev-oleg.livejournal.com/9734040.html> [in Russian]

<sup>35</sup> <https://news-front.info/2019/07/31/politika-poroshenko-prodolzhitsya-pri-zelenskom-kak-kirov-protivostoit-vengerskomu-zakarpattiu/> [in Russian]

<sup>36</sup> Panyi, Sz. (2020) *Bement Egy Tucát Diplomata a Magyar Külügybe. Feszült Vita Lett Belőle Ukrajna Miatt*. Available [online]: <https://444.hu/2020/02/13/bement-egy-tuc-at-diplomata-a-magyar-kulugybe-feszult-vita-lett-belole-ukrajna-miatt> [in Hungarian]

<sup>37</sup> <https://news-front.info/2019/11/08/vengriya-ponyala-chto-ne-stoilo-idti-evropejskim-putem-miklosh-kevehazi/> [in Russian]

### USING BULGARIAN EXTREMISTS FOR SPREADING SEPARATIST IDEAS

In May 2020, the incumbent Ukrainian government moved to carry on with an administrative reform plan, according to which the country's Bogdan region (where the majority of ethnic Bulgarians live) would be divided into five separate administrative units. The move was immediately criticized by the ethnic Bulgarian community, which feared that they would be weakened and unable to send their (traditionally pro-Russian) MP, Anton Kisse, to the Verkhovna Rada.

Initiated by its pro-Moscow and/or nationalist lawmakers, the Bulgarian parliament approved a resolution condemning Ukraine's actions. Kyiv hit back, saying that the measure is part of a countrywide administrative reform and dismissing the Bulgarian protest as foreign interference. The scene looked ready for a conflict between Bulgaria and Ukraine, which local Kremlin loyalists and Moscow were ready to exploit.

As the Hungarian case suggests, pro-Kremlin disinformation actors aimed for portraying the dispute as something bigger than what it really was, namely, not an ethnic row, but a territorial conflict. A notable example came from the Russian news site *Politobzor*, which claimed that Bulgaria "put forward territorial claims to Ukraine" in the region in question, whereas no official request came from Bulgarian officials<sup>39</sup>. Only the Bulgarian pro-Russian and far-right ATAKA party came up with such claims, the importance of which were over exaggerated by pro-Russian media outlets<sup>40</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> <https://politobzor.net/216074-bolgariya-vydvynula-ukraine-territorialnye-pretenzii-iz-za-odesskoy-oblasti.html> [in Russian]

<sup>40</sup> StopFake (2016) *Pro-Kremlin Far-Right Bulgarian Party Used in Latest Ukrainian "Separatism Fake"*. Available [online]: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/pro-kremlin-far-right-bulgarian-party-used-in-latest-ukrainian-separatism-fake/>

This pro-Russian effort to spark a conflict between Kyiv and Sofia, which was most certainly intended to prevent the Bulgarian government from supporting Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic aspirations, was not the first one. In 2016, several Ukrainian news sites reported on a fake letter allegedly sent by the Bulgarian government to endorse the request of Ukrainian Bulgarians for greater autonomy within Ukraine<sup>41</sup>.

### ATTACKS ON POLISH CEMETERIES

Besides also being involved in dubious or nonexistent claims about economic autonomy for ethnic Poles in Ukraine, Poland was

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

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also targeted by pro-Kremlin media actors, however, in slightly other ways. In Ukrainian regions bordering Poland<sup>42</sup>, cemeteries and monuments important for the local Polish minority have been frequently vandalized. RT<sup>43</sup> and other Kremlin-controlled or pro-Kremlin<sup>44</sup> media then covered these attacks extensively.

Another example of Russia stirring up tensions between Ukrainians and Poles is the feud between pro-Putin Polish "history buff" Mirosław Majkowski and Russian-born Ukrainian nationalist leader Artyom Lutsak. Majkowski and Lutsak had their fair share in provoking tensions between Warsaw and Kyiv – while the former staged anti-Ukrainian rallies in the border city of Przemyśl, counter-rallies followed (or collided with the Polish ones) that were organized by the Lutsak-led nationalist movement, the Right Sector.

Despite both being pro-Russia, this rivalry, which almost ignited violence in the Polish-Ukrainian border region, was potentially staged by the Kremlin – Majkowski is seen as the loudest pro-Putin surrogate in Poland, while Lutsak has strong ties to Moscow and did not even acquire Ukrainian citizenship until 2012<sup>45</sup>. Although the PiS-led Polish government itself had quarreled with Kyiv over the interpretation of history

<sup>42</sup> Górzynski, O. (2018) *Russia's Covert Campaign to Inflame East Europe*. Available [online]: <https://www.the-dailybeast.com/russias-covert-campaign-inflaming-east-europe>

<sup>43</sup> RT (2019) *Monument to Polish WWII Massacre Victims Desecrated with Fascist Symbols in Ukraine* Available [online]: <https://www.rt.com/news/373233-polish-monument-wwii-vandalized-ukraine/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://888.hu/ketharmad/felavattak-az-ukran-ron-galas-utan-ujjaepitett-vereckei-emlekmuvet-4127785/> [in Hungarian]

<sup>45</sup> Observer (2018) "This Is How Vladimir Putin Manufactures Conflict Between Nations". Available [online]: <https://observer.com/2018/07/putin-conflict-poland-ukraine-nato/>

and the actions of historical figures and traditionally important historical monuments, Russian efforts involving Warsaw have remained largely unsuccessful, with Poland continuing to be one of the strongest advocates for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration.

### ALLEGED TERRITORIAL REQUESTS FROM ROMANIA, TOO

The ethnic Romanian community also came under Moscow's radar. Numerous close-to-Kremlin Russian news outlets, including Sputnik News and Russia Today, stated that local Ukrainian Romanians – led by a certain Dorina Kirtoake – allegedly proposed to gain autonomy in the historical region of North Bukovina, most of which is now a part of Ukraine, whereas no such local assembly or request ever materialized and the aforementioned figure turned out to be a fictitious person<sup>46</sup>. This pro-Kremlin narrative was brought to life by the concept of "Greater Romania", the country's interwar territory, which at the time included most of modern-day Moldova, as well as parts of western Ukraine and northern Bulgaria. Corresponding disinformation has so far ranged from groundless rumors (such as Ukraine is prepared to cede a part of the country to Bucharest) to baseless claims – uttered on Russian state TV channel Pervij Kanal – about Romania's territorial requests to Kyiv<sup>47</sup>.

In all cases, regardless of which minority was brought into the spotlight, the strategy behind these aforementioned disinformation efforts was to portray Ukraine

<sup>46</sup> StopFake (2020) *Fake: Bukovinian Romanians Demand Autonomy*. Available [online]: <https://www.stopfake.org/en/fake-bukovinian-romanians-demand-autonomy/>

<sup>47</sup> EU vs Disinformation (2020) *Romania and Hungary Have Territorial Claims to Ukraine*. Available [online]: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/romania-and-hungary-have-territorial-claims-to-ukraine/>

as a country that should not even exist in its current form (or at all) or it should at least return to the Russian geopolitical orbit. Questioning Ukrainian identity and sovereignty is a recurring element of pro-Kremlin propaganda, which exists both in country-specific ways, as shown above, and in a greater context. The latter is also shown by pro-Kremlin claims, saying that it was the United States that green lighted the partition of Ukraine between Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Romania, and echoing that Ukraine is a “completely artificial country”<sup>48</sup>.

To sum up, pro-Russian outlets did not necessarily make completely unfounded claims – some organizations, political parties in states neighboring Ukraine did disseminate messages in line with the Kremlin’s interests. However, disinformation portals regularly over-exaggerated the importance of these messages, making the statements of marginal organizations and individuals look like official policies. Moreover, they also used the claims of dubious experts and analysts to strengthen the narrative that the minorities living in Ukraine pose a threat to the territorial integrity of the country via their home nations. These efforts by pro-Kremlin propaganda could, this way, generate animosity between the majority and minorities within Ukraine. In turn, any conflicts between ethnic groups in the country could be used by pro-Kremlin media to prove the rightfulness of Russia’s official reason for intervention in Crimea, and the protection of the Russian minority from the alleged “Nazi” regime in Kyiv.

#### ALL SIDES MUST ACT TO AVOID FURTHER RUSSIAN PROVOCATION

While no major threat is expected to permanently block Ukraine’s path to Western integration from Bulgaria, Poland, or Romania, the conflict between Budapest and

Kyiv has opened the door for Russia to use Transcarpathian Hungarians as an instrument in achieving its foreign policy goals. Its disinformation network is committed to exploiting the bilateral tensions between Hungary and Ukraine to depict the Hungarian minority in the region as a “fifth column” for Hungary. Consequently, Hungarian – and, importantly, Ukrainian – decisions that deepen the divisions between the two countries are nothing but new opportunities for Russia to continue encouraging ethnic conflicts.

For the Kremlin, it matters little if these conflicts are started by paid Russian agents or Ukrainian nationalist groups, Russian leadership will use every single attack to justify the annexation of Crimea and, at least rhetorically, support rebels in Eastern Ukraine. As always, any atrocities will serve as “proof” that Russian fears about minority rights were well-founded, and that Ukraine does not belong to the Western community. To avoid giving such a potent information weapon to Moscow, both Kyiv and Budapest will have to change course. In line with this, all other sides involved in the issue due to the presence of their minorities in Ukraine, should also refrain from publicly escalating tensions with the Ukrainian administration, which also has considerable responsibility to avoid giving any chance to Moscow to use its decisions and false narratives as information weapons.

Kyiv must swiftly implement the changes recommended by the Venice Commission (e.g., get rid of ambiguities, ensure a sufficient level of teaching in EU languages, improve the quality of the teaching of the state language, enter new dialogue with national minorities, etc.) to its education law, and it should do the same concerning the Ukrainian language law (e.g., delay its implementation; repeal provisions differentiating between languages of indigenous

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ACTORS

people, the EU, others, etc.). Alternatively, Kyiv could extend the rights granted to indigenous minorities (e.g., the right to study in their mother tongue throughout elementary and high school), primarily the Crimean Tatars, to communities using an official EU language as their native tongue.

Moreover, Ukrainian decision-makers should disseminate positive rhetoric on minorities that considers them partners in building Ukraine, and not adversaries. Importantly, neighboring states should also communicate clearly and regularly with Ukrainian citizens, highlighting what their aims are in terms of protecting their local minorities, emphasizing that they have no territorial ambitions, and noting how they

are helping Ukraine in its path to Western integration.

Ukrainian media must be more careful when taking over stories and quotes from Russian media and pro-Kremlin media outlets in the CEE region. As for Hungary, Budapest should de-escalate tensions by lifting its veto on progress in Ukraine’s integration process, as the country would, years from now, have the final say on approving Kyiv’s EU and NATO membership. Over those years, Hungary would have ample opportunities to monitor the implementation of the two controversial laws, and one of the chapters in EU accession negotiations would concern the judiciary and fundamental rights, ensuring that Ukrainian laws are in full compliance with EU standards.

In this regard, Volodymyr Zelensky’s victory in the 2019 presidential elections was a promising sign. Although the disputes surrounding the controversial education and language laws continue to have a profound impact on bilateral tensions, both Budapest and Kyiv have been actively engaged in sorting out the issues, and a summit between the Ukrainian president and the Hungarian prime minister is rumored to be in the making. This “reset” presents a challenge to the Kremlin, as chances for exploiting minority-related conflicts could become drastically lower if an agreement is reached. A smaller, but meaningful gesture in this regard came in Ukraine’s aforementioned administrative reform: although Ukrainian officials denied it, the restructuring of the borders of a region in the Transcarpathian region seems to be favorable for ethnic Hungarians (which, of course, was immediately attacked by Ukrainian nationalists)<sup>49</sup>. However, the two disputed

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> <http://politic.karpat.in.ua/?p=8461&lang=hu> [in Hungarian]



laws remain the elephant in a room and will eventually decide Ukraine's future in NATO according to the perspective of the Hungarian government's perspective.

One other potential obstacle comes from the lack of willingness for compromise from both sides. The policies of the Ukrainian government are heavily dependent on domestic party politics, in which Zelensky's Servant of the People party is continuously contested by its nationalist opposition. Led by former President Poroshenko, the European Solidarity party is able to mount large-scale opposition when it comes to linguistic, religious, and other cultural issues important to conservative or right-wing Ukrainian communities. While the political threat posed by Poroshenko remains far from becoming a contender against the ruling party, political risks could easily evolve if Zelensky crosses red lines drawn by the post-Maidan Ukrainian society.

From the Hungarian viewpoint, the often-nationalistic rhetoric of the Orbán government is one of its core policies and the ruling Fidesz party invested heavily in making itself the sole representative of Hungarian national interest. Since almost all major Hungarian opposition parties (except, to some extent, the liberal Momentum party and the Democratic Coalition of former Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány) support the government's Ukraine policy, it is important for Budapest to be able to show tangible results in any potential agreement with Kyiv to avoid giving the initiative on the Ukraine issue to opposition forces. The Kremlin could exploit such domestic political considerations, the internal political struggles of Hungary, and those of Ukraine's other neighbors to advance its own foreign policy goals.

Since Hungary is already an EU and NATO member and it can block Ukraine's integra-

tion at any point, Budapest has the upper hand in the negotiation process. In any case, finding a solution to bilateral issues would ultimately benefit both sides, primarily Ukrainian citizens and ethnic Hungarians living in Transcarpathia.



PATRIK  
SZICHERLE

.....  
An analyst at Political Capital focusing on disinformation and authoritarian influence in Europe



DORKA  
TAKÁCSY

.....  
A former analyst at Political Capital focusing on Russia and the post-Soviet space



DOMINIK  
ISTRATE

.....  
A foreign policy journalist and political analyst at Political Capital focusing on Eastern Europe, Russia, and post-Soviet countries



# Russian Bid for Czech Hearts and Minds



\*  
ROMAN  
MÁCA

Since 2014, the Czech media landscape has changed. The number of pro-Kremlin websites has mushroomed<sup>1</sup>. This has been followed by disinformation campaigns on social networks, chain e-mails targeting mostly elderly people, and various activists spreading false information and promoting interests of the Kremlin. Disinformation has also become a tool for so-called "patriotic politicians" building their campaigns and proclamations on fear and hate, as well as using foreign hostile propaganda.

The Czech Security Information Service described new elements in the Czech media landscape in its 2015 annual report<sup>2</sup>. The intelligence mentioned that Russian information operations in the Czech Republic in 2015 focused especially on:

- weakening the strength of Czech media (covert infiltration of Czech media and the Internet, massive production of Russian propaganda and disinformation controlled by the state);
- strengthening the information resistance of the Russian audience (pre-fabricated disinformation from Czech sources for the Russian audience);
- exerting influence on the perceptions and thoughts of the Czech audience, weakening society's will for resistance or confrontation (information and disinformation overload of the audience, relativization of truth and objectivity, promoting the motto "everyone is lying");
- creating or promoting inter-societal and inter-political tensions in the Czech Republic (foundation of puppet organizations, covert and open support of populist or extremist subjects);
- disrupting the coherence and readiness of NATO and the EU (attempts to disrupt Czech-Polish relations, disinformation and alarming rumors defaming the US and NATO, disinformation creating a virtual threat of a war with Russia);
- damaging the reputation of Ukraine and isolating the country internationally (involving Czech citizens and organizations in influence operations covertly led in Ukraine or against it by Russia).

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32070184>

<sup>2</sup> Security Information Service (2016) Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2015. Available [online]: <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocní-zpráva/en/ar2015en.pdf>

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DISINFORMATION  
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This scheme is valid for the years following 2015, as Russian disinformation is widely spread in the Czech Republic. It is crucial to understand the general extent of this phenomenon as it clearly shows how widespread and far-reaching it is – and may still be.

## RUSSIAN STATE-CONTROLLED OUTLET *SPUTNIK* AND CZECH PRO- KREMLIN WEBSITES

Russian state-controlled *Sputnik* has operated since November 2014. Nowadays, this outlet works in more than 30 languages – including Czech.

Apart from “news service” reflecting Russian interests, *Sputnik* also cooperates with Czech citizens mostly from radical, extremists, and conspiracy theorist scenes with a positive attitude towards the Kremlin. *Sputnik* often interviews them as “experts” and publishes their articles and commentaries prepared exclusively for this media outlet.

Another agenda of the Czech version of *Sputnik* is military and warfare issues – they regularly present “new miracle Russian weapons, which can easily destroy NATO forces surrounding and attacking Russia”<sup>3</sup> – showing the military power of Russia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, *Sputnik* also

3 E.g. Sputnik featured article titled: "NATO Is Helpless: Danish Journalist Spoke about Russian Superweapon" (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/20200713122913582-nato-je-bezmocne-dansky-novinar-hovoril-o-ruske-superzbrani/>); "They Will Be Surprised in NATO: What Weapons Will Russian NavyHave" (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/nazory/202001111234267-v-nato-se-budou-divit-cim-bude-vyzbrojeno-ruske-lodstvo/>); "Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia: Moscow Recommend to NATO Members to Think about Consequences of Increasing of Tension" (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/2020030711606502-ministerstvo-zahranici-ruska-moskva-doporucuje-zemim-nato-premyslet-o-nasledcich-zvysovani-napeti/>); "Koller: Defender Europe 20 Practices War with Russia" (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/nazory/202001241130-5184-koller-defender-europe-20-cvici-valku-s-ruskem/>).

“RUSSIAN  
DISINFORMATION  
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published various articles about discovering new Russian medicines curing the disease to support a propaganda narrative of a successful country saving the world.

As a side note, interestingly enough, *Sputnik* has a “lifestyle” section, which helps it reach larger audiences (recruited mostly from a group of elderly men). For this purpose, it features content showing half-naked celebrities including porn actresses. One such *article* was titled: “Young Porn Actress Daisy Lee Is Shaking Her Naked Butt in Front of Her Haters (VIDEO)”<sup>4</sup>. This may seem astounding, as *Sputnik* is, after all, a state-owned propaganda channel. Their content released in Czech includes a limited variety of themes, from “porn stars shaking their butts” to half-naked celebrities, which does not seem to be a standard situation for “state-owned” media. This atypical strategy for such a type of a media outlet has been also indicated by Jakub Kalensky, who formerly worked for EEAS Stratcom, and who is now affiliated with the Atlantic Council. Meanwhile, *Sputnik* still claims that they are *serious* media.

<sup>4</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/2019=060410060007-mlada-pornoherecka-daisy-lee-pred-svymi-hejtry-vrti-nahym-zadeckem-video-/>

"The Scientists Named the Country Which Is Able to Survive a Zombie Apocalypse"  
(cz.sputniknews.com)<sup>5</sup>



SVĚT 22:54 05.03.2018 Získat krátkou URL

20 3 3 3 3

Matematici zjistili, že invazi zombie dokáže zastavit pouze takový stát, který má dostatečně silnou armádu. Pro tuto roli se hodí jedině Severní Korea.

Russian state propaganda, through *Sputnik*, further published articles e.g. with conspiracy theories about aliens and UFOs, prophecies about the end of the world coming from Ukraine, and zombie apocalypses.

Apart from *Sputnik*, there have been more than fifty disinformation websites (also named as “alternative media”) spreading false information and pro-Kremlin propaganda in the Czech Republic. Some of them may be seen as activists’ projects of conspiracy theorists. The publishers behind these resources are invited to Russia, where they are celebrated and presented as famous independent Czech journalists.

<sup>5</sup> <https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201803056902444-vedci-nazvali-zemi-ktera-dokaze-prezit-zombie-apokalypsu/>

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## SOME OF THE CZECH PRO-KREMLIN WEBSITES ARE ONLY BUSINESSES EARNING MONEY ON ADVERTISEMENT AND DONATIONS WITH DISINFORMATION

One example is conspiracy theorist Jan Korál, who runs a website called *New World Order Opposition*. Korál began his “career” many years ago with conspiracies about 9/11 and secret societies. After 2014, he added, among others, an anti-Ukrainian and anti-NATO agenda. Korál started to travel to Russia and to Russian-occupied Crimea to participate in the “all-Slavic” conferences in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in an economic forum in Crimean Yalta where he is presented as a Czech expert.

Some of the Czech pro-Kremlin websites are only businesses earning money on advertisement and donations with disinformation. They usually reprint the relevant content (conspiracy theories, anti-Western, pro-Kremlin rhetoric, etc.) from other Internet resources – the Czech version of *Sputnik* is among the most popular ones.

One of the most successful commercial disinformation business projects is

a conglomerate of websites (the main site is AC24.cz) run by a young businessman, Ondřej Geršl. It is estimated, that simply republishing articles from *Sputnik* and other similar resources on his website masked as media and independent alternative news services, brings an income of EUR 5,000 monthly<sup>6</sup> from advertisement. For more visitors, Geršl also uses fake pages with names such as “I want to know the truth”, created only to promote articles from his websites. He also uses fake profiles of young attractive women spamming links to his websites into various Facebook groups<sup>7</sup>.

The strongest element connecting these so-called “alternative websites” is the opposition against their presumed enemies: multiculturalism, Muslims, migrants, the European Union, the United States, NATO, NGOs, LGBT, 5G networks, vaccination, business moguls such as George Soros or Bill Gates, secret societies, mainstream media, and journalists. They present the contemporary Western world as apocalyptic and totalitarianism. Everything related to it is a scandal, a lie, and a fraud. The only hope for humankind is Russia with Vladimir Putin at the helm, and so-called “Czech patriotic politicians” advocating for the Kremlin. The people behind these websites feel they are presenting the truth (or they are simply doing business), which is censored by mainstream media.

In the annual report for 2018, the National Centre against Organized Crime (an agency of the Police of the Czech Republic) stated that activities of the so-called “alternative media” are evaluated as a threat for the future. These “media” are showing a non-

<sup>6</sup> The average monthly salary in the Czech Republic is approx. EUR 1,350.

<sup>7</sup> Maca, R. (2017) *The Hidden and Censored Truth Only on Pro-Russian Websites and Fake Profiles*. Available [online]: <https://maca.blog.idnes.cz/blog.aspx?c=585068> [in Czech]

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## THE STRONGEST ELEMENT CONNECTING “ALTERNATIVE WEBSITES” IS THE OPPOSITION AGAINST THEIR PRESUMED ENEMIES: MULTICULTURALISM, MUSLIMS, MIGRANTS, THE EUROPEAN UNION, THE UNITED STATES, NATO, NGOS, LGBT, 5G NETWORKS, VACCINATION, BUSINESS MOGULS SUCH AS GEORGE SOROS OR BILL GATES, SECRET SOCIETIES, MAINSTREAM MEDIA, AND JOURNALISTS

critical attitude towards the Russian Federation, a conflict in Ukraine, and the annexation of Crimea. These outlets often include contributions balancing on the boundaries of criminal law by spreading hoaxes, encouraging hate speech, trivializing, or denying the Holocaust<sup>8</sup>.

According to the STEM agency research from June 2016, a quarter of Czechs trust the so-called “alternative media” (including pro-Kremlin ones) more than the traditional mainstream media<sup>9</sup>.

### SOCIAL NETWORKS AND “PATRIOTIC” PAGES

The content from websites spreading disinformation presented as real news is also used for various campaigns and pages on social networks – especially on Facebook. These initiatives try to provide a picture of the Western world in ruins and the reporting from *independent alternative media* should be enough proof.

One of the most visible Czech “patriotic” campaigns was focused against Islam and migration. This initiative operated under the name “We Are Here At Home” and worked anonymously. The authors presented the public apocalyptic scenarios and they used shocking content to provoke emotions, such as fear and hate. The mechanism was simple: Firstly, download an old video e.g. from Asia showing a murder for example. In a second step the video was uploaded with a false explanation symbolically saying: “This is Italy nowadays, this person was killed by a migrant, and the media censored

<sup>8</sup> National Centre against Organized Crime of the Police of the Czech Republic (2019) *Annual Report for 2018*. Available at: <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/zprava-o-cinnosti-ncoz-za-rok-2018.aspx> [in Czech]

<sup>9</sup> European Values Think-Tank (2016) *Disinformation Operations in the Czech Republic*. Available [online]: <https://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/disinformation-operations-in-the-czech-republic/>



it<sup>10</sup>. This scenario worked perfectly and it evoked strong emotions and hate speech among the viewers.

The shocking content was followed by videos from Russian state television RT (formerly Russia Today), speeches of Vladimir Putin and calls to action that included the use of weapons. The mechanism was easy: To scare first, then present saviors.

As previously mentioned, the campaign was operated anonymously. However, wider investigation showed that Czech citizen Petr Mančík was behind it. He lives in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, where he operates

“Brilliant Speech of Vladimir Putin” (We Are Here At Home at facebook.com)<sup>11</sup>



<sup>10</sup> <http://www.hatefree.cz/blo/hoaxy/1497-migrant-v-italii-brutalne-napadl-prodavace>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/analysis-czech-businessman-wages-disinformation-campaign-from-dubai-to-increase-appetite-for-authoritarianism>

## “ DISINFORMATION CHAIN E-MAILS WERE FIRST MASSIVELY USED DURING THE LAST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC IN 2017 AND 2018

a business in Internet marketing and PR<sup>12</sup>. Simply put, a Czech “patriotic” campaign against migration and Muslims is operated by a Czech migrant living in the Muslim world, who is doing business in Internet marketing and PR<sup>13</sup>.

### DISINFORMATION CHAIN E-MAILS

The e-mail is another channel for spreading disinformation and hostile foreign propaganda. Disinformation chain e-mails were first massively used during the last presidential election campaign in the Czech Republic in 2017 and 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> National Centre against Organized Crime of the Police of the Czech Republic (2019) *Annual Report for 2018*. Available at: <https://www.policie.cz/clanek/zprava-o-cinnosti-ncoz-za-rok-2018.aspx> [in Czech]

“Czech Journalist: USA Is Preparing a Bloody Provocation in Ukraine” (russian.rt.com)<sup>14</sup>



The challenger of the current president Miloš Zeman, Jiří Drahoš, was labelled in e-mails as a paedophile, a member of secret societies, and as a person who will import migrants – including terrorists – to the Czech Republic, should he become president.

In the Czech Republic, the e-mail is a substitution of social networks for the elderly. These people are spammed by numerous e-mails saying: “This is censored information that the media will not speak about. Send it to as many people as you can”. The research of Palacký University in Olomouc showed that the e-mails with the relevant shocking content was forwarded by 47% of people over 65 years of age; meanwhile, in

<sup>14</sup> <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2014-12-19/CHeshskij-zhurnalists-SHA-gotovyat-na> [in Russian]

the age group 35-44 it was only 12%<sup>15</sup>.

### PRO-RUSSIAN ACTIVISTS

“Ladislav, good day. Do you need help?” Alexander Usovski asked Czech Stalinist Ladislav Kašuka. “I am not rich, but I have some money,” continued Usovski who financed a network of extremists across Europe with the money of Russian pro-Kremlin oligarch Malofeev. Czech citizen Kašuka was one from the network<sup>16</sup>.

Kašuka works as a security officer in a shopping mall in Prague and he is actively blogging. In his articles, he called for executions in the style of Stalin, and he presented his love towards Russia, Putin, and Russian armed forces. Kašuka is strictly against the West, the USA, and Ukraine. The headline of one of his articles read: “It Does Not Matter Who Accidentally Shot Down Boeing MH17, Ukraine Is Guilty”, denying Russia’s responsibility for the deed and blaming Ukraine instead, even though the investigation revealed that the Malaysian plane was shot down with a BUK missile transported to Russian-occupied part of Donbass from a military base near the city of Kursk in Russia.

With this portfolio, Kašuka became a star of Russian mainstream and state-controlled “media”, where he was presented as a famous Czech expert and journalist. For example, the article published on Russian state-controlled television RT was titled: “Czech Journalist: USA Is Preparing a Bloody Provocation in Ukraine”<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Palacký University in Olomouc (2018) *Elderly People in the Net*. Available [online]: <https://www.e-bezpeci.cz/index.php/veda-a-vyzkum/starci-na-netu-vyzkum-2018> [in Czech]

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/28/world/europe/slovakia-czech-republic-hungary-poland-russia-agitation.html>

<sup>17</sup> <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2014-12-19/CHeshskij-zhurnalists-SHA-gotovyat-na> [in Russian]

Furthermore, as RT claimed in a lead paragraph to the article,

*"Journalist Ladislav Kašuka does not exclude that Washington could drop an atomic bomb in the territory of Ukraine and accuse Russia for that. As he wrote on the Czech Free Press<sup>18</sup> website, USA unconditionally needs a big war in Europe to strengthen the dollar and get full control of the EU"<sup>19</sup>.*

It looks really absurd. A Czech Stalinist paid by Russians with an "expertise" of a security worker from the shopping mall "discovered" a possibility of an American nuclear attack, and so the Russian state TV informed about findings of this famous expert and "Czech journalist".

Kašuka was also tasked with organizing protests. Usovski asked Kašuka to find children clothes, blood, and a woman, who will be hysterically shouting, "this is the bloody clothes of Donbass children killed by Poroshenko". The bloody clothes would be put in a box and on September 1 (the first day of school) sent to the office of Ukrainian President Poroshenko, and Kašuka would film all of the procedure. For this he was promised EUR 300-400 from Usovski<sup>20</sup>.

He was a member of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (now he supports the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy party), and Usovski offered Kašuka finan-

cial support of EUR 3,000 for his campaign to the local municipality elections in the small town of Mělník<sup>21</sup>.

Other examples of pro-Russian activists are Jiří Černohorský and Žarko Jovanović. Černohorský is a well-known figure on the Czech extremist scene. He publicly calls for the execution and hanging of politicians, and he is regularly arrested by the police for breaching the peace. Černohorský was very active in opposing the moving of the statue of Soviet marshal Konev in Prague. He organized protests, incited and motivated his followers to threaten representatives of Prague. Although he presents himself as a patriotic activist, the Russian Centre of Science and Culture – one of the organizations that implement the Russian diplomatic mission – supported Černohorský<sup>22</sup>.

Žarko Jovanović presents himself as a patriotic activist too. He organizes protests and is behind an Internet TV channel called "Raptor TV", which streams various pro-Kremlin and extremist events in the Czech Republic and abroad. Since 2010, he has been in insolvency with huge debts, officially has no income, and despite of having no money he regularly travels to Russia. Jovanović also covertly works for Russian state TV and prepared a report for the main propaganda show "Vesti nedeli" (News of the week) and the TV station of Russian armed forces called "Zvezda" (Star)<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Czech Free Press is one of pro-Kremlin fake news websites.

<sup>19</sup> RT (2014) *Czech Journalist: USA Is Preparing a Bloody Provocation in Ukraine*. Available [online]: <https://russian.rt.com/inoty/2014-12-19/CHeshskij-zhurnalst-SSHA-gotovyat-na>

<sup>20</sup> Informnapalm (2017) *How the Kremlin is Financing Polish Radicals: Tasks, Rewards, Reports to Moscow*. Available [online]: <https://informnapalm.org/cz/jak-kreml-financuje-polske-radikaly-ukoly-odmeny-hlaseni-do-moskvy/> [in Czech]

<sup>21</sup> Informnapalm (2017) *How the Kremlin is financing Polish radicals: tasks, rewards, reports to Moscow*. Available [online]: <https://informnapalm.org/cz/jak-kreml-financuje-polske-radikaly-ukoly-odmeny-hlaseni-do-moskvy/> [in Czech]

<sup>22</sup> Russian Centre for Science and Culture (2017) Festival "Slavic Mutuality" in RCSC in Prague. Available [online]: <http://rsvk.cz/cs/blog/2017/10/28/festival-slovanska-vzajemnost-v-rsvk-v-praze/> [in Czech]

<sup>23</sup> <https://hlidacipes.org/cesky-vlastenec-potaji-zasobuje-ruska-statni-media-dostaval-pozvanky-i-od-ze-manu/> [in Czech]

Žarko Jovanović during one of his visits to Russia (facebook.com)<sup>24</sup>



The connecting element of these three people is their debt and problematic official income. Černohorský and Jovanović were also very active during the presidential campaign and they did a lot to help re-elect Miloš Zeman. After winning, Zeman invited them to participate in official state events at Prague Castle. The topic of so-called "pro-Russian activists" was mentioned in the 2018 Security Information Service annual report, which stated that "Activities of the spectrum of pro-Russian activists, who were involved in spreading disinformation, posed the gravest threat to the constitutionality of the Czech Republic in 2018"<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=143-821-7302954195&set=pb.100002978184049.-2207-5200-00.&type=3>

<sup>25</sup> Security Information Service (2019) *Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2018*. Available [online]: <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocní-zprávy/en/ar2018en.pdf.pdf>

As the report also continued, it showed the connection of so-called "activists" with the spreading of propaganda,

*"Pro-Russian activists influenced public opinion e.g. by spreading various conspiracy theories and pro-Russian propaganda. To achieve that, they used primarily the internet, social networks, their own internet video channels or the so-called independent/alternative media that are now the main producers of disinformation benefiting Russia".*

The aforementioned Czech intelligence remarked that they have "indications concerning certain individuals of their direct links to Russian state structures or of them being directed by Russian intelligence services"<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Members of the “Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for Peace” during training (formerly available on the Facebook account of Radek Mansfeld)<sup>27</sup>



### PARAMILITARY GROUPS

Between 2014 and 2015, paramilitary organizations (so-called “self-defence forces”) have been created in the Czech Republic. Their declared mission was to defend Czechia against illegal migrants from Africa and Middle East. But in reality, their leaders did not travel to any relevant region such as the Balkan Peninsula or Italy. Instead they traveled to Russia and to their occupied territories. These groups usually use Russian or Soviet symbols on their “uniforms”, and their members consist of radical communists and Neonazis.

Czech paramilitary groups are under Russian information influence and they believe that NATO wants to provoke a war against Russia. In that case, they declare, they will fight with Russia against NATO, including Czechs.

One of these groups, “National Self-defence” is chaired by Marek Obrtel, a former military doctor. Obrtel is now one of the admins of the Facebook group named “In the third war, we will fight at the side of the Russian Federation”<sup>28</sup>. He also visited occupied Crimea as a “Czech delegate”.

<sup>27</sup> The image was shared by Radek Mansfeld on his Facebook account, and has been since deleted. Available [online]: <https://www.facebook.com/radek.mansfeld.54/photos> [formerly] Find out more: <http://blog.aktualne.cz/blogy/roman-maca.php?itemid=35722>

<sup>28</sup> Maca, R. (2017) *Influencing and Radicalization of Pro-Russian Paramilitary Fifth Colony in the Czech Republic*. Available [online]: <https://maca.blog.idnes.cz/blog.aspx?c=586666> [in Czech]

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BETWEEN 2014  
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REPUBLIC

Co-leader of his organization is Nela Lisková, who traveled frequently to Donetsk. After her visits, she was named as an “honorary consul of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) to the Czech Republic” and she established a fake Donetsk consulate in the city of Ostrava. The “consulate” existed only virtually in Russian propaganda – there was talk about growing official relations between the DPR and the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic does not recognize the so-called DPR and a court abolished the fake consulate.

Another group called Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for Peace, is chaired by a former officer of the Czechoslovak People’s Army<sup>29</sup>, Ivan Kratochvíl. Besides travelling to Russia or to territories occupied by Russia, this organization also sent its own members to join “the armed forces” of the

DPR organization. The idea was to create a trained Czechoslovak unit of fighters there. After returning back to the Czech Republic, members of the unit would fight for the interests of the organization in a partisan war including terrorist attacks against the Czech Republic and its citizens<sup>30</sup>.

These groups and their leaders are regularly mentioned, interviewed, or have their articles published on pro-Kremlin, disinformation websites, as well as on the Czech version of *Sputnik*. They are also active in sharing disinformation and Russian propaganda. The leaders of paramilitary groups have been in contact with Russian secret services, and the Russians were interested in how these groups are able to mobilize people.

In recent years, these groups are stagnating and they cannot attract new members. In 2019, the Czech Ministry of the Interior in the report monitoring extremism and hate speech estimated that these groups have around 200 members of retirement or pre-retirement age<sup>31</sup>. From the ambition to create a paramilitary pro-Kremlin army with hierarchical military structure and with a vast member base, or a starting point for Czech fighters in Eastern Ukraine, these groups became more of a pastime for elderly men who felt nostalgic. Although they remain passive when it comes to joining military training or sending their members to Ukraine, they are very active online, where they spread disinformation, hate speech, and pro-Kremlin and anti-Western propaganda.

<sup>30</sup> *Reporter Magazine* (2019) “When the Patriots Are Excited by War”. Available [online]: <https://reportermagazin.cz/a/pnscw/kdyz-vlastence-vzrusuje-valka> [in Czech]

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic (2019) *Overall Report on Extremism and Hate Speech*. Available [online]: <https://www.mvcr.cz/soubor/extremismus-souhrnna-situacni-zprava-za-2-ctvrtleti-2019-pdf-pdf.aspx> [in Czech]

<sup>29</sup> The army of the communist Czechoslovakia.



"Czech president admits his country produced Novichok – but British mainstream media remain silent" (rt.com)<sup>32</sup>



## POLITICIANS

Other groups promoting the interests of the Kremlin – sometimes more than the interests of the Czech Republic and its allies – are politicians such as Czech President Miloš Zeman, as well as those from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and The Freedom and Direct Democracy Party.

Before 2012, Zeman was almost forgotten as the former Czech prime minister. The idea of him being a political pensioner was, however, premature. During years of his life

in seclusion, he was among others introduced to Vladimir Yakunin, a former general of the Soviet KGB and a close co-worker of Vladimir Putin. Zeman later on called Jakunin his friend<sup>33</sup>.

A society was also established, called "Friends of Miloš Zeman" to support Zeman in his presidential candidacy. One of these "friends" was Zdeněk Zbytek, a former colonel of the Czechoslovak People's Army who studied in the Soviet Union. After the Velvet Revolution, Zbytek became a business-

<sup>33</sup> European Values (2016) Axis Zeman – Yakunin – Putin. Available [online]: <https://www.evropskehodnoty.cz/zeman-jakunin-putin/> [in Czech]

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.rt.com/uk/425826-czech-zeman-skripal-novichok/>

Communist deputy Zdeněk Ondráček welcomed by Denis Pushilin (the leader of DPR organization) in Donetsk (ct24.ceskatelevize.cz)<sup>34</sup>



man using his contacts in the former USSR. Another friend of Zeman is Martin Nejedlý, who worked for the Russian oil company Lukoil. When Zeman was elected, Nejedlý became Zeman's main adviser.

Zeman was first elected in 2013 and at that time, nobody knew about his "Russian" background. In 2014, when the Russian war against Ukraine started, his statements were surprising for the Czech public. Zeman argued that there is no Russian army in Ukraine<sup>34</sup>, that the annexation of Crimea is a "*fait accompli*"<sup>35</sup> (finished issue), and so on. The Czech president had also

demanding the lifting of Western sanctions imposed on Russia<sup>36</sup>.

Zeman also became a star of Russian propaganda. He has been presented as an independent politician with a strong anti-American position who has been staying on the side of the truth – the Russian side. His false statements were also used by the Russians against the Czech Republic and the country's allies. "Czech president admits his country produced Novichok – but British mainstream media remain silent," – claimed Russian state-controlled television RT using Zeman's false interpretation.

"No substance of the Novichok type has ever been produced, developed, or stored

<sup>34</sup> <https://english.radio.cz/president-calls-ukraine-conflict-civil-war-8284921>

<sup>35</sup> [https://censor.net.ua/en/news/458699/czech-president\\_zeman\\_says\\_crimean\\_annexation\\_fait\\_accompl](https://censor.net.ua/en/news/458699/czech-president_zeman_says_crimean_annexation_fait_accompl)

<sup>36</sup> <https://english.radio.cz/president-zeman-calls-lifting-russia-sanctions-event-organized-putin-associate-8282519>



in the Czech Republic,” the Czech government stated after the meeting of the Czech prime minister with directors of security services<sup>37</sup>.

Other voices promoting the interests of the Kremlin are in the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, which is still (even 30 years after fall of communism) loyal to Moscow. Apart from producing and sharing pro-Kremlin disinformation and propaganda, communists also visit Russia and territories occupied by Russia.

These visits are presented by propaganda as official Czech state delegations. Although the communist travelers are telling the Czech media that these trips are private, e.g. in Donetsk or in Crimea, they perform as official state delegations; in reality they do not have the mandate to represent the Czech Republic officially<sup>38</sup>.

Another parliamentary party using pro-Kremlin and anti-Western propaganda is the Freedom and Direct Democracy, chaired by Czech-Japanese Tomio Okamura. The party presents itself as a “patriotic” party denying migration and multiculturalism and is also calling for Czechia to exit the EU. Their agenda is often built on disinformation and manipulation to promote emotions of fear and hate. The politicians of the party regularly share content from pro-Kremlin disinformation websites and they are also sympathetic to Russia and the regime of Vladimir Putin. They, for example, recognize the annexation of Crimea, saying that the people decided to join Russia in a referendum. The members of the Freedom and

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/no-substance-of-the-novichok-type-has-ever-been-produced--developed-or-stored-in-the-czech-republic-166262/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.unian.info/war/10550802-czech-for-foreign-minister-condemns-czech-communist-mp-s-visit-to-russia-occupied-donetsk.html>

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## OTHER GROUPS PROMOTING THE INTERESTS OF THE KREMLIN – SOMETIMES MORE THAN THE INTERESTS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND ITS ALLIES – ARE POLITICIANS SUCH AS CZECH PRESIDENT MILOŠ ZEMAN

Direct Democracy party are also used by Russian propaganda resources.

Apart from this, the interests of the Kremlin are promoted by other far-right or far-left (often marginal) Czech political subjects as well. The Russian authoritarian regime is an idol and anti-Western sentiments are a uniting factor for them.

### CZECH PRO-RUSSIAN SUBCULTURE

These, in the article described factors have given an impulse to the creation of a Czech “alternative” subculture. The information from “alternative media” brought to this

group of people support a virtual imagination of an almighty Putin, who is a strong leader doing everything selflessly for his people. Something along the lines of “We should be grateful to Vladimir Putin that he deflects Western provocations and we still live in peace” may be encountered in Czech online “alternative” debates, where Putin is considered as a peacekeeper.

As a fashion trend, these Czech citizens transformed their names on social networks profiles into the Russian alphabet, and their profiles are full of Russian flags and portraits of the Russian president. They also proudly wear badges saying “an agent of Kremlin” and t-shirts with the likeness of Vladimir Putin.

With the support of “alternative information” Czech “alternative people” created their own “alternative world”. If they are scared of Muslims, Putin will stop them – although in reality, Russia is the country with the biggest Muslim population in Europe. If they are scared of 5G networks presumed as a source of harmful radiation, Putin will stop them – although in reality, 5G installation has been in progress in Russia. If they are scared of vaccination, Putin will stop it – although in reality, Russia manufactures vaccines and actively vaccinates the population.

These disinformed people are escaping the real world and avoid facts. The negative news about Russia is simply anti-Russian propaganda for them. They voluntarily enter a virtual reality created by the Kremlin, allies of the Kremlin, and their own fantasy. And they do not want to lose it.

### CONCLUSIONS

After more than six years of an intensive Russian hybrid campaign, a network of Czech allies loyal to the Kremlin has been formed and is continuously being expanded. This network includes top politicians,

conspiracy theorists running disinformation websites, various activists, extremists, and paramilitary groups, as well as average people living in their “alternative” disinformation-driven bubble.

Although it is clear that Russians and their allies not only divide the Czech society and create or promote social and political tensions, the Russian hybrid strategy also impacts the internal security of the Czech Republic by supporting extremist and paramilitary entities, which are fully under the influence of Russian propaganda and ready to fight for the Kremlin's interests.

In response to these phenomena, a reaction from the Czech state followed, and the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats under the Ministry of the Interior in the Czech Republic has been created<sup>39</sup>. However, even with this body in place, countering the Russian interference will still pose a huge challenge, as a significant part of Czechs still subscribing the Kremlin's vision for the future, instead of being loyal to their own country.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/centre-against-terrorism-and-hybrid-threats.aspx>



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ROMAN MÁČA

An analyst of the Institute for Politics and Society based in Prague, the Czech Republic

# Growth of Disinformation Media: Are Traditional Media Getting Out of Touch with Czech Population on Important Issues?



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MICHAL  
HEJL

One often noted theme by political commentators and the so-called “mainstream journalists” is the growth of what is referred to as “alternative media”. In the Czech context, this label generally means news sources that tend to be more conservative, less cosmopolitan, and more nationalistic than the traditional media. Let us, therefore, attempt to trace some of the reasons why these media have gained popularity.

The rise of disinformation media has been noted world-wide, with traditional media losing readers/viewers and thus getting into financial problems. In the Czech context, this has been compounded by the transfers of media from foreign into Czech billionaires hands.

## MEDIA OWNERSHIP IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

A diverse selection of media exists in the Czech Republic, albeit not as diverse as say, 10 years ago. This is tied to changes in the ownership structure that will be discussed later. Media can be broadly divided into three categories. These are the public media, that are financed, but not directly controlled by the government; the traditional media, which have been having the same problems as their counterparts in other countries; and the last, newest and most controversial category is the “alternative” media (according to themselves) or disinformation media.

## PUBLIC MEDIA

Czech Television (ČT) can be considered as the most trustworthy source of news in the Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>, is still the publicly owned Czech Television (ČT). It is structured in a similar way as for example the

BBC, and is still partly funded by mandatory public subscription – i.e. anyone who owns a television must pay. It is quite insulated from politics, partly due to its structure and partly due to a previously failed attempt by politicians from the then dominant Social Democratic and Civic Democratic parties, to gain direct editorial control over it (the so-called television strike in 2000). As a result, the editorial tone is set mostly by the journalists working there. As such, the political leanings of the TV could fairly accurately be described as mildly progressive, pro-EU, and centre to centre-left<sup>2</sup>.

The same trend also applies to the other publicly owned media – the Czech press office and the Czech radio. The current government (composed of the ANO party led by billionaire Andrej Babiš, the Social democrats and supported by communists) has been making some moves to gain more control over these media, but so far those have been for the most part limited to placing people opposed to public media on control boards<sup>3</sup>.

Another very important phenomenon to take note of is that the Czech public media are the only ones who still maintain a network of foreign correspondents, and thus are not wholly dependent on foreign media or developments abroad. This dependence is sometimes almost comical, when, for example, reporting on news in Poland is based on what was written by CNN<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of mainstream right wing criticism see <https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/komentare/85798/ceska-televize-si-muze-za-kritiku-casto-sama-v-mnohem-nestranna-rozhodne-neni.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lupa.cz/clanky/hana-lipovska-pavel-matocha-lubos-xaver-vesely-rada-ceske-televize-ct/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/volby-polsko-jaroslav-kaczynski-pis.A191014\\_184708\\_zahranicni\\_m](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/volby-polsko-jaroslav-kaczynski-pis.A191014_184708_zahranicni_m)

<sup>1</sup> [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a4893/f9/po190328.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4893/f9/po190328.pdf)

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THE CZECH PUBLIC MEDIA ARE THE ONLY ONES WHO STILL MAINTAIN A NETWORK OF FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS, AND THUS ARE NOT WHOLLY DEPENDENT ON FOREIGN MEDIA OR DEVELOPMENTS ABROAD

### TRADITIONAL MEDIA

In a sharp reversal to the previous decade, when most of the nation's leading newspapers were owned by foreign (usually German) media companies, most publishing houses today are the property of Czech billionaires<sup>5</sup>. When explaining his motivation for acquiring Mafra, one of the leading publishing houses, Andrej Babiš, the current prime minister of the country, stated, "My reason for buying it was based on the fact

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2019/03/aktualizovana-mapa-vlastniku-ceskych-medii/>

that they wrote lies about me"<sup>6</sup>. As a reaction to the sale, quite a few<sup>7</sup> journalists have left and founded their own, primarily online media (for example, *Echo24* or *Forum24*). These new media have become the fiercest critics of the current government.

The other billionaires<sup>8</sup> usually kept their reasons for buying media to themselves, some even portraying it as an act of charity (nowadays, print media are usually unprofitable). Some observers have even claimed that owning a publishing house has become a sort of a status symbol amongst billionaires<sup>9</sup>.

### "ALTERNATIVE" MEDIA

Currently, the biggest and most noticeable "alternative media" outlet in the Czech Republic is *Parlamentní listy* (PL). The name means parliamentary newspaper, and it is quite the misnomer. The publication has no affiliation with the Czech parliament and it is, at the moment, an online-only media source. Its critics consider it to be the main source of disinformation in the Czech Republic<sup>10</sup>.

PL is based on several ideas. The first is the production of a large volume of articles with as sensational headlines as possible, akin to a tabloid. More importantly, PL also offers politicians the ability to publish their articles free of charge. Thirdly, its critics allege that PL also offers political parties the op-

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.denik.cz/ekonomika/babis-koupe-mafry-byla-chyba-radeji-jsem-mel-koupit-blesk-20141018.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://zpravy.tiscali.cz/novinarsky-exodus-je-cas-udelat-babisovi-papa-318919>

<sup>8</sup> For example Zdeněk Bakala, Ivo Valenta or Daniel Křetínský

<sup>9</sup> <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/denik-insider/miliardari-jako-vlastnici-medii-proc-si-babis-a-bakala-kupuji-noviny/r~i:insider:article:23286/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://hlidacipes.org/ondrej-neumann-jak-parlamentni-listy-siri-dezinformace-tentokrat-o-propojeni-george-sorose-a-ceskych-novinaru/>

tion to publish their press releases as news articles without noting the source<sup>11</sup>. The last ingredient for success is the presence of almost unmoderated discussions under individual articles. After a promising start, PL was purchased by Ivo Valenta, a billionaire and current senator. The political orientation of PL is nationalistic, conservative, and against the current form of the European Union (EU)<sup>12</sup>. It is often claimed to be pro-Russian, but the evidence is not quite clear, since due to the aforementioned structure, both pro and anti-Russian texts get published there.

There are many other so-called alternative media, which may, roughly speaking, be categorized into several "camps". Perhaps the best known are the openly pro-Russian media such as *Sputnik* (which is directly owned and controlled by *Russia Today*, a state-owned enterprise based in Russia) and *Aeronet* (an anonymous project most notable for its conflict with Svoboda a přímá demokracie, the biggest Czech nationalist party). Media like these have been described by the Czech government as sources of Russian propaganda<sup>13</sup>. Simply put, these media support the current Russian foreign policy – including the occupation of Crimea, for example. They also tend to support Czechxit, are extremely socially conservative, and fiscally very left-wing<sup>14</sup> (and so may be perceived as national socialists – but still not Nazi).

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.respekt.cz/special/2017/dezinformace/most-na-druhy-breh>

<sup>12</sup> <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66094730-jsem-pro-odchod-z-eu-rika-senator-a-podnikatel-ivo-valenta-a-chysta-se-nakupovat-dalsi-televize>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.respekt.cz/z-noveho-cisla/putinuv-hlas-v-cesku>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.lidovky.cz/byznys/media/parlamentni-listy-jsou-radikalni-listy.A150817\\_124641\\_ln\\_nazory\\_ELE](https://www.lidovky.cz/byznys/media/parlamentni-listy-jsou-radikalni-listy.A150817_124641_ln_nazory_ELE) <https://www.forum24.cz/aeronauti-z-ruska-v-akci-komu-jejich-web-patri-a-kdo-to-asi-plati-no-hadejte/>

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THE VAST MAJORITY OF CZECHS ARE NEITHER PROGRESSIVE NOR PARTICULARLY GLOBALIST

A much older group of the media is the far-left media outlets. Some of these have existed for quite some time, with few existing since the 1990s (the oldest continuous run is from 1996). These include such publications as *Britské listy* or *Deník Referendum*. When compared to the previous category, these tend to be much more upfront about what they want and who writes the articles. The editorial line includes extreme-left economics and very progressive social ideas.

### COMMENTARIES

Once, almost every online news media outlet featured the option of users posting comments under the articles. Over time, many websites have either eliminated this feature completely, or made it available only to registered readers due to the time required moderating the discussion boards. As such, active commenters have congregated on the remaining websites with a distinct set of opinions not necessarily related to the editorial line of the newspaper itself.

Nowadays, the biggest media discussion boards are those at idnes.cz (which are centre-right, more conservative than progressive, opposed to Andrej Babiš, and somewhat skeptical of the EU) and the boards of novinky.cz and parlametnilisty.cz

(which tend to support Babiš and are even more conservative and EU-skeptical). The more progressive commenters tend to use Twitter or Facebook. However, needless to say, Facebook also has significant nationalist pages<sup>15</sup>.

CNN is, for some reason, treated by Czech journalists as the US version of BBC, while it is structurally anything but the BBC. *The Guardian* is a British newspaper noted for its progressive stances. Politically, it can be categorized as left-wing.

The odd one out is Reuters, a British news agency, striving for an as objective a language as possible. As such, Reuters was the only one of these four sources of news that tried to take on a rather neutral position on the aforementioned issues. The problem, of course, is that the vast majority of Czechs are neither progressive nor particularly globalist. This unfortunate selection of news sources has, therefore, created a disconnect between mainstream media and their audiences.

### MIGRATION CRISIS

The migration crisis was a shock to most Czechs. Until mass migration hit the news, the summer of 2015 was a veritable "silly season" with the better half of July being dominated by the news of the break-up of a Czech beach volleyball duo. However, when migrants started to cross to Hungary, the problem could no longer be ignored. And thus, Czech media started to report on the issue, mostly by simply translating articles from the above-mentioned four foreign sources. This phenomenon immediately created a deep disconnect, since Czechs were, and still are, adamantly op-

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/hnutispd/>, <https://www.facebook.com/tomio.cz/>, [https://www.facebook.com/MilosZemanMujPrezident/?ref=py\\_c](https://www.facebook.com/MilosZemanMujPrezident/?ref=py_c), <https://www.facebook.com/AntiKavarna.cz/>, <https://www.facebook.com/hejobjcane/>

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## CZECHS ARE VERY HOSTILE TO THE IDEA OF ACCEPTING REFUGEES

posed to admitting a larger number of migrants [See: Table 1].

Furthermore, as the data suggests [See Tables 1 and 2], Czechs are very hostile to the idea of accepting refugees. The key reason as to why, is likely a fear shown by the majority thinking that refugees are a threat to the security of Czech Republic, the European Union, and even to world peace. These feelings have remained basically unchanged throughout the years, and it is safe to assume that they are not going to change any time soon. The only notable change is the considerable reduction of interest in the situation, which is not surprising due to how the human attention span and news cycles work<sup>16</sup>.

### CZECH MEDIA, REPORTING ON THE MIGRANT CRISIS, AND THE REACTION OF THE PUBLIC

In contrast to general opinion, most of the mainstream media reporting was what its supporters would call "emphatic", but its critics would label it as "bleeding heart naïve" as can be seen in the contrast between the tone of the report and the tone

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/apr/16/got-a-minute-global-attention-span-is-narrowing-study-reveals>, <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/analiza-zpravy-o-migraci-se-objevuji-v-mediich-hlave-pred-volbami/1817346>

Table 1: Czech opinions about refugees in 2015

Question	Yes (2015)	Yes (2019)	No (2015)	No (2019)
Should the Czech Republic admit war refugees?	35 % only until the end of the war, 4 % permanently	31 % only until the end of the war, 2 % permanently	59%	63%
Should the Czech Republic admit refugees from Middle East and North Africa??	16%	15%	79%	81%
Are refugees a security threat for the Czech Republic?	79%	72%	18%	22%
Is ISIS a threat to the Czech Republic ?	77%	Not asked	17%	Not asked
Are refugees a security threat for the EU?	88%	84%	9%	14%
Are refugees a threat to world peace?	78%	75%	17%	20%
Are you interested in the refugee crisis?	74%	57%	21%	43%

Sources: <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/1967-postoj-ceske-verejnosti-k-prijimani-uprchliku-rijen-a-listopad-2015>; <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/4970-postoj-ceske-verejnosti-k-prijimani-uprchliku-kveten-2019>

Note: The numbers do not add to 100 %, because the table omits the "I don't know" answers

of the discussions. For example, an article reporting about the rescue of 150 migrants has the following as the second most voted up comment: "Rescue? You mean rescue of human trafficking business"<sup>17</sup>. That is to say, most of the coverage was casting the migrants in a sympathetic light and were not looking at the whole picture and implications of the migration wave. Sometimes, the reporting repeatedly described the same stories; migrants were, for instance, described as "mostly doctors and engineers" or "quiet and grateful"<sup>18</sup>. Such framing of

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/recko-rhodos-migranti-zachrana-egejske-more.A200828\\_061532\\_zahranicni\\_wass/diskuse](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/recko-rhodos-migranti-zachrana-egejske-more.A200828_061532_zahranicni_wass/diskuse)

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/na-madar-sko-rakouske-hranice-dorazila-dalsi-vlna-uprchliku.A150910\\_060948\\_zahranicni\\_ane](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/na-madar-sko-rakouske-hranice-dorazila-dalsi-vlna-uprchliku.A150910_060948_zahranicni_ane)

the debate quickly entered the public discourse, but was mostly used by opponents of migration to denigrate the integrity of the reporting.

The reaction of the public was fairly homogeneous, regardless of the news medium (with the exception of the far-left media)<sup>19</sup>, which is something that has not really happened with any other issues in the past. There was widespread scorn to the way the media tried to frame these issues. Almost every online comment section was rife with anti-migrant sentiment, sometimes descending to outright racism. More im-

<sup>19</sup> This is because these publications have made the plight of various disadvantaged groups one of their foci long before this crisis.



## “THE MEDIA UTTERLY FAILED TO PERSUADE THEIR AUDIENCES THAT THE CZECH REPUBLIC SHOULD HELP THE MIGRANTS/ REFUGEES

portantly, links to news sources that were allegedly less biased started to proliferate, hence the growth of the disinformation media, which used this opportunity to cast themselves as truth-speakers.

Consequently, the media utterly failed to persuade their audiences that the Czech Republic should help the migrants/refugees. More importantly, the idea that the media were lying started to circulate more often and with greater force than before. The fact that “alternative media” started to greatly increase in number around 2015 is thus not a coincidence.

### BUILDING PUBLIC DISTRUST IN MEDIA

The most notable event that successfully contributed to generating distrust of the public opinion in the Czech Republic towards media was probably the 2016 US presidential election. The reason why is similar to that of the migration crisis, only more magnified this time. In the end, if one used CNN as their main source of in-

formation for the US elections, there was no chance to receive the full picture. The one-way reporting done by most media in Czech Republic, coupled with the fact that the election did not end the way they predicted, only deepened the distrust.

Some events, most notably the Czech television (CT) special called “American Election Night” (sic!) aired on X November 9<sup>th</sup> 2016 were even the subject of formal reprimand by the country's Council for Television and Radio Broadcasting due to biased coverage. The CT has, however, refused any criticism and asked the Council to reconsider<sup>20</sup>. On a personal note, having watched the said special, I can say that it could not be considered impartial reporting and had resulted in my significantly decreased trust in the CT after that.

The trend of favoring progressive (or “liberal”, in media parlance) candidates is fairly constant, regardless of the country in question<sup>21</sup>, and has, in aggregate, caused many conservatives to stop trusting the mainstream media completely. A major issue then is the fact that there are no conservative news sources in the Czech Republic that stay out of the disinformation business.

### CAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA REGAIN THE TRUST OF LOST AUDIENCES?

The question whether Czechs trust the media is surprisingly difficult to answer. There

<sup>20</sup> <https://hlidacipes.org/nevyvazena-ceska-televizce-ct-zada-rtv-o-prezkum-usneseni-k-vysilani-z-americke-volebni-noci/>

<sup>21</sup> For a criticism from the left see <https://www.spec-tator.co.uk/article/will-the-bbc-become-a-victim-of-its-own-bias->, from the right <https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/495927-in-the-age-of-trump-media-bias-comes-into-the-spotlight>, a data point <https://www.npr.org/2017/10/02/555092743/study-news-coverage-of-trump-more-negative-than-for-other-presidents>, <https://www.em.muni.cz/veda-a-vyzkum/10296-duverou-v-media-otrasla-polarizace-spolecnosti>

Table 2: General trust in media 2019

Question	Yes	No
Trust in media, according to digitalnewsreport.org <sup>22</sup>	33% in general, 39% towards the media I use	X
Trust in television, according to CVVM <sup>23</sup>	44%	53%
Trust of newspapers, according to CVVM	41%	55%
Trust of internet, according to CVVM	42%	50%

Note: Yes and No aggregated responses such as “I (dis)agree completely” and “I mostly agree/disagree”

## “THE TREND OF FAVORING PROGRESSIVE (OR “LIBERAL”, IN MEDIA PARLANCE) CANDIDATES IS FAIRLY CONSTANT AND HAS, IN AGGREGATE, CAUSED MANY CONSERVATIVES TO STOP TRUSTING THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA COMPLETELY

have been quite a few surveys with widely differing results [See: Tables 2 and 3].

Although the data is rather unclear as regards the trust in various Czech media outlets, some conclusions may still be drawn. First of all, when asked to rate the media as a whole, Czechs tend to rate them lower than when asked about an individual source, which is not so surprising. The reason behind this dichotomy probably stems from most people having a news source they like thus pushing the overall ranking higher.

Secondly, the levels of trustworthiness go from the public media being most trusted, through mainstream newspapers, to alternative media, and finally tabloids. It should, however, be borne in mind that *Blesk*, the tabloid mentioned before, has the highest print circulation of all media in the Czech Republic, which strongly suggest

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2019/czech-republic-2019/>

<sup>23</sup> [https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com\\_form2content/documents/c2/a4893/f9/po190328.pdf](https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4893/f9/po190328.pdf)

Table 3: Trust in selected individual media 2019 [in %]

Do you trust this medium?	Yes	No
Czech Television	74/56.6	18/19
Czech radio	53/56.8	14/10.3
MF Dnes Idnes.cz	45/37.5 64/37.5	23/18.1 25/18.1
Hospodářské noviny	42/39.5	17/10.8
Právo	35/28.2	24/18.9
Novinky.cz	58/31.8	30/13.5
Aktualne.cz	54/34.9	22/10.6
Blesk (T)	12/7	56/62.2
Aha! (T)	5.5	54.8
Parlamentnilisty.cz (A)	25/16.7	33/20.7
Deník Referendum (A)	5.8	7.2

Sources: Before parentheses: AMI communications<sup>24</sup>; after parentheses or if parentheses not present: MUNI<sup>25</sup>. “Alternative media” are marked with (A), tabloids with (T).

Note: Large numbers of responses were “I don’t know” or “Neither trustworthy, nor untrustworthy”

that readers of tabloids care more about salaciousness than factuality.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, this connection cannot be so easily established with the so-called “alternative media”, which suggests that many recipients of alternative media consume them,

because they think the other media are lying and the alternative ones do not.

There exist various interpretations as to what drives the distrust of the Czech public opinion toward the media. It is a common trope, for example, to assume that the elderly are easy to manipulate, whereas the youth are more media savvy [See: Table 4].

<sup>24</sup> By the way, when writing, I was instantly reminded of this clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DG-scoaUWW2M>

Table 4: Distrust of media by personal factors [in %]

Factor	Distrust
University-level education	48.5
Basic education only	46.9
Often watches/reads media	35.9
Seldom watches/reads media	51.9
Votes for right-wing parties	43.1
Votes for left-wing parties	50.6
18-29 years old	53
Over 60 years old	44
Very low income	62.3
Above average income	46.7
Unemployed	67.3
Retired	41.5

Source: <https://interaktivni.rozhlas.cz/duvera-mediim/>

Moreover, there are very strong correlations based primarily on economic data. It is clear that distrust towards the media is often driven by poor financial situation status and, perhaps, a need to find some other force outside themselves to blame for their poor state of life. It is very interesting to note the below-average distrust that elderly people show towards the media, which, ironically, makes them more, not less vulnerable to disinformation as they are less likely to question what they consume.

REMEDYING THE SITUATION

The majority of leading newspapers in most EU countries have been struggling due to a pattern of losing subscribers and labor costs going up<sup>25</sup>. The fact that anyone with a video camera (i.e. everyone with a smart-

<sup>25</sup> For example in Germany there has been a decline in newspaper circulation going back 2 decades despite population growth <https://www.statista.com/statistics/380784/circulation-daily-newspapers-germany/>, similar in the US, eg <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2017/11/media-apocalypse/546935/>

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## DISTRUST TOWARDS THE MEDIA IS OFTEN DRIVEN BY POOR FINANCIAL SITUATION STATUS

phone) can become a content creator has not helped either. Media have lost much of their former power to shape the narrative and act as gatekeepers of information.

I wonder if a little bit of ideological clarity would not help in the Czech Republic. To explain: unlike in most Western countries, here newspapers still tend to pretend (and are expected to pretend by much of the population) that they are a neutral source of information – which they are not<sup>26</sup>. As such, the media could, paradoxically, become more trustworthy by owing up to their own biases and “coming out” – by, for example, stating their political affiliation “we are a centre-left, progressive, pro-EU” newspaper, which is a common practice in the United Kingdom. At the very least, the wind could be taken out of the sails of conspiracy theorists, claiming that the media

<sup>26</sup> Right wing criticism: [https://www.expres.cz/zpravy/jan-zahradil-nora-fridrichova-168-hodin.A190902\\_142658\\_dx-zpravy\\_stes](https://www.expres.cz/zpravy/jan-zahradil-nora-fridrichova-168-hodin.A190902_142658_dx-zpravy_stes), left wing criticism: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewiuprDEydnrAhWN0cAKHf-BBAkQFJA GegQIBhAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fblisty.cz%2Fart%2F66591-kauza-baborova-problemem-jsou-zaujata-media-a-pasivni-volici.html&usq=AOvVaw0L8hoiCAOzuYrYSCyz70XT>, point of view of politicians: <https://www.info.cz/zpravodajstvi/strategie-spor-o-ct-nejde-o-hospodareni-poslancum-vadi-zaujati-redaktori-tvrdi-zaoralek>

have some hidden, nefarious agenda. There also exists a long-term solution to the problem at hand. Like the much harped on teaching on better understanding of written text in schools. But that is a question that is part of a much larger debate on how education should work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In the end, much of the onus is on the journalists themselves. Of course, nowadays some progressives seem to question the very concept of informative journalism, and tend to dabble into activism with the idea of writing with justice, transparency, or clarity, not objectivity as the goal, so a change might not be forthcoming there. Nonetheless, regardless of how post-modernists twist the meaning of once perfectly clear words, deceiving one's readers, is still not going to be a viable long-term strategy for securing credibility. It might, however, be one for continued financial success, as studies show that an increasing number of people want to read newspapers news sources that confirm their views instead of reporting the truth<sup>27</sup>.

In light of these phenomena, public/state-owned media should probably exist to provide mostly unbiased information. However, it must be stated, that in some cases, state-owned media may serve as mouthpieces for the government – as is, at the moment, evident in Poland or Hungary. This sort of situation certainly does not serve to increase trust in media.

A solution to remedying the situation may at first glance be to have publicly owned media in the vein of the BBC, and thus theoretically have independent and informative media. I agree that such media are independent, but am very skeptical on the lack of activism. This progressive activism

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/07/090701082720.htm>

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## THE MEDIA COULD, PARADOXICALLY, BECOME MORE TRUSTWORTHY BY OWING UP TO THEIR OWN BIASES AND “COMING OUT”

is something that is just not acceptable to many of the more conservative readers.

### CONCLUSIONS

The so-called “alternative media” in the Czech Republic would have started to grow regardless of the aforementioned problems, just like they did in other countries. Nevertheless, biased media coverage of some issues such as the migration crisis gave them a completely unnecessary boost. Getting those readers and watchers back to mainstream media will be close to impossible, since people are not likely to start trusting media again, as they believe that they are being lied to, due to divergences between public opinion and media opinion.

One popular initiative happening in many countries that tries to address this are various fact-checkers. It is questionable how much this can help. The issue of trust remains the same, people disinclined to trust mainstream media are not likely to trust fact

checkers or are supported by them. Also, the “alternative media” will try to claim that the people doing the checking are biased against them, as has already happened in the Czech Republic<sup>28</sup>.

Perhaps time will resolve the issue and the amount of lies and disinformation may eventually drive most of alternative media readership from it. But the question is where will they go? Back to mainstream media or to another alternative media? And will there be any real mainstream media to go back to?

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Jak-funguje-overovani-pravdy-Pracovnik-odhaluje-podivne-praktiky-na-serveru-Demagog-593221>, <https://www.televizeznam.cz/video/jb-talk/xaver-63988896>

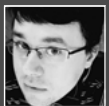


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MICHAL HEJL

An analyst at the Institute of Social and Economic Research, a new independent political think tank based in Prague, the Czech Republic

# Authoritarian Change, Public Broadcasters, and “Fake News” in Poland



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PIOTR  
BENIUSZYS

**A**uthoritarian regimes and dictatorships of any kind have always typically striven to control the flow of information in the countries they governed. All media outlets that would come under control of such political systems were bound to cease as reliable sources of information. The political agenda of the government would thence dictate their political news broadcasting: some facts would be omitted, others manipulated or distorted, blown out of proportion, or even simply created out of nothing.

At the same time, some authoritarian regimes would declare themselves genuinely free democracies and would hope to transmit this kind of image to at least part of the world. The fact-checking activities of free media, usually from the democracies abroad, would present a major challenge to this image-building strategy, as lies and propaganda of their state media would get exposed time and again. In some cases, this threat would constitute an incentive to limit the frequency of false information broadcasting to only the most urgent or inevitable situations. But in today's reality, where people are permanently confronted with a tremendous amount of online news sources (many of which are of rather low quality), with identity media outlets, which dress up ideological formation as news, and, of course, with blunt so-called “fake news” spreaders, the general trust in media credibility has been profoundly damaged<sup>1</sup>. It has now become fairly easy for anyone who broadcasts political information to insist that it is the others who spread lies.

In a world filled with false or inaccurate news, authoritarian regimes can set up public broadcasting news outlets and pub-

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IN A WORLD FILLED WITH FALSE OR INACCURATE NEWS, AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES CAN SET UP PUBLIC BROADCASTING NEWS OUTLETS AND PUBLISH DISINFORMATION ALMOST WITHOUT LIMITS

lish disinformation almost without limits. As public TV and radio stations in democratic countries still enjoy a somewhat better reputation than other outlets<sup>2</sup>, them being taken over by a government which is gearing towards introducing a change of the political system – away from liberal democracy – creates a potential for spreading disinformation. These manipulations can prove to be resistant to exposure for quite a number of years. In Poland, since the electoral success of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, the public broadcasters, especially the public Polish Television (TVP), are a case in point.

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/the-fall-rise-and-fall-of-media-trust.php)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.quotenmeter.de/n/99812/vertrauen-in-nachrichten-ard-und-zdf-dominieren-ausser-beim-moderator> [in German]



## POLISH PUBLIC TELEVISION AFTER THE 2015 POLITICAL CHANGE

Not only during election campaigns has it become clear to most observers and many institutions that both TVP's flagship daily news programme "Wiadomosci" and its 24/7 news channel TVP Info have turned into a completely one-sided, government and PiS-supporting, opposition-bashing, political campaign operator. The news reports of "Wiadomosci" have the quality of

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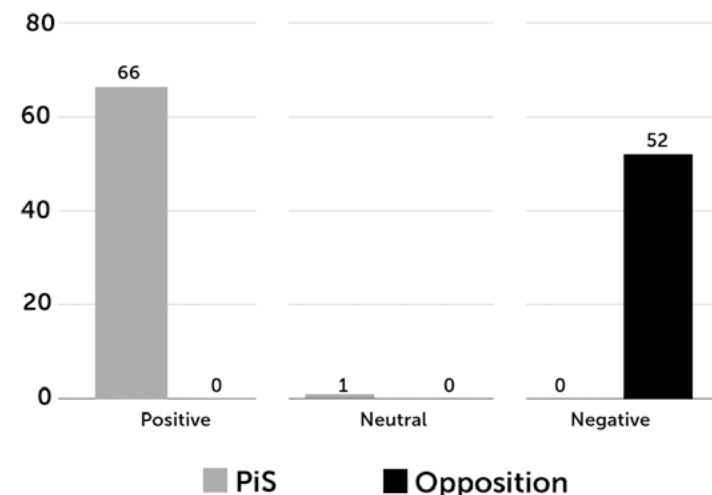
TVP'S FLAGSHIP DAILY NEWS PROGRAMME "WIADOMOSCI" AND ITS 24/7 NEWS CHANNEL TVP INFO HAVE TURNED INTO A COMPLETELY ONE-SIDED, GOVERNMENT AND PIS-SUPPORTING, OPPOSITION-BASHING, POLITICAL CAMPAIGN OPERATOR

election campaign spots, which can be roughly divided in two categories: on the one hand, positive reports on the government and PiS candidates illustrating their various successes and never mentioning any mistakes of theirs; and on the other hand, strongly negative reports on the opposition who they claim governed disastrously before 2015 and since then only attempt to maliciously spoil the Polish days in the sun.

This has been eliciting protests for a few years now, not only with the participation of opposition politicians (who, in addition to skewed news reporting, also often face an openly hostile treatment by TVP anchors and journalists when they, on occasion, appear on televised debate programmes there). Also private citizens who vote for opposition parties and pay a monthly subscription fee that benefits public broadcasters in Poland, other non-public media who criticize TVP's conduct on grounds of journalistic ethos and national and international institutions have voiced their criticism.

It is worth noting that the Polish ombudsman office (Adam Bodnar, who held the office until early September 2020) is one of the very few appointed officials who remain outside of PiS control so far. As such, it has issued a formal letter of protest, pointing out that TVP is not fulfilling its legal obligation to present political subjects in a fair and balanced manner. Especially by not granting all candidates equal airtime in order to inform voters about their programmes, they are judged according to political preference. Bodnar stressed that in the month of February 2020 TVP granted 90 minutes to inform about PiS presidential candidate and incumbent Andrzej Duda, while the Left's candidate, Robert Biedron, received only 44 seconds. The ombudsman's letter was simply left unanswered both by the TVP and PiS-controlled media supervisory bodies.

Figure 1: TVP's "Wiadomosci" news items on political parties ahead of parliamentary elections (September 27 - October 11, 2019)



In addition to that, the OSCE report on 2019 Polish parliamentary general elections stated that while the voting procedure was democratic and fair, the political reporting of TVP and public radio stations was "clearly biased and deprived of any kind of supervision and had a negative effect on the voters' capability to make informed electoral decisions"<sup>3</sup>.

A report on the balance of positive/negative reporting by the TVP from the 2019 election campaign (issued by the "Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie" journalistic community) leaves no space for doubt. During two key weeks in September and October 2019 over half of all political news materials – 67, to be exact – concentrated on PiS. 66 of them were positive, 1 was neutral. 52 materials focused on the combined opposition parties and each and every single one of them was negative [See: Figure 1]. The selection of

guests for the primetime political talk show on TVP1 (aired directly after "Wiadomosci") also proved to be unbalanced, as 14 guests represented PiS, and only 6 the opposition parties combined (also, no opposition politician appeared as a single guest, they were each time flanked by a PiS politician)<sup>4</sup>.

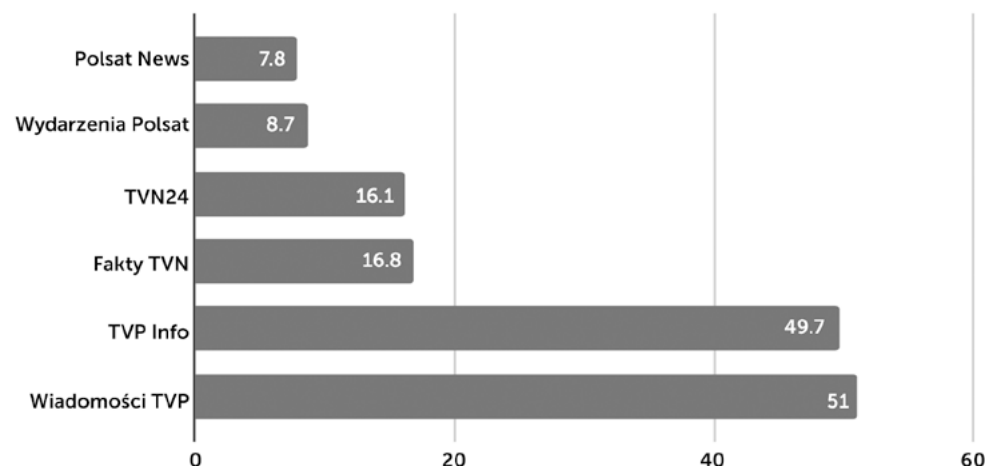
This reality is also expressed in public opinion polls on media reliability in Poland. The most recent of them, conducted by the major public opinion studies institute, IBRIS, found that the majority of Poles (51%) consider "Wiadomosci" to be biased and unreliable, with over 49% expressing the same view on TVP Info. Major private news broadcasters fared much better: only less than 9% believe Polsat to be biased, whereas 16% see TVN's news broadcasting as skewed<sup>5</sup> [See: Figure 2].

<sup>3</sup> On the ombudsman intervention and the OSCE report, see: <https://krytykapolityczna.pl/archiwum/dosc-stron-niczosci-mediow-publicznych-rpo-zada-wyjasnienie-prezesa-tvp/> [in Polish]

<sup>4</sup> <http://towarzystwodziennikarskie.pl/> [in Polish]

<sup>5</sup> Poll results available at: <https://www.press.pl/tresc/62149,ibris-dla-onetu--wiadomosci-i-tvp-info-nierzetelnie-relacjonuja-kampanie> [in Polish]

Figure 2: Percentage of Poles considering major TV news media unreliable



Polish public broadcasters have a history of not being completely fair and balanced, as the system of appointing the TVP's and radio's management after 1989 has always been politicized. Of course it was undoubtedly a progress compared to the communist era, but it never ceased to be a focus of strong political controversy. Yet, even conservative-leaning commentators agree that the treatment of public broadcasters by the PiS government since 2015 has been unprecedented. Andrzej Stankiewicz of the Onet.pl news website said, "TVP has never attacked opposition parties so brutally. It is, in fact, not a right-wing or pro-PiS television, most of all it is a television, which is fighting all of the enemies that PiS singles out: LGBT people, the right-wing party Konfederacja, Germans, Jews". Piotr Zaremba of the right-wing "Sieci" weekly says that the bias of TVP is so utterly obvious that "people who have reservations about PiS, they just don't watch "Wiadomości"<sup>6</sup>,

they are repulsed by it. The only use for it is to solidify the core PiS electorate, who seek a simple and clear signal"<sup>7</sup>.

The swift dismissal of many journalists at TVP after PiS gained control over the television was also unprecedented.

The most popular anchors found themselves on a "black shortlist" and were fired within a few weeks of the takeover. In the months thereafter, a wave swept away approximately 160 popular journalists, some of whom quit on their own, unable to accept the dramatic political bias or censorship of their reporting work by the newly installed top management or editor's office. Some waited to be let go in order to file lawsuits against TVP and won compensation in court. Some had been engaged for a limited period of time and their contracts have not been renewed. Yet, a substantial number of rather technical employees (such as cameramen, researchers, sound or light technicians) had to stay on simply due

to their financial situation. They conform despite strong misgivings – the job market for media workers in Poland is very small and the threat of unemployment is great. Therefore, if they speak about the reality of working at TVP during the last years, they do so anonymously<sup>8</sup>.

### THE REALITY AS SEEN ON TVP

The daily activity of TVP news broadcasts is to report on the opposition in a negative fashion. To this end, almost exclusively PiS-supporting commentators or public intellectuals are asked to comment on daily events, facts are selected and omitted, events from long gone years unearthed to dismiss the current criticism against the government. TVP utilizes stereotypical aversions that incite parts of Polish society to picture the opposition as allegedly Germany-, Brussels-, or Russia-friendly, or being a part of the LGBT+ movement's secret plan to *destroy* Polish families. All of this leads to the establishment of a false image of the opposition, who supposedly are not willing to stand up for Polish interests in the world. At the same time, the few international allies of PiS (mainly US President Donald Trump and the Hungarian government) are always shown in a positive light, and a close collaboration with them is never considered as a threat to the Polish *raison d'être*.

This, in itself, is groundwork for a falsified vision of a political reality. Yet, TVP also engages in spreading typical disinformation and unleashing hate campaigns. In order to discredit climate activist Greta Thunberg and her cause (the Polish government sees the continued energy production from coal to be in the country's strategic interest), a doctored picture of the young Swedish

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activist supposedly talking to George Soros (depicted for years as an almost diabolical donor of progressive organizations) was shown in "Wiadomości"<sup>9</sup>. Most viewers never found out that Soros' face covered that of former US vice-president Al Gore whom Thunberg really met. In order to keep Poles on high alert against Muslim refugees and immigration (a major source of PiS' electoral success in 2015), TVP often spreads false information about violent events involving this group in Western Europe; sometimes falsified video material was shown. TVP even created a non-existent fashion designer to speak praise on the Polish first lady's style, a fake doctor to speak on investments in healthcare, and showed skewed charts to exaggerate the healthcare

<sup>6</sup> For statements by Stankiewicz and Zaremba, see: <https://www.press.pl/tresc/57387,stromniczosc-tvp-w-informacjach-i-publicystyce-moze-miec-wplyw-na-wynik-wyborow> [in Polish] [own translations]

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <https://de.ejo-online.eu/pressefreiheit/staatsgelenkte-oeffentlich-rechtliche-medien-pressefreiheit-in-polen> [in German]

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/world/europe/poland-election-state-television-tvp.html>

spending development in Poland since PiS took over government<sup>10</sup>.

Migration from abroad was the backdrop of a hate campaign that TVP has unleashed against the Gdansk mayor, Pawel Adamowicz. This moderate, centrist politician took a decisively liberal approach on the issue of accepting refugees during the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and strongly challenged the government's stance. He quickly became one of the major enemies for TVP reporters, who attempted to implicate him in all manners of financial crimes or irregularities. Adamowicz was chased down the streets by a TVP camera team, his meetings with Gdansk inhabitants were interrupted, another camera crew attempted to raid his office at city hall. In 2018, different news items attacking Adamowicz aired approximately 1,800 times on TVP. Then, in January 2019, he was stabbed to death while onstage for a charity event. Although TVP denied any blame for the attack, and the perpetrator was deemed unable to take responsibility for his actions due to his mental state, his statement after the murder had political undertones and many Poles believe Adamowicz would not have been the target if not for the televised hate campaign<sup>11</sup>.

### THE FUTURE LOOKS BLEAK

After a year, the country fell all the way to the rank of 47 and in the following years slid slowly further down each time the index was released to reach the rank of 62 in the most recent estimation for 2019<sup>12</sup>. Over 50 members of the Parliamentary Assembly

<sup>10</sup> For some of the more trivial fake news on TVP see: <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10299159/wiadomosci-tvp-chwalily-sluzbe-zdrowia-i-zaliczyly-wpadki-zle-zdjecie-lekarza-i-zaskakujacy-wykres.html> [in Polish]

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/world/europe/poland-election-state-television-tvp.html>

<sup>12</sup> For World Press Freedom Index numbers, see: <https://www.press.pl/tresc/61335.polska-spadla-na-62.-miejsce-w-Swiatowym-indeksie-wolnosci-prasy> [in Polish]

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MUCH LIKE THE “RE-POLONIZATION”, THE “DE-CONCENTRATION” IS DESIGNED TO PUT THE OWNERSHIP STATUS OF MEDIA INTO FLUX AND CREATE AS MANY CHANCES AS POSSIBLE FOR GOVERNMENT-FRIENDLY OR GOVERNMENT-CONTROLLED ACTORS TO BUY OUT MEDIA OUTLETS

of the Council of Europe stated that TVP is now “a propaganda channel for the ruling party.” Reporters Without Borders diagnosed that Poland’s public media “have been transformed into government propaganda mouthpieces.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/poland-public-television-law-and-justice-pis-mouthpiece/>

After PiS scored victories in both the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2019 and 2020 it is not to be expected that the philosophy of conducting news broadcasting at TVP is to change anytime soon. Supporters of its hardline reporting believe that TVP merely re-balances the political broadcast in the country, as before the PiS takeover of both public media and the largest private media were hostile towards the conservative right. The man mainly responsible for the new TVP, politically appointed president and former PiS politician Jacek Kurski, believes that it is a public broadcaster’s duty to present the position of the government and its coalition parties, as it is them who hold a democratic mandate<sup>14</sup>. He seems to basically ignore the existing legal regulations in Poland<sup>15</sup> that oblige the TVP and Polish Radio to take a much different approach, one which grants any political tendency supported by groups of the Polish society access to the public via these media in order to take part in an open, pluralistic, and fair public debate.

Instead of easing the grip on political reporting, the governing party intends to tighten it before its second term in office ends in 2023. As it is often the case with creators of so-called “fake news”, TVP and PiS politicians accuse other media of spreading them<sup>16</sup>. Currently, the debate on the media landscape’s future turns toward the idea of the so called “re-polonization” of private media outlets, which are owned by foreign capital. During the 2020 presidential campaign, the Swiss-German and American owners of the *Fakt* newspaper, TV

<sup>14</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/poland-public-television-law-and-justice-pis-mouthpiece/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.lexlege.pl/ustawa-o-radiofonii-i-telewizji/rozdzial-4-publiczna-radiofonia-i-telewizja/6111/> [in Polish]

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.o2.pl/informacje/kontrowersyjne-wydanie-wiadomosci-tvp-oskarza-o-medialny-atak-na-andrzeja-duda-6531940204387040a> [in Polish]

channels TVN and TVN24, the *Newsweek Polska* weekly, and the Onet.pl website were harshly criticized for alleged attacks against Andrzej Duda. It was implied that they did not act out of journalistic sense of professional duty, but rather as agents of foreign interests that wished President Duda removed from presidential office.

Germany especially has been painted as an agent that is willing and ready to use the media they have in Poland to exercise political influence against PiS. Hence, the Polish government would like to take over as many private media groups as possible (or rather facilitate their takeover) by Polish state-owned big business corporations (from energy or insurance sectors) or even by private Polish companies, as even these would be easier to steer towards compliance with the government’s coverage expectations<sup>17</sup>.

Another facet of the plans to extend the political control is the so-called “de-concentration” of media, even those owned by Polish private capital. The owner of, for example, a newspaper would be legally forced to sell their news website or radio station. Much like the “re-polonization”, the “de-concentration” is designed to put the ownership status of media into flux and create as many chances as possible for government-friendly or government-controlled actors to buy out media outlets.

The free speech of those who wish to speak negatively of PiS can be narrowed even further with a planned “law against fake news”. A journalistic self-governing body would then be established to decide which news is considered “fake” and which is “true”<sup>18</sup>. Of

<sup>17</sup> <https://oko.press/polsce-grozi-wegierski-model/> [in Polish]

<sup>18</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/poland-public-television-law-and-justice-pis-mouthpiece/>

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course, a politicized process to appoint this body is to be expected; therefore, consequences of spreading alleged “fake news” – such as hefty fines – would certainly affect opposition media only. Plus, a harsh clamp-down against journalists in libel cases by increasingly government-controlled courts is a possible means to inflict self-censorship as a scare-tactic.

#### POLAND AS PART OF A WORLDWIDE TREND

Disinformation spreading media outlets appear around the world in every possible color. They have one propensity in common, though: to accuse others of being “fake news” – precisely those who attempt to falsify their stories. This is the reason why Poland plans to bring in sanctions against “fake news”, why Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte, the president of the

Philippines, repeatedly envision a similar action against the mainstream media that dare to fact-check them, why Singapore, Qatar, and Russia already introduced such legislation, and why Egypt even imprisoned people accused of repeating alleged fake news. These regimes are also poised to use this type of legislation to take action against people who reveal facts, i.e. whistle-blowers<sup>19</sup>.

It has become very easy to call facts “fake news”. Since the Internet’s information revolution – particularly since the onset of social media predominance as gateways to online news articles – the identity media became the most popular type of media that readers and viewers interested in politics consume<sup>20</sup>. In Poland, the argument that people want TVP to be an identity media outlet rather than an “outdated” public broadcaster in the classical sense of the term, has also made its rounds<sup>21</sup>. With so many of “the media” having a partisan bias, anyone can dismiss any criticism as coming from an untrustworthy source, one that does not seek the material truth, but is on an ideological mission for enemy forces. Accusations of “fake news” are just another step down the same line. If someone attacks us for ideological reasons and raises the matter in question in a glaringly one-sided way, then who will not believe that that same person is not just bending facts, but also generating them? It is not difficult to establish and upkeep a “news” organization based on lies in an environment where almost everyone lies at one point or another.

<sup>19</sup> <https://theglobepost.com/2018/10/23/fake-news-silencing-citizens/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/poland-public-television-law-and-justice-pis-mouthpiece/>

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DISINFORMATION  
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Here we come to a double dilemma. One impulse, maybe even the first impulse, is to call for a ban on disinformation and to extend the control over the information flow on the Internet. This way a gatekeeper mechanism is reintroduced, and conspiracy theorists, religious fanatics, automated bots, foreign-funded manipulators, and basic disinformation spreaders are deprived of the ability to reach huge audiences.

Still, is it not exactly what authoritarian regimes would want to do? Can we go and use their methods just because we believe, as liberals, that our cause is noble? The first part of the dilemma is the Internet’s nature of being both a tool to control authoritarian tendencies and governments who overstep their boundaries and attempt to encroach on our freedoms, and a tool to spread disinformation that weakens liberal democracies and politically strengthens precisely those who are most likely to encroach upon these freedoms of ours. The second part of the dilemma is the nature of disinformation. It is both a form of free speech (as outside the courtroom – and maybe church – lying is actually legal, although morally ques-

tionable), but it, clearly, at the same time, undermines free expression.

Therefore, liberals need to find ways to combat disinformation without banning it (especially since some disinformation is generated by people who made a mistake inadvertently) and to ameliorate the Internet tool, so that a decreasing number of people follow, believe or even decide to read disinformation. It erodes the trust in journalism, makes a reasoned public debate increasingly impossible, takes credibility away from genuine truth-seekers who are treated with often equal mistrust as malicious partisan pundits and become unable to persuade their readers or viewers.

Finally, disinformation undermines the very idea of democratic governance, as it seems questionable whether a majority of citizens should still decide on the course of political action if that majority is seriously ill informed. Freedom of speech will not survive for long if the public is no longer able to distinguish fact from falsehood. If criticism is made futile through multiplication of falsehoods in a public debate, free expression becomes pointless. This is precisely the reason why authoritarian regimes spread disinformation and fake-fight them.

The consumer of a news item must be made aware each time that they consume false news. Some social media platforms are taking first, yet hesitant steps towards this goal: in 2020, Twitter started to flag tweets which include false or heavily disputed information on the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>22</sup>. Facebook began labeling news items as “fact-checked” or “disputed” after the presidential election fiasco of 2016<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.vox.com/recode/2020/5/11/21254889/twitter-coronavirus-covid-misinformation-warnings-labels>

<sup>23</sup> <https://venturebeat.com/2018/08/21/facebook-now-gives-users-who-flag-fake-news-a-credibility-score/>



Research conducted at MIT led by David Rand and his team showed that a comprehensive system of labels can be effective as the number of people willing to repost disinformation decreased significantly if the label was present, from almost 30% in an online environment not using any labels to 16%.

The challenge presented here is one of completeness. 36% of disinformation stories were reposted when they were unlabeled in an online environment using labels. Consumers decided that the absence of a “false” label meant the story was true, and not just pending fact checking. In conclusion to their findings, Rand’s group suggested that all posts on, e.g. Facebook, receive labels, including those yet to be fact-checked, so that the “implied truth-effect” does not distort the consumers’ behavior.

Interestingly, readers also rejected news items labelled “false” when these were in accordance with their personal political views. In an age of ideological “bubbles” and a tendency to read only pieces of information one agrees with (while avoiding even reading those they reject on ideological grounds), it is worth noting that fact accuracy trumped ideological preference<sup>24</sup>.

### HOW TO LABEL?

Yet, labeling millions of news items with new ones coming in every hour is a gargantuan challenge. One of the ideas to tackle this is a crowd-sourced system of judging news. In fact, Rand’s team found that labeling news items by having users vote on their accuracy is promising – the judgments of the regular readers were mostly in line with those conducted by experts.

<sup>24</sup> <http://news.mit.edu/2020/warning-labels-fake-news-trustworthy-0303>

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Known disinformation outlets and highly partisan media fared particularly poorly when crowd-sourced judgment was used. Yet, this kind of “democratic” decisions on what is false news and what is not, raises some questions especially with regards to hacking of the rating procedure and winning “true” labels for false stories.

Another solution would be to refrain from labeling each single news item and to label news outlets and providers on their overall record instead. It seems possible to award labels for a set time frame (e.g. 3 months) that would be up for revision after elapsing. Any news provider could improve or damage their label based on their most recent performance in terms of fact accuracy. A range of labels could be introduced: from “always true” to “generally fake news” with

shades of gray of the type “known to publish disinformation, yet occasionally true stories as well”. With such a system in place, all consumers of news would be able to exclude false or unsure news sources from their newsfeed if they chose to. Rand’s findings show that a majority of people would probably do just that<sup>25</sup>.

Labeling systems already exist with regards to aspects other than accuracy. The website AllSides<sup>26</sup>, for example, charts Anglophone media outlets according to political or ideological leanings and to the extent of bias they exhibit. This mechanism, combined with the aforementioned “true” vs. “false” labeling, could create an even more precise tool to categorize the media. A consumer of news could not only find a news provider whom they like ideologically and which is free of disinformation, but also divide the media into a few categories depending on their approach to reporting.

Even among disinformation-free media, there are serious differences between content barren of any comment whatsoever and strongly partisan reporting. One category would then be a media outlet (or a programme) that reports “naked” news only, does not air any comment about the news, no opinions from any political figures, thus being totally unbiased.

A second category would constitute news programmes that allow for comment and opinion to accompany the pure information, but always – as their quality trademark – present opinionated commentaries from all (in many cases two, yet sometimes more) sides of an argument (and the news anchors always remain neutral). Debate talk

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.fastcompany.com/90471349/study-fakebooks-fake-news-labels-have-a-fatal-flaw>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.allsides.com/media-bias/media-bias-chart>

shows with representatives of political parties would typically fall into this category.

The third category would be media independent of all politicians, which would not only report news, but also create it with means of investigative journalism. Citizens’ media geared towards fulfilling the original function of the so-called “fourth branch” of government would be a part of this category.

The fourth category would be social media, where everyone is free to speak whatever they like, so it is logical that the information available there can be both highly partisan and inaccurate. Finally, the fifth category would be the identity media, both tied to political parties and independent of them but with a clear ideological leaning. On their programmes, viewers could expect to hear one side of the story, yet even here there would probably be both low quality, obscure outlets of disinformation, and higher-quality journalism, biased yet respectful of facts, and, at worst, omitting them.

A labeling system would also eventually be used as means to pressure public broadcasters in now somewhat failing democracies (such as TVP in Poland) to return to the level of quality media. Eventually no public broadcaster could operate if labelled as spreading disinformation or partisan news, as this is not their role. It ought to be clear that public broadcasters can only air programmes that may be categorized in one of the three categories: “pure news”, “news with balanced comment or opinion with a neutral anchor”/“balanced debate talk shows with a neutral moderator”, and – maybe – “investigative journalism”.

### WHO IS TO AWARD LABELS?

So far, so good, but a fundamental problem remains. Who would decide which label to award to each of the media outlets?

There seems to be very little doubt that if the label awarding commission was to be appointed in a politicized manner in Poland, PiS would seize control over it and award TVP's "Wiadomości" with labels "always true", "news with balanced comment or opinion with a neutral anchor", and "no ideological leaning". Case closed.

It is more than clear that no government who runs its own media can fulfill this role. It is also not possible that competing media organizations would award each other labels as *quid-pro-quo*s or – alternatively – hostile coalition building would ruin the whole undertaking. Of course, a better outlook could be provided if journalists created such a system on an international level. In fact, Reporters Without Borders launched the Journalism Trust Initiative that could introduce a certification system based on reporting accuracy of media<sup>27</sup>. Tech giants should also refrain from taking up this task as they can easily come under the suspicion of aiming at censorship. Fact-checking groups are better equipped, but as major opponents of influential disinformation spreaders, those who consume false information today do not trust them.

One possibility would be to recreate the consumer union movement that at some point developed into broad organizations warning people about low-quality products or dishonest service providers. If hundreds of thousands of people would involve themselves in investigating the media reporting's accuracy and releasing the findings to the public, the lives of disinformation groups would instantly become very difficult. Instilling default skepticism among consumers of news would be the first goal. Next, these movements could

<sup>27</sup> <https://theconversation.com/governments-are-making-fake-news-a-crime-but-it-could-stifle-free-speech-117654>

expand into activist groups that would intervene in media corporations' decision, force them into more transparency and demand quality publications only. Teaching media consumption literacy in schools would be another crucial step. It is within these structures that a – maybe even informal, but powerful by its reputation – commission to award warning labels and quality certificates for media outlets would come into existence.

Another option was presented by the European Union. The EU already introduced a voluntary Code of Practice for social media platforms with regards to their self-policing attempts that are oriented towards stopping hate speech, disinformation, and deep-fake manipulations. Within the scope of a future EU Digital Service Act, these platforms will share common content moderation tools. The social media operating tech giants seem willing to help the cause, as from a business perspective they have little interest in being widely considered as relays for low quality content and misleading information<sup>28</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The three ranges of labeling, namely 1) accuracy: from "always true" to "generally fake news"; 2) ideological leaning: from "left" to "right"; and 3) approach to reporting: from "pure news" to "identity media", would empower the consumers of information. It would further guarantee them freedom from cunning manipulation, awareness of what they came across, ability to evaluate what they are seeing, a foundation for conscious choices of news sources – and, hence, for responsible and well-informed political decisions. Liberal democracies profoundly require these changes. It would be a way to re-establish the public's belief

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.accesspartnership.com/free-speech-vs-fake-news-the-future-of-content-regulation/>

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## PUTTING AN ADEQUATE LABEL ON LIES DOES NOT CONTRADICT FREE SPEECH

in the existence of truly impartial news, with commentaries and opinions clearly separated from facts as they once used to be on the pages of serious newspapers in a different day and age.

Many countries have long ago introduced very thorough labeling systems for movies, video games, and even music albums. Consumers are warned when material is not suitable for children below a certain age. Even adult viewers are warned that the material includes violence, nudity, drug consumption, or colorful language and explicit lyrics in case they would prefer to avoid these. Still, for some reason, a system that warns people about the threat of misinformation is yet to be established, despite the fact that foul news media can have much more harmful effects on the political future of human lives than watching a sex scene.

The dispersal of information sources from once maybe a dozen national outlets per country to now countless sources that almost every internet user can start and establish, the lack of trust towards all types of elite that fuels the allegedly "independent", "rogue", "courageous" explainers of reality operating from their parents' basement, the deep ideological divisions that kill off pure news programmes and contribute to

the growth of identity and partisan media are a clear and present danger to our liberal democracies. Committed and accurate reporters cannot be forced to fight in the same category with liars. Brutally put, there is a need to name and shame. No one, except for those who call for violence or slander others, should have their freedom of speech restricted. But putting an adequate label on lies does not contradict free speech.

The European Union and the Council of Europe attempt to stop the erosion of the rule of law in countries like Poland. However, stopping authoritarian-leaning regimes from turning public (and publicly financed) broadcasters into disinformation spreaders, who then do the government party's dirty work, seems equally important.



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PIOTR BENIUSZYS

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A political scientist and sociologist based in Gdansk, Poland. Since 2008 publicist of the *Liberté!* quarterly and a blogger. Specializes in the history and ideological development of liberal political movements in Western Europe

# PIs for Propaganda: Disinformation and Manipulation of the State Broadcaster in Poland



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MIŁOSZ  
HODUN

*"You remember me as a tough politician. Because I used to be such a tough politician, and I understand the world of media. I am the guarantor, and I will know how to protect the independence of public television of the threats from the world of politics".*

Jacek Kurski, President of TVP  
(January 8, 2016)

**T**he Law and Justice (PiS) party won the presidential and parliamentary elections back in 2015. For the first time after the 1989 peaceful transition, one party had the absolute majority in both the Sejm and the Senate. But for Jarosław Kaczyński, *de jure* an ordinary member of parliament, the *de facto* leader of the populist right-wing ruling camp in Poland, and the architect of the deep refurbishment of the country's institutions, it was not enough. Kaczyński knew he needed more than one term to complete his revolution, to ingrain the changes in the state and society, so that (potential) future governments would not be able to reverse them.

Already in 2015 it was obvious for PiS that everything must be done to win the 2018, 2019, and 2020 elections. The first, namely the regional and the European elections,

were only a prelude before the grand finale between the autumn 2019 and spring 2020, when a new parliament and a president would be chosen.

PiS had armed itself well, with everything that the state had to offer. It took control – to a certain extent limited by popular protests, internal mobilization within the independent system, and pressure from the EU – over the judicial system. Shortly before the 2020 presidential election it managed to fill the position of the First President of the Supreme Court with its associate<sup>1</sup>.

The government has also changed the school structure and the curricula<sup>2</sup> in order to bring up – in the long run – its own voters within the official system. In the short run, PiS politicians, its loyalists, and their families took control over state-owned companies and built an uninterrupted stream of cash to the party and its candidates. This took place both in form of the companies' support for initiatives ideologically close to the right-wing populists and direct transfers from forever thankful newly employed managers and directors to PiS's electoral fund<sup>3</sup>.

One last element of this well-oiled machine was the state-owned media, especially the public service TV broadcaster – TVP. In 2015, TVP channels, especially TVP1 and TVP2, were still among the most popular in the country. TVP was the most watched media group, with TVP1 being one of the most watched channels. What is more, the public broadcaster was the most favored

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<sup>1</sup> Małgorzata Manowska was appointed to the Supreme Court in 2018. Before that, she had been the under-secretary of state in the Ministry of Justice for several months in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Curricula focus more on domestic issues and promoting conservative values now.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kraj/1958-820.1.haracz-na-wladze--kto-i-za-co-placi-partii-kaczynskiego.read> [in Polish]

source of information for Poles, especially its flagship news programs – “Wiadomości” and its lighter version “Teleexpress”. TVP Info was the only publicly available (and free of charge) news channel in Poland<sup>4</sup>. Hence, TVP was a tasty morsel for the new government, and was very quickly eaten, swallowed, and had its image change from a “public broadcaster” to “a tube of propaganda of PiS”.

### CHANGES

The new government started with personnel changes very rapidly. Four senior managers at TVP had announced their resignations. The resignations came from the heads of the channels TVP1, TVP2, TVP Kultura, and the human resource department of the TVP group. They have intended to pre-empt their anticipated dismissals from TVP after a new law passed through both chambers of the Polish parliament, which would allow the ruling party to choose their own heads for the public broadcaster.<sup>5</sup> This new law included firing all senior management at TVP – including the boards of directors and their members, both on national and regional level – with the country’s treasury being left in charge of choosing their successors.

Reshuffling began. Among those who lost their jobs were not only managers, but also journalists – including the iconic ones, like Tomasz Lis, the current Editor-in-Chief of

*Newsweek Polska*. “No one can force Poland to shut its mouth. No one can force me to shut my mouth,” he commented when leaving TVP.<sup>6</sup> “The independence of Poland’s media is enshrined in the law but, in practice, it is very relative,” Reporters Without Borders Editor-in-Chief Pauline Adès-Mével said at the time: “[...]firing experienced journalists whose professionalism has never been disputed violates a democratic society’s rules and threatens press freedom. Employment policy must be based on merit and transparency, not on affinities with ruling party leaders”<sup>7</sup>.

Experienced journalists were replaced, mostly by unskilled and untalented newcomers, eager to show up and prove themselves as valuable activists for the right-wing formation. Many of them were graduates from the College of Social and Media Culture (owned by father Tadeusz Rydzyk, an ally of PiS and a manager of the ultra-conservative media empire), and former reporters of niche right-wing channels (e.g. *Telewizja Republika*, *TV Trwam*). This new team was not only unprofessional (with difficulties speaking proper Polish and unable to provide reliable sources for their materials), but also highly politicized. Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy, a Polish TV and newspaper journalist and the director of Belsat TV, commented on this change:

*“Today there are these journalists who call themselves ‘disobedient’<sup>8</sup> and they may well be, but not towards Kaczynski. Maybe they don’t have a close relation-*

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.krrit.gov.pl/Data/Files/\\_public/Portals/0/publikacje/analizy/roznorodnosc-tresci-informacyjnych-w-polsce.pdf](http://www.krrit.gov.pl/Data/Files/_public/Portals/0/publikacje/analizy/roznorodnosc-tresci-informacyjnych-w-polsce.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> New legislation undermined the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT), which is empowered under the Constitution to regulate broadcast media and oversee public radio and television. The new measure terminated the KRRiT’s board members and temporarily shifted its responsibilities for management and appointment of public media personnel to the treasury minister. The National Broadcasting Council was circumvented a few months later, when the ruling majority passed a bill creating a new National Media Council, “with the right to hire and fire personnel for state television and radio”. The Council is totally dominated by PiS politicians and decides according to the PiS leadership’s will.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.wirtualnemedia.pl/artykul/tomasz-lis-przemawial-na-manifestacji-kod-nigdy-nie-zamknam-ust-wideo>

<sup>7</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/news/unjustified-firing-journalists-polands-state-broadcaster>

<sup>8</sup> The so-called “disobedient journalists” (*dziennikarze niepokorni*) are an informal group of self-declared right-wing and conservative journalists who rejected liberal and left-wing mainstream media.

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## EXPERIENCED JOURNALISTS WERE REPLACED, MOSTLY BY UNSKILLED AND UNTALENTED NEWCOMERS

*ship with Kaczynski, as he is a man who doesn’t maintain a relationship with every journalist. But, in general, there is a group of journalists with whom he is in good relations”<sup>9</sup>.*

TVP is legally obliged to produce diverse programs characterized by “pluralism, impartiality, balance”<sup>10</sup>. But currently the case is far from that. Katarzyna Chojnowska, a former foreign desk journalist, said that after the 2015 election, reporters were forbidden to use the terms “far-right” and “populism.” “There is also a ban on criticizing [US President Donald] Trump and [Hungarian Prime Minister] Viktor Orban,” she said, who are both seen as allies of PiS<sup>11</sup>. On the other hand, some progressive leaders’ words were censored, like Barack Obama’s concerns about PiS’s attempts to assert direct control over the Constitutional Tribunal expressed at the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw. They were edited in such a way so that only his praise for Poland was aired in

<sup>9</sup> Dzieciolowski, K. (2017) *Is There a Chance for Non-Partisan Media in Poland*, Oxford: Thomas Reuters Foundation, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.krrit.gov.pl/dla-nadawcow-i-operatorow/publiczni/status-zadania-finansowanie>

<sup>11</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/25/poland-public-television-law-and-justice-pis-mouthpiece/>

TVP. In other words, practices known from channels like Russia Today were domesticated and given its finishing national touch by party-loyalists and journalists committed to the local right-wing populist revolution. Poland, which has been mostly immune to hostile Russian propaganda, created its own disinformation factory, known as TVP, responsible for spreading fake information, challenging democratic values, and dividing the European Union.

What is more, the government was accused of using TVP outlets to target journalists it found disagreeable. Mariusz Kowalewski, a former employee of the state-owned Television News Agency (TAI) said that he received orders from his superiors to find dirt on top liberal journalists<sup>12</sup>. Jacek Kurski<sup>13</sup>, the new head of TVP, became the poster boy of the entire revolution in the Polish public media. Kurski started off as a journalist – he worked with *Tygodnik Solidarność*, and as a *BBC* correspondent at TVP in the early 1990s. He was formerly an MP, MEP, and a Deputy Minister of Culture in the government of former Prime Minister Beata Szydło. It is nothing new that a politician was appointed as head of TVP, since over twenty people who were running the company were former MPs and members of government. But none of them was a frontline political fighter of their parties. Kurski was. He is known as the self-declared “Kaczynski’s bull terrier” and a spin-doctor of PiS. He became a guarantor of the replacement of factual information with disinformation in all state broadcasters as expected by his political superior.

It is obvious that under the rule of the PiS party, state media has been used to promote

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/11/world/europe/poland-election-state-television-tvp.html>

<sup>13</sup> Jacek Kurski’s brother, Jarosław Kurski, is the Editor-in-Chief of the most influential Polish daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*.



the government's narrative and attack its opponents, including in news coverage. The right-wing politicians and commentators do not deny this shift, but they see it as bringing back pluralism on the market dominated by media not leaning towards PiS. Jacek Karnowski, the editor-in-chief of the PiS-oriented *Sieci* weekly magazine commented on this phenomenon in the following manner:

*"We need to see how deeply rooted the communist and post-communist staff in the public media is. Not only the faces, bosses, as these faces were frequently taken from the outside — e.g. a TV reporter. There is like thousands of people who are silently working in one direction and they stub, and they never let help to those who have been willing to help. When the right wing was governing the public media, everything was being destroyed, it was out of order, or it simply didn't work. When the left-wing party was ruling, or left-liberal formation, everything was fine".*

However, this narrative is only a smoke-screen and an excuse for PiS. TVP mutated into a propaganda tool of the government, notes the Reporters Without Borders in its 2020 ranking on press freedom. It is one of the reasons, besides the libel suits against journalists, for Poland's worsening performance compared to the previous year. This is the fifth year in a row that Poland has recorded a decline in the ranking, which coincides with PiS taking over power in the country<sup>14</sup>. In 2015, Poland's position was

<sup>14</sup> According to the 2020 ranking, in Poland (down three positions – to the 62<sup>nd</sup> place), the government's control over the judiciary has adversely affected the press freedom. Some courts use Article 212 of the Penal Code, which allows sentences on journalists of up to a year in prison on defamation charges. Up to now, judges have only imposed fines but the damage has been done and an underlying climate of self-censorship has now come to the surface. Find out more: <https://rsf.org/en/poland>

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TVP IS LEGALLY OBLIGED TO PRODUCE DIVERSE PROGRAMS CHARACTERIZED BY "PLURALISM, IMPARTIALITY, BALANCE". BUT CURRENTLY THE CASE IS FAR FROM THAT

the best, and it had reached a record high of 18<sup>th</sup> in the index. Now, five years later, it finds itself below Armenia (61<sup>st</sup>), Niger (57<sup>th</sup>), and Papua New Guinea (46<sup>th</sup>).

Thousands of Poles took to the streets in 2015 and 2016 to protest against the evident direct subordination of TVP to PiS. At the same time, then-EU Commissioner Günther Oettinger indirectly supported protesters, openly accusing Poland of infringing "common European values", and Frans Timmermans, the European Commission's Vice-President at the time, sent a letter to Poland's top officials, stressing that "media freedom and pluralism is essential to the functions of the EU"<sup>15</sup>. TVP portrayed these protests (such as the "Free Courts" protest or "Black Strike" protest) as

<sup>15</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/SPEECH\\_16\\_114](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/SPEECH_16_114)

mobs with a secret agenda guided by hostile foreign powers, backed by EU leaders, as a revenge for the refusal of PiS to accept migrants under a European relocation scheme.

### THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

Why all these changes made in 2015 and 2016 were so highly desired by Jarosław Kaczyński, became obvious in the 2018–2020 electoral period, when TVP turned into another media channel of PiS, with propaganda no different from the official party channels. The propaganda was composed of false news, hate speech and manipulation tailored to destroy all public actors and social groups labeled by PiS as its enemies, this included all other political parties to minorities to critical professional groups. Independent bodies, both Polish and international, have confirmed this opinion.

During the European Parliamentary election campaign, the Society of Journalists (*Towarzystwo Dziennikarskie*)<sup>16</sup> in cooperation with the Stefan Batory Foundation, monitored Polish media<sup>17</sup>. The goal was to find out how TVP fulfills its obligation, as per Article 21.1 of the Law on Radio and Television, to ensure "pluralism, objectivity, balance, and independence" in its broadcasting. The analysis focused on the main evening news program "Wiadomości".

During the monitoring period, two thirds of the material on "Wiadomości" (105 out of 153) pertained to the European elections, in which the main rival for PiS was the Euro-

<sup>16</sup> Not to be confused with the Association of Polish Journalists, the oldest organization of journalism in Poland, which was taken over by the PiS-related journalists and politicians.

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Masz%20Glos/RaportTDEnglFin\\_June%2010N.pdf](https://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Masz%20Glos/RaportTDEnglFin_June%2010N.pdf)

pean Coalition<sup>18</sup>. 69 of the news items had to do with PiS, with 68 of these positive, and one neutral. 33 news items concerned the Coalition, with all of these being negative. There were also two negative reports on the Confederation party, a far-right competitor of PiS.

There was no mention at all of the other parties, including the left-wing *Wiosna* movement. The same happened with the announcements at the beginning of the news broadcasts of what was to appear on air. Of the 30 that concerned the elections, 20 were about PiS (and presented the party in a positive light), and only 9 were about the Coalition (and were all negative).

Jarosław Kaczyński was the most visible politician in "Wiadomości", with the most extensive and frequent coverage. His picture and voice (PV) appearances reached 12 min 18 sec., i.e. amounted to 11% of all PVs in the monitoring period. On the last day before mandatory "election silence" (May 24, 2020), Kaczyński was invited for an interview to the after-news programme "Wiadomości's Guest", which was being introduced in the main news for 8 min. 32 sec. Among the five most frequently covered politicians in "Wiadomości" were the leaders of the ruling party: Jarosław Kaczyński, Beata Szydło, Zbigniew Ziobro, and Joachim Brudziński. The leader of the oppositional European Coalition, Grzegorz Schetyna, was fourth in the ranking; Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki was the sixth.

In the pre-election period, there was a good practice – the report says – in electronic media to mark politicians being shown in

<sup>18</sup> European Coalition (*Koalicja Europejska*) was a political alliance and electoral list created for the 2019 EP election. The Coalition was created by Civic Platform, Nowoczesna, SLD, PSL, the Greens, the Poland Initiative, among others. It came in second place in the election with 38,5% of the vote, returning 22 MEPs.

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## JACEK KURSKI, THE NEW HEAD OF TVP, BECAME THE POSTER BOY OF THE ENTIRE REVOLUTION IN THE POLISH PUBLIC MEDIA

news and other programmes as “electoral candidates”, regardless of the reason why they appear on the screen. “Wiadomości” were not following this good practice. In some reports PiS politicians are marked as “electoral candidates”, in others not.

TVP not only promoted PiS and their candidates, but also used all manipulation techniques to help PiS win the European election. It was especially visible in the case of the LGBT+ topic, which PiS was trying to frame as a main axis of the campaign<sup>19</sup>. And it succeeded with the inestimable help of TVP. Not only did TVP promote the PiS’s spin about LGBT+ being an “ideology” connected to pedophilia, but also did everything to root this message in voters’ heads. For example, a conversation between a Coalition MP and two reporters pretending to be Pride participants, was recorded by a hidden camera during the Warsaw Equality March. Later, this MP’s comment on gay marriage was shown in seven

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/polands-law-and-justice-plays-the-lgbt-card-ahead-of-elections/>

successive broadcasts of “Wiadomości”.

Almost every day in the monitoring period, “Wiadomości” ran items that criticized the past and present performance of the Coalition. There were days when the news programme ran such items twice. The materials regarding the Coalition were characterized by a regular use of epithets such as “total opposition”, “roguery”, “betrayal”, “unfulfilled promises”, and absence of any balancing opinions. The party was not given possibility to refute the attacks.

News material which showed PiS in a bad light were left out. The TVP audience was never informed, for instance, about the report of the National Chamber of Audits (NIK), which criticized the school reform carried out by then Minister of National Education Anna Zalewska, a PiS candidate to the European Parliament, or about two critical biographies of the Prime Minister published during the campaign. There was also no mention of a devastating film about pedophilia within the Polish Catholic Church, although the film had been viewed on YouTube by 20 million people and was undoubtedly in the public interest.

TVP also ran PiS election materials directly on its channels. PiS rallies were broadcasted live on TVP Info and crucial captures were shown in “Wiadomości” without any critical commentary.

In this period, TVP was also using misleading graphics – for example when talking about economic successes of the PiS government. What is more, visual and sound manipulations, which favored PiS, were fairly common, too. Jarosław Kaczyński was invariably shown in wide-lens shots being applauded as he entered and left meetings. Meanwhile, whenever Grzegorz Schetyna, the leader of the European Coalition, was featured, there was scant

or muted applause or enthusiasm shown. Visuals of the opposition leader were often badly lit and shot close up. “Wiadomości” also exposed lapses, facial grimaces, and ill-judged gestures made by politicians of opposition parties. In this context, it must also be mentioned that according to the report, TVP was also producing so-called “fake news”. A very clear example of blatant false news coverage could be observed on May 24, 2019. “He is scornful of Poland and Poles. Tusk is damaging Poland,” said a young man in French, introduced as a “journalist from Belgium” in a plug for TVP Info<sup>20</sup>. Actually, as revealed by independent journalists, Sebastien Meuwissen was an intern in TVP2. He speaks Polish fluently, works for the Visgerad Post portal, and

<sup>20</sup> Find out more: <https://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/7,166611,24826877,dziennikarz-z-belgii-krytykowal-tuska-po-francusku-w-tvp-info.html> [in Polish]

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## UNDER THE RULE OF THE PIS PARTY, STATE MEDIA HAS BEEN USED TO PROMOTE THE GOVERNMENT’S NARRATIVE AND ATTACK ITS OPPONENTS, INCLUDING IN NEWS COVERAGE

states Warsaw as his place of residence on his Facebook profile. Hence, such a manipulation is reminiscent of Russian propaganda channels rather than European public broadcasters.

This comprehensive report can be complemented by another one launched about the same time. The Council for the Protection of the Polish Language under the Polish Academy of Sciences sent the Speaker of the Polish Sejm its submission on the captions or headlines used by TVP on “Wiadomości”<sup>21</sup>. In this 150-page-long study based on monitoring covering the years 2016-2017, it was reported that only 25% of the captions served to inform, whereas the remaining were 75% mainly used for ‘persuasion’ (influencing the audience); creating a reality, and for expressive purposes (expressing judgments or emotions).

The captions are essentially a tool aimed at influencing the views and judgments of the audience. According to the study, the world in TVP is sharply divided between the good government and *the bad* opposition (and other actors, like the EU or civil society, linked to it). TVP uses manipulation, mockery, or irony to build and cement a negative picture of the opposition. When talking about those not supporting the government, the terms used are unmistakably negative: ‘scandalous’; ‘provocation’; ‘putsch’, etc.. The Council’s report was supposed to have been adopted by the Sejm’s standing committee, but was – unprecedentedly – not.

One last example should be mentioned here. And this one is special, because the study was commissioned by the PiS-dominated National Broadcasting Council (KRiR) in 2017. It was conducted by the Pontif-

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.rjp.pan.pl/images/Sprawozdanie\\_o\\_stanie\\_ochrony\\_j%C4%99z.\\_pol.\\_2016-2017.pdf](http://www.rjp.pan.pl/images/Sprawozdanie_o_stanie_ochrony_j%C4%99z._pol._2016-2017.pdf)

ical University of John Paul II in Cracow and posted on its website in May 2019 and later removed. According to the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, the report stresses that those who watch public TV can get the impression that Poland is a single-party state. "Wiadomości" is criticized for being radically subjective, always echoing PiS's messages<sup>22</sup>.

### THE 2019 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

Similar observations were made before the 2019 parliamentary election. Once again, TVP worked as the propaganda machine for the PiS party and its candidates. According to the Society of Journalists, TVP omitted some news (including the biggest scandal of the year that involved the newly appointed head of the Highest Court of Auditors), downgraded others (Nobel prize for Olga Tokarczuk known for her left-wing ideas), used human stories to promote the government (e.g. a story of a sick boy who was transported by the army to the USA for a surgery), discredited independent courts, manipulated sound and vision, and – last but not least – again produced false news (e.g. "Government found one billion for investments" or much inflated number of newly built social houses)<sup>23</sup>.

The election was criticized by international bodies, primarily because of the actions of the state media. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the election was "administratively prepared well." But the voters' "informed choice was undermined by a lack of impartiality in the media, especially the public broadcaster," noted Jan Petersen, the head of an elec-

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.krrit.gov.pl/krrit/bip/raporty-z-monitoringow/raport-uniwersytetu-jana-pawla-ii-w-krakowie/>

<sup>23</sup> Raport z monitoringu „Wiadomości” TVP, „Wydarzeń” Polsatu, „Faktów” TVN oraz serwisów Polskiego Radia w okresie kampanii wyborczej do Sejmu i Senatu 27 września -11 października 2019 r., available at <http://towarzystwodziennikarskie.pl/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019RaportTDPaFin5.pdf>

## THOUSANDS OF POLES TOOK TO THE STREETS IN 2015 AND 2016 TO PROTEST AGAINST THE EVIDENT DIRECT SUBORDINATION OF TVP TO PiS

tion observation mission in Poland<sup>24</sup>. The ODIHR media monitoring results indicated that TVP1 and TVP Info displayed a clear bias against the Coalition and Polish Peasant's Party (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (PSL)) candidates, contrary to their legal obligations and public mandate<sup>25</sup>.

ODIHR also noted, "that the campaign environment was highly polarized and became increasingly negative. Some contestants' campaign messages were inflammatory, including instances of nationalist

<sup>24</sup> Republic of Poland Parliamentary Elections 13 October 2019. ODIHR Limited Election Observation Mission Final Report, 14.02.2020, available at [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/7/446371\\_1.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/7/446371_1.pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Journalists on these newscasts often referred to opposition candidates with such terms as "pathetic", "incompetent" or "lying." During the monitored period, the Coalition and PSL received 40 and 6% of political coverage on TVP1 and 40 and 4% of coverage on TVP Info, which was predominantly negative in tone. By contrast, PiS and the government received 17 and 24% of political coverage on TVP1 and 25 and 18% on TVP Info, which was mainly positive. Coverage of the ruling party was often intertwined with the coverage of the government, with its achievements often being attributed to PiS.

and homophobic rhetoric and hate speech. Such messages provoked a sense of threat and elicited negative emotions towards the LGBT+ community, non-Christians, and other minorities." These main messages of the PiS campaign were creatively elaborated by TVP, especially with regards to sexual minorities. On Thursday night, three days before the election, TVP1 broadcasted what it described as a documentary: *Inwazja* (*Invasion*), billed as an "exposé of the true agenda of the LGBT movement". LGBT people were portrayed as a threat to Polish culture and identity, echoing a primary campaign message of Jarosław Kaczyński. That fall of 2019, 54 members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe called TVP "a propaganda channel for the ruling party." Their declaration reads: "

*"We are concerned that public service broadcast media should cover the election campaign fairly and impartially, so that all the participants can benefit from*

## TVP NOT ONLY PROMOTED PiS AND THEIR CANDIDATES, BUT ALSO USED ALL MANIPULATION TECHNIQUES TO HELP PiS WIN THE EUROPEAN ELECTION

*balanced media coverage. Independent studies have shown that coverage of recent elections in Poland by public service news organizations such as Telewizja Polska (TVP) have been strongly biased in favor of Law and Justice (PiS), the ruling party. (...) TVP reporting before the forthcoming general election shows that the public service media continue to act brazenly as a propaganda channel for the ruling party. This failure by Poland to abide by its Council of Europe obligation is causing damage to the country's reputation as a democratic member of the Council of Europe".*

The practices of the public broadcaster cause much more harm than merely damaging Poland's reputation. They divide the country and society. They also antagonize various groups and irresponsibly employ hate speech for short-term benefits in a political fight. The symbolic tragic consequence was observed in January 2019, when Mayor of Gdansk Paweł Adamowicz was murdered during a concert for Poland's largest annual charity event, which was raising money for hospital equipment to treat children. It was a crime committed by a mentally ill person, but it was also a hate crime preceded by a months-long hate campaign run by TVP against the mayor and the charity. The widow of Adamowicz said that TVP was "responsible" for the death of her husband<sup>26</sup>. TVP responded that it would sue anyone suggesting that its programmes were in part to blame for the politician's death.

<sup>26</sup> In February 2020, Magdalena Adamowicz, who was elected to the EP, announced: "As a member of the LIBE Committee (Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs) in the European Parliament, which deals with the rule of law and safeguarding citizen rights, I've been chosen to prepare a report for the needs of the EU Parliament, aimed to set a road map to free media, and how to free media content from hate speech, without violating the freedom of speech".

## THE 2020 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

As regards the TVP's behavior during the 2020 presidential campaign, some commentators stressed that it was not a race between Rafal Trzaskowski and Andrzej Duda, but between Rafal Trzaskowski and Jacek Kurski, the head of TVP.

TVP standards themselves became one of the most significant topics of the first part of this campaign<sup>27</sup>. In February, PiS pushed for PLN 2 billion additional subsidies for TVP and Polish Radio. The extra money was needed to make up for gaps in payments of the license fee, which is supposed to be paid by all TV and radio owners. This fee is widely ignored, also due to the politization of TVP<sup>28</sup>. During the debate in the Sejm Malgorzata Kidawa-Blonska, then the Coalition's presidential candidate said, "Public media in Poland has been long gone". The opposition suggested that this sum should rather be spent on cancer treatment. The heated debate in the Sejm reached its climax when Joanna Lichocka from PiS (an ex-journalist) extended her middle finger to the opposition – becoming one of the symbols of the audacity of the current administration<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> PiS postponed the presidential election initially planned for May. The National Electoral Commission declared that the presidential election intended to be held on May 10, 2020, was invalid since there was no possibility to vote for any of the registered candidates. The speaker of the Sejm declared the new elections would be held on June 28. A few days after the National Electoral Commission's declaration Malgorzata Kidawa-Blonska resigned from running and she was replaced by Rafal Trzaskowski as the Coalition's candidate.

<sup>28</sup> There is a major problem with license evasion in Poland. It is estimated that back in 2012 around 65% of households evade paying the subscription fee, compared to an average of 10% in the European Union. In 2020, it was revealed by KRRiT that only 8% of Polish households paid the fee.

<sup>29</sup> Joanna Lichocka was a deputy chair of the Sejm standing committee on culture and was supposed to present on behalf of PiS its anti-hate speech declaration.

The Senate opposed the subsidies, but the PiS majority in the Sejm finally approved it, and Andrzej Duda signed it. The opposition accused the government that this was the money needed for Duda's campaign in TVP before the elections. What is interesting is that Duda demanded PiS to dismiss Jacek Kurski in exchange for this costly signature. Kurski lost his job, but he did not lose his power. He was replaced by his close ally and Kurski himself became an adviser to the TVP Board, which *de facto*, still runs the channel. Donald Tusk, back then president of the European Council and a former Polish prime minister, tweeted: "Lies, organized by the authorities with the use of public funds are a terrible and dangerous form of violence, of which we are all victims."

TVP organized a debate with all the presidential candidates before the first round. Many commentators said the questions were tailor-made for Duda and side-lined the most salient current issues in Poland (e.g. the question about the preparation for the First Communion in schools). Complaints were filed with the KRRiT alleging, *inter alia*, that president Duda had been given the moderator's questions in advance. The second debate, before the runoff, can be seen as a trap for Trzaskowski. It was organized in a small town where Duda won a significant majority and questions were asked by "regular people" who were later identified as PiS activists and former candidates.

What is more, four days before the first round of the election, a four-minute segment entitled "Pre-election mobilization" in "Wiadomosci" showed Duda surrounded by crowds of supporters, with warm colors and stirring music. It was a very long free ad for the PiS candidate. "Towns, municipalities, and villages, millions of people, loads of important topics, and one shared goal," says the voiceover in the video. "Pride,



## THE OSCE'S ELECTION ASSESSMENT ALSO FOUND THAT SOME OF TVP'S REPORTING "WAS CHARGED WITH XENOPHOBIC AND ANTI-SEMITIC UNDERTONES"

dignity, respect, history and tradition, responsibility, credibility, keeping one's word," it adds. Such an ad, just like many other TVP materials broadcasted to help Duda, have a measurable price that should be paid for by his campaign committee. But it was not – Polish law on campaign finances was violated – but there is no institution under the PiS-rule that could draw legal consequences.

Once again, TVP was not even trying to be objective. According to a report published on June 19, 2020, by the Press-Service Monitoring Mediow agency, 97% of the items on "Wiadomosci" from the start of the campaign presented President Duda in a positive light and 3% were neutral. At the same time, of the 31% fewer references to Trzaskowski, 87% were negative and 13% were neutral<sup>30</sup>. According to Ombudsman

<sup>30</sup> [https://www.press.pl/tresc/62151\\_wiadomosci\\_tvp-o-rafale-trzaskowskim-tylko-negatywne](https://www.press.pl/tresc/62151_wiadomosci_tvp-o-rafale-trzaskowskim-tylko-negatywne)

Adam Bodnar this disproportionate election coverage violated the electoral code. In their assessment of the presidential election, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe stated that:

*"The governance and funding of the public broadcaster TVP does not ensure editorial independence and enables the government to exert pressure on TVP content. During this campaign, in the period qualitatively followed by the ODIHR SEAM, the TVP failed in its legal duty to provide balanced and impartial coverage"*<sup>31</sup>.

Kurski's campaign against the opposition candidate had been so offensive that Trzaskowski filed a complaint alleging "violation of privacy rights" after a report broadcast on June 9 accused him of "representing [...] a powerful foreign lobby", because he "had supported the entrance of illegal migrants into Poland" and "had not wanted to defend Poles against mendacious accusations of complicity in the Holocaust". The OSCE's election assessment also found that some of TVP's reporting "was charged with xenophobic and anti-Semitic undertones", which portrayed Trzaskowski as "a threat to Polish values and national interests"<sup>32</sup>.

According to a poll conducted at the end of the presidential campaign by Ipsos, 51.6% of Poles believe that TVP is not fulfilling its mandate<sup>33</sup>. In TVP, the PiS hardliners seem to have won with the PiS centrists. Even for Duda moderate voters TVP became a problem and could demobilize some of

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/focus-on-psm-public-media-in-poland/>

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> <https://oko.press/sondaz-3-4-wyborcow-dudy-uwaza-ze-tvp-jest-rzetelna-w-kampanii-bez-kurskiego-prezydent-nie-mialby-szans/> [in Polish]





## TVP BREACHES THE CONSTITUTION WITHOUT ANY CONSEQUENCES

his voters, contributing to his failure. But it did not happen...

Andrzej Duda won the Polish presidential election by a wafer-thin margin. He narrowly beat the Warsaw mayor with 51.2% of the vote. The difference between them was ca. 420,000 votes – less than 20% of the daily audience of “Wiadomości”. Without TVP’s disinformation strategy PiS would not have won these elections. Jarosław Kaczyński is aware of this and he will not give up on the state-owned media. He will stop at nothing to force his worldview in the media, and he needs his obedient knights in this fortress, he needs Kurski to control all state propaganda on TV.

The opposition is also aware of the importance of TVP for the Polish democracy. Civic Platform has lodged an official complaint against the election, with its leader claiming that the contest did “not meet the democratic standards”. “The act of voting itself can be carried out well, but the whole surroundings, the engagement of public finances, the engagement of the so-called public media, meant that this was not a fair situation,” said Borys Budka, the new leader of the Civic Platform party. But the newly PiS-created Supreme Court chamber said that even though there had been dozens of irregularities, it approves the results of the vote.

### CONCLUSIONS

Three days before the 2020 presidential election in Poland, Timothy Garton Ash wrote for *The Guardian*: “For a bitter taste of Polish populism, just watch the evening news” claiming that Poland’s public broadcaster had entered the paranoid realm of the far right<sup>34</sup>. And it is hard to fight this opinion, as TVP is not really *public* anymore. Therefore, the “P” in TVP now stands for “Propaganda”, or “PiS”.

And propaganda is just another word for disinformation. Disinformation is more than information that is false. Disinformation in a board sense is any information that was deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, etc. It is also information that is based on reality and used to inflict harm; it is all forms of manipulation and brainwashing, aggressive one-sided comments, subjective opinions presented as facts to influence political choices of their receivers. A TV channel that does everything to drown any criticism directed at its mighty patrons and leaves no space for discussion and real democratic dispute about visions and ideas is nothing more than a political gadget and disinformation machine. TVP does all that. Its disinformation is simple and straightforward, often crude, like from a textbook written in Moscow or Pyongyang, but is also more subtle and hard to track (like video and audio manipulation). Regardless of the methods, it has been very successful.

TVP breaks not only all democratic rules and moral standards, it also directly acts against the law. As the public broadcaster, TVP is bound by its public mission. This includes a commitment to impartiality:

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/25/polish-populism-evening-news-public-broadcaster-presidential-election>

*“As an institution serving all of society, TVP, in its programmes [...] does not formulate its own stance. It does not formulate or express its own views on political matters or others that are the subject of public debate. It does not favor or promote any party, organization, group or option”.*

Despite this mission, TVP’s vision and message are far from impartial. Principles of press freedom are enshrined in Poland’s Constitution (Articles 14 and 54). However, in reality, TVP breaches the Constitution without any consequences. Anyone can observe it: the opposition, media experts, international institutions. But TVP continues the illiberal system created by PiS. Even criticisms from the only foreign authority PiS still listens to, the US government, have no impact.

TVP creates and affirms its own world. A world designed by Jarosław Kaczyński, where there is no room for anybody who thinks differently. *The New York Times* described it in the following manner:

*“In the TVP universe, Germany and France are treated with suspicion if not outright hostility. President Trump is the greatest American president in generations and his love for Poland goes hand in hand with his affection for Law and Justice. Migrants are overrunning much of Europe, forcing families from Hamburg to Marseilles to huddle in their homes at night in fear of being raped or assaulted. And when the migrant issue started to fade as a public concern, TVP started broadcasting frightening stories about a new threat — the rainbow plague of homosexuality”.*

This universe is made of false news, disinformation, and manipulation. It is financed by taxpayers, whether they want it or not, and distributed to all corners of the country.

Now, with a PiS majority in the parliament, the key issue is to maintain and protect independent media in Poland. Luckily, the Polish media scene is, unlike in Hungary, big, diverse, and vibrant. There is a wide range of independent outlets, among them are niche online sites, influential blogs or podcasts, but also mainstream and powerful TV stations. Law and Justice has long called for a “re-polonization” of the media, which would reduce and restrict foreign ownership of Polish outlets and give PiS’ allies chances to buy popular titles, including regional newspapers. However, since 2015, PiS has not presented any legislation to that effect. It is suspected that now, after Andrzej Duda’s re-election victory, it will be among the first key bills sponsored by PiS in the Sejm. Such legislation must be stopped as it endangers Polish pluralism and democracy as such. Another measure tackled is adding more 24/7 news channels to the digital terrestrial television platform in Poland. Everybody in the country has free access to this platform. For years, TVP Info was the only news channel available there, limiting the scope of information available for its viewers, especially in the countryside, where some 50% of residents get their news solely from the public broadcaster. Adding TVN24, the oldest and the most popular news channel in Poland, to the platform would help break this monopoly.

However, what about TVP itself in the long run? Is there any hope for it, even if PiS should lose the next elections? Answers to this question vary even on the opposition’s side. Some people believe it will be a return to business as usual. A new majority will have to replace the current board with professional managers and media experts, and replace current pseudo-journalists with real, independent ones. Others believe that the damage is so deep that TVP should be privatized and the so-called “state mission” sponsored by the government, in the form



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THE CURRENT STATE OF TVP RESEMBLES THAT OF POLAND. THE DAMAGE DONE TO ITS IMAGE, TO ALL MECHANISMS AND PROCESSES IS HUGE AND SEEMS IRREVERSIBLE

of orders that could be realized by all private channels. However, the liberal solution should be different. It should form a middle way, with a special emphasis on good legislation and strengthening of the institution. There is no room in Poland for a state broadcaster that produces disinformation and hate speech, that ruins the young democracy, undermine civil society or intimidate minorities. TVP should stay, as there is space and need for a public broadcaster, like everywhere in Europe, but it must become truly public once again. To accomplish this, a new management and new control mechanisms should be introduced.

First of all, the highly politicized National Media Council with the right to hire and fire personnel for state television and radio—that currently is the political backer of disinformation in TVP—should be replaced by the Civic Media Council. The latter should be composed of numerous politically independent representatives of regional governments, universities, art industries,

various minorities, and social groups that would guarantee high quality and diversity of programs and shows. The TVP Board should be collectively appointed by the Council to avoid single-handed control over TVP. Also, the National Broadcasting Council and Media Ethics Council, institutions that are authorized to fight against hate speech, false news, and disinformation at TVP, should be enhanced.

The current state of TVP resembles that of Poland. The damage done to its image, to all mechanisms and processes is huge and seems irreversible. But its importance for liberal democracy and open society is so great that the new majority will have to accept this gigantic challenge and fix it.



\*

MIŁOSZ  
HODUN

President of the Projekt: Polska Foundation. Member of the Board of Directors of the European Liberal Forum, think tank of the ALDE Party. Part-time teacher at Reykjavik University School of Law. He focuses on comparative constitutional law and federalism. Formerly he worked as an expert at the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland



# The Image of “Liberal” and “Liberalism” on Selected Websites Supporting the Ruling Coalition in Poland



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MARCIN  
CHMIELEWSKI

Poland's ruling coalition, United Right, whose most prominent member is the Law and Justice (PiS) party, can count on support from two types of media.

The first is the public media, which, in theory, shall implement its statutory mission of informing the public about key events<sup>1</sup>, but in practice, prepares a message formatted to legitimize the current government. The second is private media with its ties to power and remaining in friendly relations with both PiS and the government, which has consisted primarily of PiS representatives.

These relationships take two basic dimensions: personal and financial. The former consists of the mutual penetration of politics and journalism, personal long-term acquaintances between political leaders and opinion leaders, which should be understood as private relations, often from before the time of involvement in politics, as well as the existence of a specific “gray area” in which journalists perform public functions or politicians work in the media. The latter is based on the purchase of advertisements in *de jure* private media by state-owned companies.

An element of this narrative, which is not uncommon in politics, is to point out lines of demarcation and thus support its political camp, which is capable of exploiting such outlined social divisions. This article traces how the two leading, theoretically private pro-government online media, wPolityce.pl and Niezależna.pl, use the words “liberal” and “liberalism” to strengthen party and government messages, while the largest Polish opposition party, Civic Platform,

rarely identifies as liberal and tries to avoid using this term.

It is important to look at the word “liberal” or “liberalism”. The media, whose task is not to inform, but to format public debate, look for a dividing line in society to be able to make such a division effective, identifying liberalism as both a threat and something irresponsible is part of a broader strategy of disinformation. In this case, it forms the whole narrative. Liberalism and the liberals are shown in a clever way as an opponent both strong and dangerous but also weak and ridiculous. This is a strategy of disinformation that is far from being easily repulsed.

## LIBERALISM UNDER A PRAGMATIC MASK

Liberalism is an approach within the philosophy of politics in which individual freedom is a key concept. Although liberalism may be understood, interpreted, and presented in many different ways, the idea placed at

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<sup>1</sup> Art. 23. 1 of the Broadcasting Act. Public radio and television broadcasters provide political parties with an opportunity to present their position on key public matters. Available [online]: <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU19930070034/U/D19930034Lj.pdf>



its core, that the individual is autonomous, remains unchanged. The diversity of liberalism is perfectly visible in a wide range of ideologies and political doctrines built on the basis of the abstract philosophy of liberalism. Nevertheless, the temptation to understand the term very broadly, also in a way unfavorable to the liberals themselves, is somewhat ingrained in its definition.

The reception of the terms "liberal" and "liberalism" is weaker in Poland than in Western countries, which is an outcome of insufficient liberal traditions in the country. The language of liberal discourse in Polish politics has never been strong; it appears primarily as an element of the political discourse known as *pragmatic*<sup>2</sup>. This discourse is characterized by the glorification of the pursuit of success, both private and that of the state, understood above all as becoming wealthier.

The measure of the state's success would, therefore, not be the military power or the fear that such state may arouse in its neighbors, but its prosperity and living conditions that it can provide to its citizens<sup>3</sup>. At the same time, however, the pragmatic framing does not only focus on the material aspect of liberalism. The vision of people in this discourse consists, in a way, of three layers. Thus, a human is not only an economic being making material choices or being a taxpayer, but is also a citizen interested in the state, an individual who has the right to express themselves. The politician, on the other hand, is not the nation's providential parent, but a chosen specialist, understood as "one of us" tasked with looking after the machinery of the state<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Kłosińska, K. (2012) *Etyczny i pragmatyczny. Polskie dyskursy polityczne po 1989 roku*, Warsaw: National Centre For Culture, pp. 145-150.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

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IN POLAND,  
THE PRESIDENT  
CANNOT BE  
A PARTY MEMBER.  
AT THE SAME  
TIME, HOWEVER,  
THE INCUMBENT  
PRESIDENT,  
ANDRZEJ DUDA  
WAS A CANDIDATE  
RUNNING  
FROM THE LAW  
AND JUSTICE PARTY  
(PIS)

Liberalism in politics communicated to potential voters, exists in Poland almost only in the aspect of serving as a basis for a pragmatic discourse. It is built on elements of the liberal tradition and united by practical postulates relating to what the state should be and how it should act, like rule of law, efficiency and financial clarity.

This is, undoubtedly, a simplified liberalism. Every political idea, philosophy of politics, wishing to touch the realities of current affairs, must undergo certain simplifications; it must be able to be described with slogans that can be understood by the voter.

The Polish political parties operating within the so-called ethical political discourse act differently. The picture of reality they draw is an image hostile to an individual, which is lurked by forces that want to harm it, use it and take freedom from the community to which the individual belongs<sup>5</sup>. The politician is a guide leading the public through a dangerous world full of real or imagined threats, a "father-of-the-nation"-like figure who leads passive voters and who will sooner or later want from them something in return.<sup>6</sup>

This type of discourse is more popular and better rooted in Polish politics than the pragmatic one. As Bartosz Działoszyński, a Polish encyclopaedist, – to whom Katarzyna Kłosińska, a renowned Polish linguist, refers – points out, due to the extreme decentralization of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the value of the pragmatically conducted cabinet policy, understood as seeking interest and *raison d'état*, was small; hence the noble class, deciding on politics, used the language of virtues and morals in order to defend their interests, but also because it was an appealing discourse for describing the political reality the nobility created. This was to be compounded by the absence of Poland as an independent nation in the "long nineteenth century" and the lack of a political discourse that could be used to talk about costs and benefits<sup>7</sup>. The reasons why pragmatic language in politics, which is also a carrier of liberal ideas, is weak in Poland, are profound. Past historical circumstances still have an impact.

#### TIMEFRAME AND MATERIAL FRAMES

The presented analysis looks at four terms that are being used in pro-government discourse by pro-government media, namely:

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-79.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 16-17.

*liberal, liberalism, neoliberal, and neoliberalism*. Although there are definitional disputes as to the meaning of these terms, it must be stated that there is some kind of abstract debate about these words, in which the main motivation of the discussants is to find the designations, and not only to use them in current political activity.

The presented overview covers the period from February 5 to August 3, 2020, the "long election period". The boundaries extended from the decision of the Marshal of the Sejm made on February 5 on ordering the elections for the President of the Republic of Poland<sup>8</sup>, which were to take place on May 10; however, due to the epidemic situation, the presidential election was postponed. The end date for the analysis is set on the day when the Supreme Court confirmed that the re-election of President Andrzej Duda was legal). It is a sufficiently long period (covering app. six months), in which one can notice a certain trend, and construct an image of how the terms "liberal" and "liberalism" on the basis of opinions, is presented by two leading, pro-government media titles, based on a Google Trends comparison.

The election period was also a time of lively debate in politics, which, therefore, served to build and emphasize the demarcation that separates the political camps. It helps to better observe the messages of political camps and the image of liberals, their attributes, liberalism as an idea, and its properties presented in a specific way, consistent with political interests in Poland. To be more precise, a period of increased interest in politics allows for a better understanding of the language with which it is described.

<sup>8</sup> <http://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/download.xsp/WDU20200000184/O/D20200184.pdf>



”

## THE PASS-THROUGH OF THE ADDITIONAL COSTS GENERATED BY THE SECTORAL TAX TO CLIENTS OF BANKS MIGHT BE UP TO 90%

The election of the president is not only an activity of current politics and merely some – certainly important – election decision, but it can also serve as a context for showing the elections as a rivalry, and, above all, great political ideas, in which liberalism is presented in a negative light.

### FREQUENCY IN LEADING TITLES

The issue of writing about pro-government media in the context of the election of the president deserves an explanation. In Poland, the president cannot be a party member<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, however, the incumbent president, Andrzej Duda was a candidate running from the Law and Justice party (PiS). He should be identified not as a politician from outside the party (due to the existing law), but as someone in affiliation with the party. This means that the message, formulated by the *de jure* independent but, in fact, pro-PiS media, was fully consistent with presenting the narrative of a certain political force, and not

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.prezydent.pl/prezydent/pytania-i-odpowiedzi/page.2.html> [in Polish]

<sup>10</sup> See: Art. 132 of Constitution of Poland. Available [online]: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/polski/kon1.htm> [in Polish]

with a nonpartisan presidential candidate. Additionally, Andrzej Duda, as a candidate, had the full support of the politicians of the ruling PiS-camp.

In the chosen date range, the selected terms appeared on the selected websites with a clear regularity. It is true that the terms “neoliberalism” and “neoliberal” were practically absent, but we can find publications on liberalism and liberals [See: Table 1].

The use of the selected words for this analysis outside of the Polish context is always associated with creating the image of liberalism. They complement the meaning shown in connection with domestic matters. At the same time, they mostly refer to the situation in Hungary or the United States (the USA) – thus, the countries viewed as allies<sup>11</sup>.

Due to a large number of publications that are placed on the analyzed portals, it cannot be said that the words of interest occurred very often. Even more so, because the terms *liberal* and *liberalism* often occurred in the same articles – these articles appear twice in the results presented in Table 1. The articles focus primarily on the politics of the ruling camp and its decisions, which are presented in a good light. At the same time, it does not mean that words “liberal” and “liberalism” are not an important part of the pro-PiS media labeling. Generally, these media mostly write about the successes of the government. When they touch on issues related to opposition politics, they use two tactics. One is devaluing its achievements, plans and statements of its representatives, but is not the focus of this analysis. The second tactic is to define the opposition by it attacking them along the lines of ideological differences. Hence,

<sup>11</sup> Only once was *liberalism* or *liberals* mentioned in the context of a country other than Poland, Hungary, or the USA. This particular example referred to Switzerland.

Table 1: The frequency of use of the terms *liberal*, *neoliberal*, *liberalism*, and *neoliberalism* in the publications of wPolityce.pl and Niezależna.pl between February 5, 2020, and August 3, 2020

	Liberal	Neoliberal	Liberalism	Neoliberalism
Wpolityce.pl	30 <sup>12</sup> (29)	0	44 (38)	6
Niezależna.pl	25 (24)	1	14	3

Source: Own calculation

from the point of view of these media, “calling out” a liberal makes perfect sense, even if it is not done in literally every article on the portal or in every news report.

The image of political opponents identified as liberals appeared less frequently. However, it is necessary to show the world imagined and created by opinions and messages published on these portals, which has been typically aimed at placing the opposition in an unfavorable light. Interestingly, the terms *neoliberal* and *neoliberalism* were practically absent. These terms seem to have been completely replaced by the word *liberal* as a term meant to have negative connotations. Perhaps this is due to the fact that in journalistic discussion *neoliberalism* is often associated with economic policy and not with politics as such.

### LIBERALISM AS A THREAT

The reconstruction of the terms *liberalism* and *liberal* as seen by the portals used for this analysis, shall begin with a short historical reflection, referred to by the pundit of wPolityce.pl, Professor Rafał Chwedoruk.

<sup>12</sup> After entering the term *liberal*, the internal search engine of the portal returned 32 results. Two of them, however, referred to the word *Liberté!* which is the title of a popular in Poland liberal online and paper magazine, which is, therefore, of no interest for this analysis.

He writes, in the context of promoting the presidential candidate of the Civic Platform (PO), Rafał Trzaskowski, who lost to Andrzej Duda in the second round of the election:

*The slogan of “New Solidarity” is a kind of contradiction of total opposition, economic liberalism, etc. This, however, may raise questions. Hardly anyone remembers that in 1993 the then co-ruling Liberal Democratic Congress in the era of rampant unemployment had the slogan “a million jobs”. A large part of the public opinion perceived this slogan as a provocation, because liberalism was equated*

”

## IN POLAND, THE WORD “IDEOLOGY” HAS NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS

with the eruption of unemployment in Poland.<sup>13</sup>

When analyzing this excerpt, it is important not only to emphasize the poor reception of the term liberalism, and thus also the promoted weaknesses of liberalism itself, which is associated with the hard times of transition. The author also draws attention to the use of the term *liberalism* in the list right next to the term *total opposition*, one of the most important slogans used by the media of the United Right to describe its political opponents. The term "total" is intended to refer to the alleged non-constructive attitude of complete negation that the opposition would have to demonstrate. This is obviously an abuse that is not confirmed by the results of parliamentary votes. But at the same time, it is also an element of framing and disinformation. There is a clear link here between the liberal and the lack of constructiveness, the desire to destroy the consensus, and this is the impression that the reader of this statement should have.

Liberalism, in his framing, is, therefore, something oppositional and non-constructive. Trzaskowski is called, by another interlocutor of wPolityce.pl, Andrzej Gwiazda, an activist of "Solidarity", an ideologist of liberalism<sup>14</sup>, which also has an important, albeit negative context, because in Poland, the word "ideology" has negative connotations.

Moreover, liberalism is also portrayed as a threat in the publications of wPolityce.pl and Niezależna.pl. Even an absurd accusation of liberalism as being part of the ideological family of communist ideologies or doctrines can be found:

<sup>13</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/509870-chwedoruku-niewaznienie-wyborow-zaszkozioby-trzaskowsk-iemu> [own translation]

<sup>14</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/509863-gwiazda-ruch-trzaskowskiego-bedzie-mial-modna-nazwe-i-tyl> [in Polish]

”

SOME AUTHORS  
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WHICH ARE  
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CORRECT,  
AS THE IDEOLOGICAL  
TREE OF LIBERALISM  
IS VERY EXTENSIVE  
AND INCLUDES  
NUMEROUS  
VARIATIONS  
OF THIS IDEA

*"Contemporary critics of the current line of renewal [here seen as the rule of Law and Justice Party – MC] have no trace of innocence and are fully subservient to the international wave of neo-Marxism and its new form of extreme liberalism, not only in economic life but also in social life"*<sup>15</sup>.

Finally, liberalism understood in this manner – as an element of a completely different

<sup>15</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/508740-polski-wykladow-ca-z-kanady-oddajmy-glos-na-andrzeja-dude> [in Polish]

school of thought, as a collective, Marxist thinking – does not fit at all with any definition of what liberalism is in its essence. It allows, however, the outlining of the opposition between the rule of the United Right (as well as their candidate, Andrzej Duda) and its opponents. Liberalism is associated here with the *"trampling of traditions, all authorities, every religion, not only Christian, but most of all-natural law and all reference to the past"*<sup>16</sup>. As such and seen from such a perspective, is identical with doctrines based on Marxism. According to the words of the unofficial leader of the Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyński, who was quoted a few days before the second round of the presidential election, serves as a characteristic expression of scaring voters by the extreme left and mixing concepts for disinformation:

*"Candidate Trzaskowski uses the tactic of avoidance, tries not to inform voters about his views or to mislead them. It represents left-wing liberalism, far-reaching permissivism, consent to everything. Consent to introduce educational methods that lead to far-reaching degradation"*<sup>17</sup>.

Kaczyński introduced a distinction between "left-wing liberalism" and something indefinable. He identifies Trzaskowski with the left-wing version of liberalism, at the same time, however, combining it with permissiveness and directly with the negative phenomenon of demoralization. Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, the director of Radio Maryja and TV Trwam, pro-government media outlets, also wrote about left-wing liberalism, and presented the consequences of

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. [own translation]

<sup>17</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/508616-prezes-pis-mobilizuje-mozemy-pchnac-polske-na-wlasciwe-tory> It is worth noting that the publication with this excerpt of the interview appeared also on the Niezależna.pl website. [own translation]

such liberalism as: anti-culture, anti-ethics, a fight against God, and a fight against "normal family"<sup>18</sup> which is obviously building a disinformation narrative led by authorities for the recipients of this content.

### LIBERALISM AS A LAUGHING STOCK

At the same time, liberalism – as understood by the ruling party – is ridiculous, clumsy, and decaying. This is clearly visible in the statements about it:

*"Simply put, liberalism as a theory is not particularly interesting. Plato, Aristotle, Dante, Shakespeare, and Dostoyevsky were not liberals. It is difficult to recall*

<sup>18</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/spoleczenstwo/508501-o-rydzyk-przyszlosc-ojczyzny-jest-w-naszach-rekach> [in Polish]

”

LIBERALISM  
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TO THE VALUES  
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TO THE HEARTS  
OF MANY POLES

*any outstanding artist who could be considered as liberals*<sup>19</sup>.

The accusation formulated by Professor Ryszard Legutko aims to show the weakness of the liberals. They are not able to give anything of value; no liberal has achieved anything or turned out to be extraordinary in any way.

*"The crisis of the ideology of globalism, understood as the opening of everything, the privatization of everything, the domination of liberalism, had started earlier"*<sup>20</sup>.

In this case, liberalism is understood as thoughtlessness and the application of one measure: "privatization of everything". This is to show liberals as incapable of thinking about nuances, hard-lined, unreasonable. It is also a method of creating a false image of liberals and liberalism. And thus also a method of disinformation based on an attempt to deliberately associate liberals with a lack of imagination and the use of one tool to resolve various problems.

*"For all who postulated Darwinist-like liberalism under the Balcerowicz's banner and the disappearance of the state from the economy, there was a time of heavy discredit. For those who were blindfolded by their narrative - an awakening"*<sup>21</sup>.

The context of this quote is important. These words referred to an economy hit by a global pandemic. It was, however, to have a positive effect, which was an alleged time of awakening for those who followed the false advice of the liberals.

<sup>19</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/495470-profesora-ryszarda-legutki-rozprawianie-sie-z-liberalizmem> [in Polish]

<sup>20</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/498486-nasz-wywiad-krasnodebski-ue-to-nie-jest-nasza-ojczyzna> [in Polish]

<sup>21</sup> <https://niezalezna.pl/322155-przebudzenie-z-liberalnego-otumanienia> [in Polish]

*"This is a typical, hypocritical attitude of Polish liberals"*<sup>22</sup>.

As a result, the liberal as a figure, if reconstructed on the basis of the statements quoted above, is at the same time a "follower" of a dangerous, but also easily questionable and ineffective idea. According to these critics, the liberal cannot be a serious partner for a debate about the condition of Poland or the world; they are burdensome, blind supporters of erroneous and harmful solutions.

However, attention should be paid to one more aspect of the use of the terms *liberalism* and *liberal*. Some authors distinguish between different liberalisms, which are absolutely correct, as the ideological tree of liberalism is very extensive and includes numerous variations of this idea. In the publications analyzed here, however, there is an emphasis on showing current liberalism, whatever it might be, as a primarily left-wing, degenerate. At the same time, there are also voices saying that once liberalism was different. There is also a distinction between economic and social liberalism:

*"The Civic Platform has long been a political formation in Poland in an identity crisis. It consists in the fact that it has really become a formation without ideals, objectively speaking, without malice. Because this party does not know what it is fighting for. It was an economically liberal, conservative formation. We remember that. That's how it was created. Conservative in an ideological sense. However, at the moment - especially last year was unlucky - when it got tangled up in these colorful coalitions and in supporting or promoting liberal*

<sup>22</sup> <https://niezalezna.pl/339728-liberalowie-na-panstwowym-garnuszku> [in Polish]

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## THE "CAREER" OF THE TERMS LIBERALISM AND LIBERAL IN THE RIGHT-WING PRESS IS DUE TO THE FACT THAT IT IS A TERM ALIEN TO POLES AND OF AN UN-GROUNDED POSITION IN POLITICS

*[ideological] views, it simply became a disturbed formation*<sup>23</sup>.

The Civic Platform, as a political party, referred more broadly to liberal connotations. It was before 2005. Here it is mentioned in order to demonstrate the distinction between economic and social liberalism. Economic liberalism in the quoted statement is shown as neutral, but in reality it was attacked and criticized by Law and Justice. The suggestion that the Civic Platform, by drawing on "bad" social liberalism, gets lost

<sup>23</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/496453-wroblewski-operacja-kidawa-blonska-poniosla-fiasko> [in Polish]

is an element of disinformation and mocking the opponent.

*"That there would never be a stealing of Poland's national goods under the brand of false liberalism. And that the Poles would not be humiliated and humiliated, saying that it was all for their good and cleansing of imaginary guilt"*<sup>24</sup>.

Nevertheless, economic liberalism can also be seen in a negative light:

*"Trzaskowski does not represent the freedom movement, but economic liberalism beneficial to the elites of the Third Polish Republic"*<sup>25</sup>.

*"(...) liberalism in Polish is really hostile to ordinary people. And the more liberalism succeeds in withdrawing the state, the worse outcome it will give in times of crisis. Because the interests of very few, not many, really count for liberals"*<sup>26</sup>.

The lack of consistency in the assessment of variously understood types of liberalism leads to the recognition of these measures as far from an objective judgment. The idea is to present liberalism in a negative context and thus amplify disinformation in which liberalism is either a threat or a joke.

Liberalism is portrayed as a negative phenomenon, leading conservatives astray, a threat to the values close to the hearts of many Poles. Even if liberalism was once something different than it is today, it is still considered a thing of the past. However, there is also much more to liberalism which

<sup>24</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/505695-o-chamskiej-holocie-panowie-z-po-gratulacje-udalo-sie-wam> [in Polish]

<sup>25</sup> <https://niezalezna.pl/339120-gietki-jezyk-cynika> [in Polish]

<sup>26</sup> <https://niezalezna.pl/327797-pandemia-weryfikuje-liberalow> [in Polish]



# LIBERALISM IN THE EVALUATIONS AND OPINIONS OF PRO- GOVERNMENT MEDIA HAVE BEEN ALREADY FOR SOME TIME SIMPLY A BUZZWORD, A USEFUL BOGEYMAN, DEVOID OF ITS OWN UNIQUE MEANINGS

goes beyond just the presidential election. Interestingly enough, the election in which voters were to choose between Andrzej Duda and Rafał Trzaskowski was depicted by both sides of the dispute as important not only in the political, but also in the wider context. This approach was well reflected in the title of one of the columns published in the *Niezależna.pl*: *Decision on the Future of Civilization in Poland*<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> <https://niezalezna.pl/337140-decyzja-o-cywilizacji-przyszlosci-polski> [own translation]

According to Bronisław Wildstein, one of the leading right-wing columnists, there is a historically well-established consensus between the left and liberalism, which, as one may guess, should be broken:

*"The left has integrated with liberalism and together created a new system: liberal democracy. It is seen as a guarantee of power to specific circles referring to the dominant [understood here as one's own] ideology"*<sup>28</sup>.

Aside from the deliberations on the definition of *liberal* and *liberalism* in the publications of the analyzed websites, it is worth noting that in a neutral or even slightly positive context, these terms appeared only once. Both *wPolityce.pl* and *Niezależna.pl* posted articles related to Leopold Tyrmand, a Polish jazzman and expatriate to the USA. In the times of the Polish People's Republic, he was one of the few people who identified as a liberal in the old sense<sup>29,30</sup>. Although the significance of the one-off appearance of the term "liberal" in a positive light is small, it should be noted due to the requirement of reliability.

## CONCLUSIONS

The narrative about liberals and liberalism, well outlined and emphasized during the presidential election, is both an episode of political history and a fragment of a meta-narrative in which two forces – the order and the chaos – fight one another. Liberalism understood as a way of thinking and expressed by the political opponent of Andrzej Duda's camp is, therefore, anti-value in the sense of denying the values, which

<sup>28</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/505695-o-chamskiej-holocie-panowie-z-po-gratulacje-udalo-sie-wam> [in Polish]

<sup>29</sup> <https://niezalezna.pl/329864-tyrmand-by-l-rzecznikiem-jazzu-i-rocknrolla> [in Polish]

<sup>30</sup> <https://wpolityce.pl/kultura/500472-100-rocznica-urodzin-leopolda-tyrmanda> [in Polish]

are respected by traditionally oriented Poles. From their perspective, liberal values can be anti-values, especially, when they are shown in a distorted mirror, mixed with the associations of community breakdown and Marxism.

One cannot escape the fact that the liberalism of Rafał Trzaskowski and the opposition who supports him is often presumed or imagined. The elements of the liberal program<sup>31</sup> included in the declarations of the presidential candidate and his political base are not visible at all and Civic Platform is a party composed of various wings, among which liberals are only one of many. It is important to note that Trzaskowski was reluctant to call himself a liberal during the election campaign. Even his election program was called "New Solidarity", which in the Polish political debate demonstrates the distance to liberalism. These two terms, "solidarism" and "liberalism", are shown as oppositional.

It may, therefore, be hypothesized that the "career" of the terms *liberalism* and *liberal* in the right-wing press is due to the fact that it is a term alien to Poles and of an ungrounded position in politics. It comes from the limited liberal traditions and the dominance of other trends in thinking than the liberal one. *Liberal* and *liberalism* thus become insults, a synonym of what is wrong on both levels: the realities of everyday life and in the realm of ideas.

However, this is the effect of a most conscious strategy. Part of its implementation is precisely the use of the word *liberal* or the term *liberalism* in blurring contexts, mixing them with associations of all possible policies, if not carried out under a conservative banner there is a peculiar attempt to re-define these terms. They are to be framed as

<sup>31</sup> <https://trzaskowski2020.pl/program> [in Polish]

words denoting a threat, showing that the people who proclaim them are not bound

by the values respected by Poles, traditionalists at the core.

An open question and an invitation to further considerations may be the issue of spreading disinformation in the context of attempts to re-interpret the words liberalism and liberal by the media favoring the ruling camp. It is a very specific type of disinformation, concerning their formation on the linguistic level, speaking not only about politics, but also about philosophy.

Finally, it should also be taken into account that liberalism in the evaluations and opinions of pro-government media have been already for some time simply a buzzword, a useful bogeyman, devoid of its own unique meanings for some time. It is thus likely that such an interpretation is closer to reality, and so, liberals in general, not only in Poland, are faced with the task of reclaiming the term by narrowing down its scope and defining their own views in a much more precise and easy-to-grasp manner. In order to do so, liberals have to deal with disinformation that affects their own identity. Being defined by one's own political opponent and giving up the field by running away from the term "liberal" is not an option. Instead, efforts should be made to build positive associations around the term.



\*

MARCIN  
CHMIELEWSKI

A Polish political scientist, doctor of philosophy, Vice-President of the Freedom and Entrepreneurship Foundation



# Populist Conspiracy Narratives and Other Forms of Disinformation in Croatia



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DANIEL  
HINŠT

**D**isinformation affects many Western liberal democracies. It undermines public trust in important values of free societies, the institutional frameworks of the European Union (EU) and NATO, civil liberties, different minorities, and the market economy. Disinformation

activities derive primarily from populist advocates of authoritarian solutions, including the Kremlin regime.

In this context, populist conspiracy narratives in the Croatian political context may also be relevant for a broader EU and NATO framework.

The article describes the context of disinformation and populism, the EU and Croatian policy to counter disinformation, the Croatian political context and mentions certain examples of disinformation.

Policy solutions for Croatia and the European Union could include counterintelligence measures focused on detecting, confronting, containing, and downsizing this issue, all in line with the EU policy framework. While Croatia has started to develop its institutional structure and tackle disinformation by fostering media literacy, there is still an open space for a comprehensive policy direction, which could include nongovernmental and the private sector, and create a multidisciplinary policy network.

Such an inclusive solution would foster voluntary cooperation and a strong civil society, instead of restricting freedom of expression. This article represents the first Croatian initiative in the liberal policy direction.

## UNDERSTANDING DISINFORMATION AND POPULISM

Disinformation is false or misleading information, which if left unverified, has the potential to sow confusion in public dialogue, political polarization and distrust of the political system and democratic institutions<sup>1</sup>. It can also be used to question the existence

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<sup>1</sup> Atlantic Council, Disinformation. Available [online]: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/issue/disinformation/>

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of the European project<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, as European Commission's Vice President Věra Jourová framed it: most disinformation activities aim to "blur lines, polarize, make us indifferent". Moreover, it shall be borne in

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2018) "Action Plan Against Disinformation", [in]: JOIN, No. 36. Available [online]: [https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action\\_plan\\_against\\_disinformation.pdf](https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf)

mind that: "Democracy is not given, and we have to fight for it if we want to preserve it"<sup>3</sup>.

Disinformation is often connected with populism, according to which a society is divided into two homogeneous and opposing groups – honest people and a corrupt elite. Although they may acknowledge differences between individual political elites (e.g. Christian Democrats, Liberals, or Social Democrats), populists do not differentiate politicians and claim that all of them are "the same". They often use the rhetoric of chaos, crisis, and hopelessness, blame "corrupt and incompetent" political elites ("oligarchy, cliques") for the situation, and they want to "return alienated politics to the people".<sup>4</sup>

Populists often use generalized, simplified and polarizing conclusions with regards to political, economic and sociological facts, as well as standards of liberal democracies throughout the Western world. Therefore, they often trivialize specific (positive) information about public policies, in order to justify their completely negative understanding of reality, which consists of creating exaggerated, irrational, imprecise and meaningless ideological dilemmas.

At the same time, it is worth to mention that a growing number of organizations, think tanks, and institutions have been involved in the detection of and fight against disinformation, such as the Czech think tank European Values within the Kremlin Watch project, The Kremlin Playbook<sup>5</sup> of the

<sup>3</sup> Jourová, V. (2020) *Dinfo Horizon: Responding to Future Threats*, a conference paper. Available [online]: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH\\_20\\_160](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_20_160)

<sup>4</sup> Grbeša, M. and B. Šalaj (2020) *Ideološki izazov; Agencija za elektroničke medije*, UNICEF. Available [online]: <https://www.medijiskapismenost.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ideoloski-izazov.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> *European External Action Service, EU vs Disinfo*. Available [online]: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>

Centre for Strategic & International Studies', the European External Action Service with the EU vs Disinfo portal<sup>6</sup>, and the Atlantic Council's Disinfo Portal<sup>7</sup>.

### DISINFORMATION'S 100+ YEAR-OLD BACKGROUND

One could claim that there is nothing new regarding disinformation. It is true. However, such generalizations often ignore, relativize, and trivialize this increasingly common political phenomenon, which has a specific source. Although not always, disinformation activities often derive from advocates of authoritarian solutions, including the Kremlin regime. There is a deep and complex background, which has already created narratives before, mostly by Soviet and then Russian intelligence, in order to undermine liberal democratic institutions and civic values of open societies.

The background of modern disinformation warfare is rooted in the world's premier communist regime, more than hundred years ago. The most relevant source is John Sipher, head of the CIA station in Moscow, with a 28-year career in the CIA's National Clandestine Service. As he explained,

*"[a]fter the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Vladimir Lenin established a secret police service called the Cheka to be his main weapon of repression and terror. Over the decades, the Soviet and Russian secret services developed tools and habits based on their Chekist experience that set them apart from their counterparts in the West. Rather than focusing on collecting and analyzing intelligence, they developed expertise in propaganda,*

<sup>6</sup> Atlantic Council, *Disinfo Portal*. Available [online]: <https://disinfoportal.org/>

<sup>7</sup> Sipher, J. (2019) "Putin's One Weapon: The 'Intelligence State'", [in]: *New York Times*. Available [online]: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/opinion/putin-russia-security-services.html>

*agitation, subversion, repression, deception and murder. The Cheka and its successors sowed chaos abroad with propaganda, disinformation and sabotage while managing mass arrests and gulags at home. Indeed, the Kremlin deployed an army of spies and recruited informants around the world to steal secrets, spread disinformation and support terrorists and rogue regimes"*<sup>8</sup>.

The methods Cheka used were continued after the Cold War by the KGB, mainly by confronting the CIA as the central place for confronting the spread of communism. One K.G.B. spy is current Russian President Vladimir Putin. He ultimately had a hard time with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as his entire secret service. As Sipher adds:

<sup>8</sup> Sipher, J. (2019) "Putin's One Weapon: The 'Intelligence State'", [in]: *New York Times*. Available [online]: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/24/opinion/putin-russia-security-services.html>

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*"A decade after the Soviet Union fell, Mr. Putin rose to power and recruited many of his former K.G.B. colleagues to help rebuild the state. The result is a regime with the policies and philosophy of a supercharged secret police service, a regime that relies on intelligence operations to deal with foreign policy challenges and maintain control at home"<sup>9</sup>.*

The Baltic and the Central Eastern European countries that belong to the Three Seas Initiative immediately turned to the West when the totalitarian Kremlin-led control disappeared. In addition to close relations with the neighboring Nordic and Western European countries, these states have developed a strong and geopolitically important foreign policy partnership with the United States, without which communism would not have fallen. The spread of U.S. led liberal democracy, the EU and NATO enlargement to these countries has been a source of disappointment for Russia. Therefore, President Putin has used the strengthening of his authoritarian and crony regime to put pressure on Baltic and Eastern European countries that are now part of the EU and NATO, or have ambitions to become members, such as the countries of the Eastern Partnership.

Croatia is a part of the Three Seas Initiative and its EU and NATO membership additionally serves as an obligation for solidarity with Eastern European countries, which have suffered under Soviet rule. Although Croatia, within former Yugoslavia, was not a part of the Soviet bloc and had a domestic "peoples" style of communism or socialism, Croatia has been facing populist advocacies for closer ties with the authoritarian Russian regime while undermining the EU-NATO framework. Therefore, Croatia, the Western Balkan and the whole Eastern Eu-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

rope region face the same national security challenge.

## EU POLICY AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Based on the previously mentioned vulnerabilities towards disinformation it is important to look at the role the EU plays in fighting the influences of disinformation. The European Commission's Action Plan Against Disinformation provides four policy guidelines for the EU and its member states:

- I. **Improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyze and expose disinformation** – the Strategic Communication Task Force and Intelligence and Situation Center within the European External Action Service, Member States);
- II. **Strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation** - Rapid Alert System for addressing disinformation, working within the existing networks, the European Parliament and NATO, stronger Member States' communication on Union values and policies, strategic communications in the Union's neighborhood;
- III. **Mobilizing private sector to tackle disinformation** (online platforms and advertisers tackling the disinformation and increasing transparency of political advertising);
- IV. **Raising awareness and improving societal resilience** (better understanding of the disinformation sources, specialized trainings, conferences, debates, supporting independent media and quality journalism, supporting multidisciplinary teams of independent fact-checkers and researchers, cross-border cooperation and functional European network of fact checkers,

digital platforms connected with fact checkers, rapid implementation of the revised Audio-visual Media Service Directive which requires promotion of media literacy skills.

In short, it can be seen that the Commission's Action Plan is focused on strengthening European and national institutions, especially policy coordination among different institutions, improving online media transparency and raising awareness, especially through media literacy, quality journalism and supporting fact checkers.

Besides the Commission, the Council of the EU regularly provides its conclusions regarding disinformation related topics. The Council's 2019 Conclusions on democracy see disinformation as a growing challenge to democracy, together with issues related to the undermining of democratic institutions and legitimizing autocratic regimes, interference with judiciaries, reducing me-

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dia pluralism, and reduced transparency of financing political campaigns<sup>10</sup>.

Moreover, the Council's 2020 conclusions (during the Croatian EU Presidency) state that

*"the exposure of citizens to a large amount of disinformation, especially in times of a major global crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They also emphasizes the importance of a systematic approach to the development of media literacy, the importance of collaboration between online platforms, experts and competent authorities as well as the importance of developing an independent fact-checking procedure in order to limit the spread of online disinformation campaigns, while respecting freedom of expression.. it is necessary to intensify work on empowering citizens of all ages with media literacy and critical thinking" and even "strengthening professional journalism, independent media, investigative reporting and media pluralism, facilitating citizens' access to quality, credible and diversified information sources and building public trust contribute to the protection of democracy"<sup>11</sup>.*

In short, Council conclusions focus on the importance of media literacy, professional quality journalism, including independent media pluralism and information diversification. This clearly proves that the EU does not aim to reduce freedom of media by regulating their content, but to foster its transparency and responsibility in relation

<sup>10</sup> Council of the European Union (2019) *Council Conclusions on Democracy*, October 14, No. 12836/19; Available [online]: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12836-2019-INIT/en/pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Council of the European Union (2020) *Council Conclusions on Media Literacy in an Ever-Changing World*, May 26, No., 8274/20. Available [online]: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44117/st08274-en20.pdf>

to the challenge, which undermines democratic institutions, including free media.

### CROATIAN POLITICAL CONTEXT AND RISKS OF DISINFORMATION

Since Croatia is a member of the European Union, a closer look will be taken at Croatian policy towards disinformation. According to the findings featured in the Kremlin Watch<sup>12</sup>, a strategic project conducted by the Czech think tank European Values<sup>13</sup>, which includes policy assessments of Croatia with regards to Russian disinformation activities, Croatia has signed a letter, which warns about disinformation problems, its efforts to discredit the EU and the transatlantic community. As the authors of the analysis observe: "Croatian leadership thus understands the threat posed by Russia, even if actions fall short of the required efforts"<sup>14</sup>. Moreover,

*"a systematic approach to the development of media literacy, the importance of collaboration between online platforms, experts and competent authorities as well as the importance of developing an independent fact-checking procedure in order to limit the spread of online disinformation campaigns, while respecting freedom of expression...it is necessary to intensify work on empowering citizens of all ages with media literacy and critical thinking" and even "strengthening professional journalism, independent media, investigative reporting and media pluralism, facilitating citizens' access to quality, credible and diversified information sources and*

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/>

<sup>13</sup> The project "aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies". See: <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/>

<sup>14</sup> *European Values*, Kremlin Watch. Available [online]: <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/croatia/>

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## POPULISM HAS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES

*building public trust contribute to the protection of democracy"*<sup>15</sup>.

Taking this fact into account, the Croatian government's political commitment to tackle disinformation is a very important first step to deal with this rising problem for the whole EU. While Croatia wants to keep good relations with Russia, it "understands the threat posed by Russia"<sup>16</sup>. Although Russia is aware of Croatia's commitment to the EU and NATO, and therefore mostly focuses on trying to block Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro on their EU paths, Russia is still playing its role in supporting disinformation in Croatia. So far, this problem is not as large as in the Baltics or in the Czech Republic. Therefore, Croatia has a solid footing on which it can tackle this problem, so long as it is not large and to learn from experiences from Eastern European countries.

Regarding the risk of disinformation, it is important to describe the 2020 Croatian political situation. After the July 2020 parliamentary elections, the newly elected

<sup>15</sup> Council of the European Union (2020) *Council Conclusions on Media Literacy in an Ever-Changing World*, May 26, 8274/20. Available [online]: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/44117/st08274-en20.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

majority once again<sup>17</sup> gave support to moderate conservative Andrej Plenković (Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) / European People's Party) as the Prime Minister. The parliamentary majority includes all eight representatives of national minorities, HDZ's pre-election classical liberal partner Croatian Social Liberal Party (HSLs), as well as post-election support from two centrist liberal parties (Reformists and Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats (HNS)).

The new center-right conservative-liberal government, approved in the parliament, remains in power without the ex-majority blurring mandates of socialist populist Zagreb mayor Milan Bandić. Moreover, despite many poll predictions, the new majority will not need support of the Homeland Movement, which consists primarily of national conservative populists and Euro skeptics. In particular, the Homeland Movement is in its essence a strong opposition to pro-EU political elites, which derives from Croatian foreign and European policy "establishment" and their policies of developing liberal democracy since 2000.

According to the Homeland Movement's programme, the past twenty years have been marked by degradation and collapse of fundamental values, institutions, and the political system of a modern and democratic society. Therefore, the Homeland movement is "a response to the political elites, which do not develop the Croatian state in accordance with its historical, economic, geostrategic and demographic needs, but rather in the interest of foreign headquarters of power that do not respect

the national interest of the sovereign Republic of Croatia"<sup>18</sup>.

In other words, these right-wing populists see a problem in 20 years, which could be characterized by as at least semi-consolidated democracy (according to the Freedom House<sup>19</sup>) and not in the first ten years of Croatian statehood, which were also characterized by a certain level of authoritarianism. During that era, political structures were creating barriers to the EU integration, due to the promotion of ethnic nationalism and denying Western values of individual liberty and liberal democracy. Therefore, many populists promoted anti-Western propaganda.

Finally, Živi Zid (Human Shield), once the third largest party in the country, has disappeared from the parliament. This party was openly anti-EU, anti-NATO, and in favor of close ties with Russia. Its policy positions undermined property rights and banking system's stability, which have been carriers of political and economic freedom.

Disinformation is not tolerated among the mainstream parties, especially by the center-right government. Moreover, disinformation is not a widespread problem in Croatia. However, there are populist parties and groups, which combine disinformation and populism in order to undermine values of liberal democracy (as described further in the text). These messages are mostly spread via non-mainstream online portals and social media.

<sup>18</sup> Domovinski pokret (2020) *Program djelovanja*. Available [online]: <https://www.domovinskipokret.hr/pdf/program-djelovanja.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Freedom House (2020) *Nations in Transit 2020, Dropping the Democratic Façade*. Available [online]: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020\\_FH\\_NIT2020\\_vfinal.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/05062020_FH_NIT2020_vfinal.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Andrej Plenković has been the Croatian Prime Minister since 2016. The new 2020 Parliament approved his second (consecutive) mandate.



## CROATIAN POLICY AGAINST DISINFORMATION

Even though disinformation is not an immediate threat, Croatia has developed its institutional framework for tackling disinformation led by the Ministry of Culture and Media<sup>20</sup>, the Agency for Electronic Media<sup>21</sup> and the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs<sup>22</sup>.

In relation to the European Commission's Action Plan and the Council conclusions, Croatian policy concretely deals with disinformation by focusing on promoting media literacy, with specific portal "Medijska pismenost"<sup>23</sup>, which provides useful information. The portal was founded by the Agency for Electronic Media, in cooperation with several institutions, including the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb (University of Zagreb) and two private schools (VERN and Edwards Bernays).

Prior to the Croatian EU Presidency, the Prime Minister Andrej Plenković emphasized that we are faced with "ever larger spread of fake news, disinformation, intolerance and hate speech on digital platforms", and added that this is a "direct threat to our democratic order because it undermines citizens' trust in institutions"<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Culture and Media, International conference "Combating Disinformation in the Digital Media Era". Available [online]: <https://min-kulture.gov.hr/vijesti-8/medjunarodna-konferencija-suzbijanje-dezin-formacija-u-eri-digitalnih-medija/18776>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.aem.hr/vijesti/zakljucni-vijeci-eu-a-o-medijskoj-pismenosti/>

<sup>22</sup> Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (2019) *Press release*, March 19, Brussels. Available [online]: <http://www.mvep.hr/hr/mediji/priopcenja/31980.html>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/>

<sup>24</sup> Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (2019) *Press release*, October 30, Zagreb. Available [online]: <http://www.mvep.hr/hr/mediji/priopcenja/32404.html>

While Croatia has defined its institutional framework, which cooperates with European institutions, and works on promoting media literacy and quality journalism, there is still space for developing concrete policies for supporting multidisciplinary teams of researchers and fact checkers, including their cross-border cooperation. Therefore, the policy should focus on civil society and private sector solutions. This model of inclusive participation in detecting and countering disinformation can strengthen institutions, further develop the civil society sector, and widen market opportunities for private intelligence services, policy analysts, journalists, researchers, fact checkers, digital marketers, teachers and academics.

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All these expert groups would be important since they can work on detecting disinformation, taking into account different scientific perspectives. For example, policy analysts and political scientists could detect how disinformation affects institutions of liberal democracy and concrete public policies, while journalists could participate in fostering media literacy and include fact checkers. Digital marketers could help different organizations in designing and promoting content quality, transparent online advertising and work on analyzing misleading online ads. Teachers and academics in both public and private educational institutions would have an important role in informing new generations and adults how to differentiate facts from fake information and values of open society from attempts to undermine its foundations.

Such inclusive policy solution would foster voluntary cooperation and a strong civil society, instead of restricting freedom of expression. A growing liberal oriented community would especially support this solution because it opens space for the civil and private sector, while avoiding new regulations. This article represents the first Croatian initiative in the liberal policy direction.

Regarding civil society's contribution, one of the Center for Public Policy and Economic Analysis's (CEA) strategically important project is the Think Tank Detektor<sup>25</sup>, which aims to gather open source information, which can contribute to the education of the Croatian and broader EU public about geopolitical risks and examples of growing disinformation and populist activities. This is vital since these disinformation activities have been focused on weakening fundamental values of individual liberty, open

<sup>25</sup> Centre for Public Policy and Economic Analysis (CEA) *Think Tank Detektor*. Available [online]: <https://www.cea-policy.hr/cea-think-tank-detektor/>

society, and transatlantic alliance within the EU and NATO framework. Through disinformation, there also lies a risk for human rights, the position of minorities, competitiveness, and the geopolitical security of Croatia, Southeastern Europe and the entire EU. Therefore, the CEA regularly monitors social media, media portals, and other open sources in order to detect and expose disinformation.

## PRO-RUSSIAN AND POPULIST CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES IN CROATIA

Populist narratives depend on particular stakeholders. There are many examples, which have been repeated. Overall, populist messages in Croatia may be described through the following narratives:

- the European Union is falling apart and has ceased to exist;
- NATO lost its meaning after the Cold War;
- the EU and NATO enlargement is an aggression towards Russia;
- the CIA and the U.S. military produced COVID-19 as a biological weapon;
- unlike Russia, the European Union has not helped member states, nor has it responded to the economic crisis (in times of COVID-19);
- the EU is a neoliberal creation that looks at the interest of capital instead of people;
- the economic crisis was caused by neoliberal capitalism, which is coming to an end;
- the government has sold everything through privatizations and colonized the economy in favor of foreigners;
- the state government should control imports from the EU market, etc.

However, this is just a general overview of the prevailing narratives in the Croatian public sphere. Needless to say, there are

many more, which appear mostly in non-mainstream media and social media communications. Basically, there is a standard obsession of conspiracy theories (re-)producing anti-American and anti-European narratives, which may often include disinformation about the Freemasons.

### **I. DISINFORMATION ABOUT BIOLOGICAL WARFARE AND THE UK, WHILE ADVOCATING FOR PUTIN'S AUTHORITARIAN REGIME**

Proponents of the Croatian right-wing movement are influenced by the TV show Bujica (Flash Flood). One episode provides narratives that COVID-19 is a form of biological warfare, China is a victim of "globalist financial oligarchy", Iran is a target of U.S. establishment motivated by Zionism, while Italy was chosen because of the Vatican and Freemasons who want to remove believers from churches, scientists are controlled by an occult oligarchy, all is done by algorithms and that Putin will save us from the occult oligarchy<sup>26</sup>.

This narrative starts with COVID-19 disinformation, and then blames the West and of course, the Freemasons as fictional rulers and ultimately provides the solution: Vladimir Putin will save Croats from the secret rule of liberal oligarchs. This theory is based on a premise of blaming globalists for producing the virus, while the solution lies in the authoritarian leader, instead of the assistance from the EU.

The European Commission mentions an example of a conspiracy theory with regards to COVID-19: the claim that the coronavirus is "an infection caused by the world's elites"<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, another episode

provides anti-British narratives, by claiming that someone in the Croatian government wants a conflict with Putin, that a Russian diplomat was expelled due to the *imputation of British secret services* towards Kremlin. Finally, a revenge in a form of erasing Croatian identity is now coming from Brussels because Franjo Tuđman (first Croatian President during the 1990s).

Certain Croatian right-wing conspiracy theorists are preoccupied by the United Kingdom and its secret service (MI6), perceiving it as the enemy of Croatian statehood. Moreover, since 2000, they have blamed Croatian political structures, for pushing for certain political changes needed for the European integration, including full cooperation with the war crimes tribunal and reconstruction of houses where ethnic Serbs lived until 1995. Their target is primarily pro-EU Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, since he is a moderate EPP conservative. Therefore, right-wing populists have considered the process of European integration and moderate political positions to be in direct opposition to the interests of the Croatian statehood. Thus, it becomes clear that they have a very narrow nationalistic and authoritarian understanding of a nation-state, which cannot be accepted within the EU framework of liberal democracies.

Populist advocacy in favor of Putin can also be clearly seen at the Portal Geopolitika (Geopolitics). Examples include statements that only *Putin can preserve Russia's stability* in turbulent global times, that Russia does not need a new fight for power and that many Russians that support Putin question the purpose of democracy<sup>28</sup>. Therefore, the suggestion in this article is that there is no need for democratic Russia,

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DESPITE THE LARGE ECONOMIC PRESENCE OF STATE-OWNED COMPANIES, POPULISTS CAN EXPRESS ECONOMIC XENOPHOBIA BY TRYING TO RESIST FOREIGN OWNERSHIP AND INVESTMENT

because many Russians favor authoritarian democracy (Vladimir Putin's regime), which grants unlimited power to the autocratic leader. Although this narrative is not prevalent in Croatia, it is widely present among right-wing populists, who also influence young people.

### **II. DISINFORMATION AND POPULIST NARRATIVES ABOUT NEOLIBERALISM AND PRIVATIZATIONS**

Populism has political and economic consequences. For example, it can lead to resisting necessary structural reforms towards the market economy. Such narratives and myths typically refer to, at least in the Croatian context, a national treasure or family silver that is supposedly completely sold out. Almost any privatization is equated with the betrayal of national interests

and the loss of sovereignty, especially with regards to foreign owners and investors. Therefore, protectionist economic nationalism, spiced with xenophobic disinformation, directly affects the weakening of competitiveness and economic freedom, thus delaying the transition to a market economy and an open society.

Examples for this discourse, which actually blames neoliberalism, can be also found on the Portal Geopolitika (Geopolitics). Its narratives blame moderate European elites for being: "preoccupied with struggle for power in the conditions of neoliberal single-mindedness"<sup>29</sup>.

It is common for populists to produce narratives about political elites, while they represent the people. This position undermines the legacy of liberal democracy, which consists of representatives elected by the people. When these representatives aim to be in moderate positions, this helps to consolidate democracy. Moreover, many populists produce narratives on "neoliberalism", which usually serve to resist structural reforms for increasing competitiveness and economic freedom. While the Soviet Union was a protector of communism, which includes political and economic single-mindedness, proponents of Russian authoritarian regime can easily claim that "neoliberalism" is a form of single-mindedness.

Moreover, the same portal claims that:

*"politics left the economy" which "further degraded relations between the government and the people". In particular, the portal is blaming the process of demonopolization (liberalization of*

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFlsExgrUc>

<sup>27</sup> European Commission (2020) *Tackling Coronainformation Disinformation*. Available [online]: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/corona\\_fighting\\_disinformation\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/corona_fighting_disinformation_0.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/zoran-meter-putin-na-celu-rusije-i-nakon-2024-pod-ovim-uvjetima/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-ujacic-eu-politicke-elite-zarobljene-izmedu-vladavine-prava-i-neoliberalnog-jednomylja/>

sectors and opening to competition) as a reason why *"politics is no longer at the center, but on the margins of events"*<sup>30</sup>.

As a follow-up to the previous comment, this narrative tries to explain that people are not in democratic control of their government, since politics lost its mediating role and left the economy. This is a typical narrative of critics of *neoliberalism*. Despite the fact that increasing economic freedom reduces the government's political control over the economy, politics is still present since people can decide which option to choose. Moreover, functional liberal democracies combine high levels of political and economic freedom.

The portal then mentions "the neoliberal revolution", run by Reagan-Thatcher policies of "deregulation, delocalization, and privatization", whose goal was "to bring the USSR to its knees." In this context, the Bilderberg Group and the Trilateral, together with Poland, has been blamed for neoliberalism. Further in the text, Poland is connected with Croatia because of the Three Seas Initiative, a way of providing a competitive alternative to Russian gas supply<sup>31</sup>. The portal questions Croatia's interest in supporting this initiative and launching the LNG on the Croatian island Krk<sup>32</sup>.

The aim of many pro-Russian populists is to gain public support for Russian gas supply as the only or at least dominant source of supply, in order to make European states more dependent on Russia.

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/geopolitika/globalno-socijalno-zatopljene-u-eu-demokracijama/>

<sup>31</sup> Atlantic Council (2019) *The Three Seas Initiative Explained*. Available [online]: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-three-seas-initiative-explained-2/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-vujacic-europsko-jedinstvo-u-vrtlozima-weimarskog-trokuta-i-inicijative-tri-mora/>

A clear connection between narratives about neoliberalism and privatizations can be seen in a portal's article which mentions that the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia proposed the Russian government to start with nationalization. Then, the portal states that, "restructuring of the current neoliberal capitalism begins, which has completely exhausted itself and led to serious global problems" and shows "total insensitivity to the problems of ordinary people who were brought "to the average stick".

Further, the portal predicts bankruptcies of first large corporations during 2021. This is a reason for proposing "a new economic model" and suggesting that, "the Croatian government should consider similar measures, although they would probably be immediately characterized by eternal critics of everything and everyone as a return to

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socialism". Finally, in relation to the issue of privatizations, the portal doubts how these measures (nationalization) will help Croatia "if there is nothing strategic in her hands anymore and if everything is in foreign hands"<sup>33</sup>. Lastly, and this is a typical narrative among populists and even larger masses, it is mentioned that Croatian government has sold (privatized) everything.

Contrary to these myths and disinformation, there is government's decision on legal persons of special interest for the Republic of Croatia<sup>34</sup>. In 2020, 39 legal persons were government-run, including large companies in transport infrastructure, woods, water, transport and energy sector, as well as one bank and one IT company. Beside these so-called *strategic* entities, Croatian central government has minority or majority shares in more than 300 companies. They are a part of CERP portfolio<sup>35</sup> where the government tries to privatize at least a part of numerous companies. Moreover, a large presence of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) is clearly visible in the OECD's PMR report where the "Scope of SOEs" regulatory restrictiveness score is 3.75 (out of 6), which is among the highest numbers within the EU and the OECD<sup>36</sup>.

Despite the large economic presence of state-owned companies, populists can express economic xenophobia by trying to resist foreign ownership and investment (which is mostly present in banking,

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/razgovori/uoci-puti-novog-obracanja-naciji-ruski-sindikati-predazu-nacionalizaciju-strateskih-tvrtki/>

<sup>34</sup> Official Gazette (71/2018) *Decision on Legal Persons of Special Interest for the Republic of Croatia*. Available [online]: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2018\\_08\\_71\\_1450.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2018_08_71_1450.html)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.cerp.hr/portfelj-cerp-a/dionice-i-poslovni-udjeli/114>

<sup>36</sup> OECD (2019) *Indicators of Product Market Regulation (PMR)*. Available [online]: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/reform/indicators-of-product-market-regulation/>

telecommunications and the retail sector), which lowers the potential for investment led GDP growth. Although the Croatian government has been run by formally mainstream parties (and its junior partners), both centre-right and centre-left large parties have showed a lack of policy immunity to widespread resistance against market reforms, including privatizations, while resistances to FDI are present in cases of certain local administration (and not in the central government any more).

### III. DISINFORMATION ABOUT NATO, THE U.S., AND THE EU

Croatia is a part of the EU and NATO. All mainstream parties support both memberships, while the populist Homeland Movement, even though not particularly enthusiastic, is at least not openly against EU membership. Therefore, Croatia in 2020 should not fear any significant Croxit movement. However, there are examples of populist narratives, which spread myths and disinformation against the EU and NATO. Portal Geopolitika claims that

*"NATO serves American interests and speculates about "America's withdrawal from NATO" which would "raise tensions within the EU and further undermine the unity of Member States"*<sup>37</sup>.

It is true that NATO serves American interests (where the U.S. is the largest contributor) and it is true that NATO serves European interests for 70 years now. However, populists do not understand and/or try to undermine and trivialize the postwar security architecture of Europe, which also led to the creation of the European Union. The U.S. withdrawal from NATO is simply not on the agenda.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-vujacic-nakon-brexita-nato-exit/>



Furthermore, an article with the headline "Occupation of Europe in the shadow of the corona" is criticizing the U.S. Army's exercise Defender Europe 20 and the EU's aims to foster military mobility through infrastructural adaptations. "While the coronavirus crisis paralyzed European societies, the Anglo-Saxon war fever did not die. Perhaps, on these few pages, a chronicle of the EU's death is written. Which is not the worst"<sup>38</sup>. The article tries to convince the public that the U.S. Army has occupied Europe (as the title of the article itself suggests), while European societies are paralyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it states that the EU is dead, which is a very common populist fiction for seducing people and their distrust towards the European institutions.

#### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A CROATIAN CALL TO ACTION

In general, disinformation often includes populism and is rooted in conspiracy theories, which can be politically very seductive. Populism usually uses simplifies and trivializes conclusions without a deeper understanding of facts, as well as standards of liberal democracies. This article provides certain examples of disinformation mixed with illiberal populism occurring in Croatia.

It can be expected that there will be continuous Croatian government support to the EU actions against disinformation. While Croatia's policy response against disinformation has been focused on creating its institutional framework and promoting media literacy, there is still space for creating a comprehensive and inclusive solution.

That kind of solution should mean creating a strong policy network of government, non-governmental, and private sector

working together in detecting, downsizing, and disposing disinformation. This network should work together in exchanging and exposing detected information about particular disinformation. A model of inclusive participation in detecting and countering disinformation can strengthen institutions, further develop the civil society sector, and widen market opportunities for private intelligence services, policy analysts, journalists, researchers, fact checkers, digital marketers, teachers and academics. Such inclusive policy solutions would foster voluntary cooperation and a strong civil society, instead of restricting freedom of expression.



DANIEL  
HINŠT

Vice-President of Croatian free market think tank Centre for Public Policy and Economic Analysis. A graduate of Advanced Master of European Studies and Political Science at the University of Zagreb

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/dr-sc-sanja-vujacic-okupacija-europe-u-sjeni-korone/>





# Understanding the Weaponization of (Dis-) Information in Present-Day CEE



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DANIELA  
OBERSTEIN



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MÁTÉ  
HAJBA

**F**ake news! The phrase has been thrown about so much lately that it lost most of its meaning and gravitas. But what does it actually mean? One definition explains it as “deliberately presenting false information as news”<sup>1</sup> and differentiates it as a subset of disinformation, which includes the spread of false information as a whole.

Now, more than ever, disinformation poses a threat to society, democracy, media freedom, and – during the COVID-19 pandemic – even to healthcare. Its meaning and definition must not be diluted, but conserved and, thus, require due attention as a credible threat. This was exactly our aim while working on the *4Liberty.eu Review* no. 13.

In the presented issue, experts throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) analyze the spread of disinformation in an attempt to answer such questions as: Who spreads false information and to what purpose? What forms can disinformation take? What can governments and liberals do to combat it?

To this purpose, the published articles provide excellent analyses on how disinformation plays out in the current political context. The authors go beyond pure theory and suggested pragmatic approaches while advocating for liberal values.

Some of the contributors shed light on how Russia – one of the most prominent sources of disinformation – is influencing and perpetuating this phenomenon and sowing discord among citizens and across nations – in relation to the Hungarian minority in Ukraine as an instrument in achieving its foreign policy goals (as evidenced in the article by Patrik Szicherle), through establishing and supporting “alternative” media in the Czech Republic

<sup>1</sup> <https://medium.com/dfrlab/fake-news-defining-and-defeating-43830a2ab0af>

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(Roman), and closely how the reliance on foreign media outlets for the country’s reporting has, among others, led to the rise of these so-called “alternative” media (as described by Michal Hejl). The dispersed nature of disinformation is one of the main reasons why it is such a threat and is, therefore, so difficult to control, as suggested by Aleksy Przybylski.

Needless to say, disinformation is not only used by Russia or Kremlin-associated proxies – through changes to the media system in Poland, under the current Law and Justice (PiS) rule, disinformation has become a weapon, which is also used by governments of the European Union. The public broadcaster (TVP) has been transformed by the ruling party into a channel communicating PiS propaganda, dividing the country and society (as illustrated by Miłosz Hodun). Even though the governing party intends to tighten the political grip before its second term in office ends in 2023, labeling systems marking false news could help consumers discern facts from false statements that are featured on public broadcasting – observes Piotr Beniuszys). Not only public broadcasting has been subject to the spread of disinformation, also online media outlets in Po-

# “ DISINFORMATION IS NOT ONLY USED BY RUSSIA OR KREMLIN- ASSOCIATED PROXIES

land have made use of the strategy, falsely marking the term “liberalism” as the source of political evil – a phenomenon examined by Marcin Chmielowski.

On the other hand, countries such as Croatia, which have been spared a disinformation flood in their political discourse, need to watch out and create pre-emptive policy measures and networks – as recommended by Daniel Hinšt. This is where the European Union becomes an important force for this global challenge: European disinformation policy has evolved and expanded in important ways. However, in order to efficiently tackle future endeavors, more funding is needed, argues Márton Schlanger. It becomes even more pressing during a time marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has proven how disinformation can harm the efforts in gaining control over the spread of the virus. In this situation, state authorities need to embrace freedom of information by means of increasing transparency, in order to respond effectively to the crisis and regain trust of its citizens – points out Tanja Porčnik. Indeed, regaining trust has become ever more important, as reliable, well-researched content competes with free, quickly available, chaotic, and false information online, it accelerates citizens’ uncertainty over what information

to believe and is channeled into distrust and hate against media in general. After all, if people question the truthfulness of governments and the public media, which are supposed to provide objective information, citizens are much more likely to migrate to “alternative” news sources spreading disinformation.

As this issue shows, both the EU and the governments of member states must work together on the problem of disinformation, while simultaneously making sure that the freedom of information and expression suffers no blows in the process. Liberals, for whom these freedoms are paramount, must ensure that the Kremlin’s propaganda image of the EU does not become a reality, and that the European Union will be one of the torch-bearers in granting freedoms of liberties.

Overall, the bottom line is this: we must all act united to combat the threat of false information, whether it is spread out of malicious intent or sheer ignorance. In order to be efficient, we must thoroughly understand this phenomenon and its implications. We hope this issue of the *4Liberty Review* gives you ample possibilities to dive into the subject.



DANIELA  
OBERSTEIN

Manager Media Freedom at the International Department of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom in Berlin, focusing on media, press freedom and disinformation. Responsible for the International Journalism and Media Dialogue Programme of the foundation



MÁTÉ  
HAJBA

Director of Free Market Foundation, an independent think tank in Hungary focusing on free market economics, rule of law, civic liberties, and tolerance”

## MEMBERS OF 4LIBERTY.EU NETWORK

**Free Market Foundation** (Hungary) is a think tank dedicated to promoting classical liberal values and ideas. The organization’s projects focus on advocating a free market economy and fighting racism. The Foundation’s activities involve education, activism, and academic research alike, thus reaching out to different people.

**Liberální Institut** (Prague, Czech Republic) is a non-governmental, non-partisan, non-profit think tank for the development, dissemination, and application of classical liberal ideas and programs based on the principles of classical liberalism. It focuses on three types of activities: education, research, and publication.

**The Lithuanian Free Market Institute** (Vilnius, Lithuania) is a private, non-profit organization established in 1990 to promote the ideas of individual freedom and responsibility, free markets, and limited government. The LFMI’s team conducts research on key economic issues, develops conceptual reform packages, drafts and evaluates legislative proposals, and aids government institutions by advising how to better implement the principles of free markets in Lithuania.

**The F. A. Hayek Foundation** (Bratislava, Slovakia) is an independent and non-political, non-profit organization, founded in 1991, by a group of market-oriented Slovak economists. The core mission of the F. A. Hayek Foundation is to establish a tradition of market-oriented thinking in Slovakia – an approach that had not existed before the 1990s in our region.

**IME** (Sofia, Bulgaria) is the first and oldest independent economic policy think tank in Bulgaria. Its mission is to elaborate and advocate market-based solutions to challenges faced by Bulgarians and the region face in reforms. This mission has been pursued since early 1993 when the institute was formally registered a non-profit legal entity.

**The Academy of Liberalism** (Tallinn, Estonia) was established in the late 1990s. Its aim is to promote a liberal world view to oppose the emergence of socialist ideas in society.

**INESS** (Bratislava, Slovakia), the Institute of Economic and Social Studies, began its activities in January 2006. As an independent think tank, INESS monitors the functioning and financing of the public sector, evaluates the effects of legislative changes on the economy and society, and comments on current economic and social issues.

**Projekt: Polska** (Warsaw, Poland) comprises people who dream of a modern, open, and liberal Poland. It is those to whom a democratic, effective, and citizen-friendly government is a key goal, and who help accomplish this goal while enjoying themselves, forming new friendships, and furthering their own interests.

**Liberales Institut** (Potsdam, Germany) is the think tank of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom dedicated to political issues such as how liberalism can respond to challenges of the contemporary world and how liberal ideas can contribute to shaping the future.

**Fundacja Liberté!** (Łódź, Poland) is a think tank created in Łódź in 2007. Its mission is to promote an open society, liberal economic ideas, and liberal culture, and to organize a social movement around these ideas. Among the foundation’s most recognizable projects are: Liberté!, Freedom Games, 6. District. The foundation is coordinating the 4liberty.eu project on behalf of Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

**Republikon Institute** (Budapest, Hungary) is a liberal think tank organization based in Budapest that focuses on analyzing Hungarian and international politics, formulating policy recommendations, and initiating projects that contribute to a more open, democratic, and free society.

**Civil Development Forum (FOR)** (Warsaw, Poland) was founded in March 2007 in Warsaw by Professor Leszek Balcerowicz as a non-profit organization. Its aim is to participate in public debate on economic issues, present reliable ideas, and promote active behavior. FOR’s research activity focuses on four areas: less fiscalism and more employment, more market competition, stronger rule of law, and the impact of EU regulations on the economic growth in Poland. FOR presents its findings in the forms of reports, policy briefs, and educational papers. Other projects and activities of FOR include, among others, Public Debt Clock, social campaigns, public debates, lectures, and spring and autumn economic schools.

**Visio Institut** (Ljubljana, Slovenia) is an independent public policy think tank in Slovenia. Aiming for an open, free, fair, and developed Slovenia, the Visio Institut is publishing an array of publications, while Visio scholars regularly appear in media and at public events.

## COOPERATING PARTNERS FROM EASTERN PARTNERSHIP COUNTRIES

**The Institute for Economic Research and Policy Consulting** (Kiev, Ukraine) is a well-known Ukrainian independent think tank, focusing on economic research and policy consulting. IER was founded in October 1999 by top-ranking Ukrainian politicians and scientists, and a German advisory group on economic reforms in Ukraine, which has been a part of Germany’s TRANSFORM program. Its mission is to provide an alternative position on key problems of social and economic development of Ukraine.

**Svetilnik** (Ljubljana, Slovenia) is a non-profit, non-governmental, and non-political association. Its mission is to enlighten Slovenia with ideas of freedom. The goal of the association is a society where individuals are free to pursue their own interests and are responsible for their actions.

**New Economic School – Georgia** (Tbilisi, Georgia) is a free market think tank, non-profit organization, and NGO. Its main mission is to educate young people in free market ideas. It organizes seminars, workshops, and conferences for education and exchanges of ideas. NESG was founded by Georgian individuals to fill the knowledge gap about the market economy in the country and the lack of good teachers and economics textbooks.



**MÁRTON SCHLANGER**  
**UNDERSTANDING THE EU'S ROLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION –**  
**PUBLIC POLICY PERSPECTIVE**

**PAGE 004**

Russia and China are the main disinformation sources and their influence is immense in the region. While most EU member states can be expected to support the fight against disinformation, member states can cause problems if the policy is controversial. Other actors such as social media companies and the EU's own agencies pose little threat to policy action and their role in implementation is most crucial.

**TANJA PORČNIK**  
**ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN TIMES OF CRISIS**

**PAGE 036**

The COVID-19 pandemic should not be used by state authorities as a pretext for limiting freedom of expression, including suspension of the right to information and attacks on media freedom. In this endeavor, it is of particular importance for governments to accept and uphold the crucial role of independent media having access to first-hand information.

**PATRIK SZICHERLE, DORKA TAKÁCSY, DOMINIK ISTRATE**  
**HOW PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION EXPLOITS MINORITY-RELATED CONFLICTS**  
**BETWEEN UKRAINE AND ITS NEIGHBORS**

**PAGE 048**

While no major threat is expected to permanently block Ukraine's path to Western integration from Bulgaria, Poland, or Romania, the conflict between Budapest and Kyiv has opened the door for Russia to use Transcarpathian Hungarians as an instrument in achieving its foreign policy goals. Its disinformation network is committed to exploiting the bilateral tensions between Hungary and Ukraine to depict the Hungarian minority in the region as a "fifth column" for Hungary.

**ROMAN MÁČA**  
**RUSSIAN BID FOR CZECH HEARTS AND MINDS**

**PAGE 064**

Although it is clear that Russians and their allies not only divide the Czech society and create or promote social and political tensions, the Russian hybrid strategy also impacts the internal security of the Czech Republic by supporting extremist and paramilitary entities, which are fully under the influence of Russian propaganda and ready to fight for the Kremlin's interests.

**MIŁOSZ HODUN**  
**P IS FOR PROPAGANDA: DISINFORMATION AND MANIPULATION OF THE STATE**  
**BROADCASTER IN POLAND**

**PAGE 106**

The current state of the public service TV broadcaster (TVP) resembles that of Poland. The damage done to its image, to all mechanisms and processes is huge and seems irreversible. But its importance for liberal democracy and open society is so great that the new majority will have to accept this gigantic challenge and fix it.

**DANIEL HINŠT**  
**POPULIST CONSPIRACY NARRATIVES AND OTHER FORMS OF DISINFORMATION**  
**IN CROATIA**

**PAGE 134**

It can be expected that there will be continuous Croatian government support to the EU actions against disinformation. While Croatia's policy response against disinformation has been focused on creating its institutional framework and promoting media literacy, there is still space for creating a comprehensive and inclusive solution.