

Russian Bid for Czech Hearts and Minds



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ROMAN
MÁCA

Since 2014, the Czech media landscape has changed. The number of pro-Kremlin websites has mushroomed¹. 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 report². 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).

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

² 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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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”³ – 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/2020073112291382-nato-je-bezmocne-dansky-novinar-hovoril-o-ruske-superzbrani/>); “They Will Be Surprised in NATO: What Weapons Will Russian Navy Have” (<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 IS WIDELY SPREAD IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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)”⁴. 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.

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

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



SVĚT 22:54 05.03.2018 Získat krátkou URL

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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.

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



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 re-publishing 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 monthly⁶ 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 groups⁷.

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-

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

⁷ 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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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 Holocaust⁸.

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 media⁹.

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

⁸ 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]

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

it¹⁰. 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)¹¹



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 PR¹². 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 PR¹³.

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.

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

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

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 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)¹⁴



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

the age group 35–44 it was only 12%¹⁵.

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 network¹⁶.

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”¹⁷.

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

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

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

¹⁴ <https://russian.rt.com/inotv/2014-12-19/CHeshskij-zhurnalistshha-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 Press¹⁸ website, USA unconditionally needs a big war in Europe to strengthen the dollar and get full control of the EU¹⁹.”

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 Usovski²⁰.

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 Mělník²¹.

Other examples of pro-Russian activists are Jiří Černohorský and Žarko Jovanovič. 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 Černohorský²².

Žarko Jovanovič 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. Jovanovič 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)²³.

¹⁸ Czech Free Press is one of pro-Kremlin fake news websites.

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

²⁰ 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]

²¹ 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]

²² 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]

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

Žarko Jovanović during one of his visits to Russia (facebook.com)²⁴



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”²⁵

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

²⁵ 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”²⁶.

²⁶ Ibid.

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



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”²⁸. He also visited occupied Crimea as a “Czech delegate”.

²⁷ 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>

²⁸ 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]



BETWEEN 2014 AND 2015, PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATIONS (SO-CALLED “SELF-DEFENCE FORCES”) HAVE BEEN CREATED IN THE CZECH 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 Army²⁹, 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 citizens³⁰.

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 age³¹. 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.

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

³¹ 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]

²⁹ The army of the communist Czechoslovakia.

“Czech president admits his country produced Novichok – but British mainstream media remain silent” (rt.com)³²



LEBANESE PM TO ANNOUNCE RESIGNATION OF GOVERNMENT 'SOON' AMID WI

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Czech president admits his country produced Novichok – but British mainstream media remain silent

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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 friend³³.

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-

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

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

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



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 Ukraine³⁴, that the annexation of Crimea is a "*fait accompli*"³⁵ (finished issue), and so on. The Czech president had also

demanded the lifting of Western sanctions imposed on Russia³⁶.

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

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

³⁵ <https://censor.net.ua/en/news/458699/czech-president-zeman-says-crimean-annexation-fait-accomplis>

³⁶ <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 services³⁷.

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 officially³⁸.

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

³⁷ <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/>

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



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 created³⁹. 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.

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



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ROMAN
MÁČA

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