

“Good Old Times”: Fake News Machine in the Czech Republic



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ROMAN
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With the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc in 1989, transformation has started. The countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria changed their political vector from the East to the West. Political and economic changes were done fast – to a greater or less successful degree.

The system was changed, but the people remained. The same inhabitants with their views on life and work, with their values, hopes, and worries. The new arrangement also brought new responsibilities. Not everyone from the countries going through the process of transformation was ready to take responsibility of their supposedly brighter future. The disappointment came, followed by such statements as: “Before 1989, I had a flat from the state, I had a guaranteed job, my life was easier.”

Selective memory and simply remembering the years of your youth followed by disappointment and challenges of a new and globalized world raised a level of nostalgia for the so-called “good old times”. This nostalgia can be understood in the current Russia as a successor of the Soviet Union, but is rather difficult to grasp in Central and Eastern European countries – the former vassals of the USSR.

This kind of nostalgia can be also seen in the Czech Republic, which translates well into a case study of relevant subjects, narratives, and mechanisms used for efforts for a revision of the political direction after 1989.

INTERNET NOVICES AND EXPANSION OF PRO-KREMLIN NEWS WEBSITES

Some fifteen years ago, when the reorientation to the West was somewhat complete, we stepped into the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the era of Internet, and mass

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digitization. Earlier, the world online was accessible mostly for academics and professionals. The price for the connection was also high, and the speed very limited. Nowadays, the Internet is the cheapest way for entertainment, information, and orientation. For a few Euros a month, one can find everything they need at the very moment in time. Needless to say, the Internet’s role as a primary source of news is becoming increasingly significant every year.

Interestingly, having gained popularity among elderly people, the Internet and social network users have been getting older too. The number of Czech Internet users in the category 65+ jumped from 6% in 2008 to 38% in 2018. The number of users of social

networks in the category 65+ became four times higher between 2013 and 2018¹.

The year 2014 may be considered a milestone for the Czech media space, when dozens of so-called “pro-Russian news websites” spread in the Czech Republic². Their agenda has also become replicated and amplified by various politicians (far-right, or far-left), often admiring a mindset of the Russian leaders.

The elderly, as Internet novices, during the last several years entered a world full of hoaxes, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and hate speech. Such problematic content is commonly produced and spread by domestic and foreign subjects to promote political goals – or, simply, to generate clicks and thus earn money. The older users thus entered the world of manipulation that play on their emotions, especially fear and hate. They gained access to a kind of artificially created and manipulated *virtual reality*, where millions of “terrorists” are said to be on the way to their small villages or where NATO wants to provoke a nuclear war with Russia.

As is visible in the Czech TV polls³, mostly older people are one of the groups with a lower level of media literacy. They are often lonely, socially excluded, weak, vulnerable, and the Internet gives them a chance to escape their everyday reality. Many of them also became very active in creating and sharing hoaxes and fake news. They

¹ Czech Statistical Office (2019) *Jednotlivci*. Available [online]: <https://www.czso.cz/documents/10180/90577061/06100419c.pdf/3f2e4e4e-cbdb-4e6c-8904-c21160ddaea8?version=1.2> [in Czech]

² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-32070184>

³ Czech TV (2018) *Mediálně negramotná v Česku je čtvrtina lidí, před svobodou upřednostňují bezpečí*. Available [online]: <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/domaci/2664323-medialne-negramotnych-v-cesku-je-ctvrtina-lidi-pred-svobodou-uprednostnuji-bezpeci> [in Czech]



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often have ample free time, and as a result of their engagement, they are more likely to consider themselves useful, popular, and admired⁴.

These Internet novices, who come mostly from vulnerable groups, have entered a world that is very different from the *real* one. They feel scared and angry, calling for strong leaders and demanding easy solutions. They remember the “good old times” behind the iron curtain, with lower responsibilities, an apparent feeling of safety, and better living standards.

⁴ iRozhlas.cz (2019) *Dokázal, že Rusko na nás útočí dezinformacemi. Klíčovou roli hrají Zeman a Facebook, říká analytik*. Available [online]: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/frantisek-vrabel-dezinformace-fake-news-rusko-facebook_1903130001_ogo [in Czech]

Such narratives have thus been exploited to promote the idea of returning to the past, connected to the authoritarian regime submissive to the Kremlin. Unsurprisingly, this phenomenon has been clearly visible in online resources (alternative media, blogs, and social networks), which are often anonymous, but present themselves as news.

CZECHS, KREMLIN-AFFILIATED

"The European Union is worse than the USSR, the EU wants to destroy us and replace us with Islamists"⁵.

Such a slogan (or, rather, a proclamation) may be quite commonly encountered in the public debate online and in relevant so-called media outlets. During the last few years, the topic of the migration/refugee crisis has become number one. As a consequence, Czechs rejected the idea of quotas put forward by the European Union, which was aimed at remedying the challenges related to mass migration to Europe.

Migration policies and their reforms have no impact on disinformation resources and their readers living in an alternative reality. They are still repeating that the EU, by cultivating the "new world order", wants to destroy national states and their population and replace them with one super state with populations from Africa and the Middle East – including Muslims, who will kill or Islamize the local population. These types of conspiracy theories, along with others, have recently been running rampant in the Czech Republic.

Jaromir Balda, a 71-year-old man from the Central Bohemian region, faced similar fears. In June and July 2017, Mr. Balda pur-

posefully cut some trees, leaving them on the railway tracks, as a result of which passenger trains were almost derailed. If this was not shocking enough, next to the crime scene, he left leaflets claiming that this was a terrorist attack organized by Muslims.

During the investigation, the police found his computer full content relating to disinformation. Apparently, Mr. Balda was a big supporter of Tomio Okamura – a semi-Czech-Japanese leader of the right-wing populist and nationalist Freedom and Direct Democracy party and his party. As a consequence of his vicious actions, Mr. Balda was sentenced to four years in prison and he has to go through psychiatric treatment.

People of the likes of Jaromir Balda live chiefly in virtual reality, and as such, they are at times potentially dangerous. They navigate their lives in an information bubble created by fake news resources and radical or extremist political subjects. They are bombarded with visions of the approaching Apocalypse of sorts. According to such distorted messaging, only "patriotic" politicians (often collaborating or supported by Kremlin) together with Russia can save humanity. The European Union is thus described as pure evil, which is far worse than the USSR – a force that, in 1968, together with other Soviet vassal states, invaded Czechoslovakia. An event that led to more than twenty years of military occupation in the country.

1968 WAS A GOOD YEAR...WAIT, WHAT?

"Invasion of the Warsaw Pact to Czechoslovakia in August 1968 was 'brotherly help' which saved us against NATO invasion and provided peace and stability for more than 20 years"⁶.

⁵ <https://www.eportal.cz/Articles/8639-evropska-unie-je-horsi-nez-sovetsky-svaz-neverite-tady-to-mate-kerne-na-bilem.aspx> [in Czech]

⁶ <https://acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2018/08/21/prague-spring-50-years-later>

From the Editors

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE IN CEE

The subject of relations between ex-communist countries and the influence the Russian Federation is attempting to exercise abroad, has been touched upon by several of our authors of this volume.

Those interested in monitoring these subjects may find it interesting to follow reputable international initiatives and reports that professionally trace the developments in this area:

- **Free Russia Foundation** is a non-profit, nonpartisan, U.S.-based NGO, with the mission to inform U.S. policy makers on events in Russia in real time and to support the formulation of an effective and sustainable Russia policy in the U.S. Its latest report is *Misrule of Law: How Kremlin Uses Western Institutions to Undermine the West*, available at: <https://www.4freerussia.org/misrule-of-law/>
- **The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)** is a similar organization, which recruits leading experts on Central-East Europe, Russia, and its neighbors to review and analyze current economic and

security challenges, presumably instigated by the government in Moscow. The CEPA reports are available at: <https://www.cepa.org/reports>

- **FNF East and South Eastern Europe Bureau** give firsthand information and analysis of the current affairs in Russia, former USSR and the Western Balkans, which one can follow at: <https://esee.fnst.org/content/fnf-east-and-southeast-europe>.
- **Kremlin Watch** is “a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies”. Its idea is to lead interested scholars, political activist, and policy makers into everything they need to know about Russia’s interference. A relatively recent guide on *The Prague Manual: How to Tailor National Strategy Using Lessons Learned from Countering Kremlin’s Hostile Subversive Operations in Central and Eastern Europe* is available at: <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/prague-manual.pdf>. All Kremlin Watch resources may be found at: <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/our-reports/>

Recently, we could bear witness to various attempts for rehabilitation of the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the occupation that followed. The narratives recalling “brotherly help” and “saving from NATO invasion” are also regularly featured in Russian pro-Kremlin media. Their sole purpose is to advocate for Russian aggression against Ukraine.

While various apocalyptic scenarios are being introduced into the public debate (caused by migrants, Islamization, or by a provocation of war against Russia), the narrative about “peace and stability” under Soviet protection is supported by often quoted opinions that it was the Soviet intervention that saved the citizens from a Czechoslovak

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“Maidan”. The invasion is thus justified as an adequate reaction at the time.

“Those (Russians), who already saved us twice! Our country, our republic, our state, our sovereignty, our nations. I appreciate it and thank you. Russians are our best friends, brothers, allies”, wrote Czech citizen Petr Michalu on his Facebook profile and added a photo featuring tanks in Prague with a description: “Thank you for the August 21st, 1968.”

Petr Michalu is a former communist prison warden. He was sentenced for fraud and escaped to Spain. From Spain his path led to Russia, where he (unsuccessfully) applied for political asylum. He is a strong believer in Communism, the Soviet Union, and loves Vladimir Putin’s Russia. After his arrival to Russia he became a star of the Russian media, and was described as “an independent journalist who was forced by the government to leave his own country and now he is looking for asylum in Russia”⁷.

Mr. Michalu is one of many strange person-ages who are presented as someone important by the Russians. Through Russian media, he speaks to the Russian audience as a Czech on how Czechs are grateful for the Russian 1968 intervention. He labels Czechs as “slaves” of the West, but he is regularly asking them for money to support his life in Russia.

CELEBRATION AND REAWAKENING OF MEMBERS OF SECURITY AND DEFENSE INSTITUTIONS

With the changing of climate in the society since 2014 (migration crisis, the war in Donbass) many members of the Czechoslovak People’s Army, Border Guards, Secret Police, and other communist bodies were waking up. Their mindset was, however, still oriented towards the past. Such proclamations as: “We promised to be loyal to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic to defend the country and its allies against imperialists”, may thus have been observed.

During recent years, since and because of Russian aggression against Ukraine – including a massive disinformation campaign against Western countries, – these people have been forming paramilitary groups called

⁷ REN TV (2016) Чешский блогер: США превратили Европу в американскую колонию. Available [online]: <http://ren.tv/novosti/2016-04-27/cheshskiy-blogger-ssha-prevratili-evropu-v-amerikanskuyu-koloniyu> [in Russian]



DISINFORMATION
OR MANIPULATIVE
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"self-defense" forces. Curiously enough, one of them was the "Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve against War Planned by the NATO Command". Later, the group changed the name to "Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for Peace". The organization is chaired by a former lieutenant colonel of the Czechoslovak People's Army, Ivan Kratochvil. Mr. Kratochvil is also often interviewed by Russian news outlet Sputnik, and he is travelling to Russia or to Russian-occupied territories (Crimea and Donbass).

Another paramilitary group is called the Na-

tional Militia, and is led by Nela Liskova, who is very popular in pro-Kremlin media too. Ms. Liskova also established a fake consulate of the so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic (DPR) and named herself as honorary consul of the DPR to the Czech Republic.

Sometimes it looks funny when groups of "adult men" are playing war games against imperialists in the woods, but the groups with closer ties to the Russian regime and its proxies are considered a threat by Czech security services. Their members are also travelling to Eastern Ukraine, where they join Russian-backed separatist forces.

"To the Czech Republic I will return only on Russian tank or as a partisan"⁸, said Alojz Polak formerly active as a Czechoslovak Soldier in Reserve", who joined the "army" of so-called Donetsk Peoples Republic.

Mr. Polak also believes in various conspiracy theories - including chemtrails and the new world order. Before he left the country, he co-organized rallies supporting Czech President Milos Zeman, and he claimed he is a voter of Tomio Okamura's party.

Others who are trying to be perceived as "patriots defending the country" are the members of former communist border guards, forming the Club of Czech Borderlands. Together with their supporters they claim to defend the borders against outside enemies. Now, apparently, they are needed again to protect the borders against migrants and refugees. But, in fact, in the past, they "defended" the borders against their own citizens and citizens of Eastern Bloc countries who wanted to escape from

⁸ <https://www.securitymagazin.cz/defence/do-ceska-se-vratim-jedine-na-ruskem-tanku-nebo-jako-partyzan-rika-v-rozhovoru-pro-sm-zoldner-v-armade-do-necke-narodni-republiky-aloisem-polak-1404057267.html> [in Czech]

communist regimes. As such, they were responsible for killing hundreds of people.

These border guards' members are, nowadays, organizing various events, which could be difficult to imagine after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. They typically wear old uniforms or simply t-shirts with the likeness of Vladimir Putin and Russia.

The activities of the Club of Czech Borderlands are also monitored by Czech Intelligence, and by the Ministry of the Interior. However, Czech President Zeman sent to the club a thank you letter for their work and for the "historical truth" they help promote⁹.

CENSORSHIP WORSE THAN BEFORE 1989

The infamous individuals and groups mentioned above are also very active online, where they are trying to promote their agenda. As it was already emphasized, they are often of retirement age and have enough time to become engaged. They also adopt, create, and share fake news and hate speech. As their agenda and content is often also full of hate speech and threatening, social networks are deleting their profiles and pages. Unsurprisingly, they consider these acts as "censorship, which is worse than before 1989"¹⁰.

Nevertheless, before 1989, the Czechoslovak media space was fully controlled by the communist regime. Foreign radio and TV stations were technically interfered (transmitters on the border area) and the authors of articles, books, and other publications that were banned by communists, were prosecuted (including, for instance, Vaclav Havel).

⁹ <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/jsou-v-hledacku-bis-varuje-pred-nimi-vnitro-zeman-ale-dekuje/r~440f6f044cea11e7886d002590604f2e/> [in Czech]

¹⁰ <http://www.bezpolitickekorektnosti.cz/?p=92735> [in Czech]

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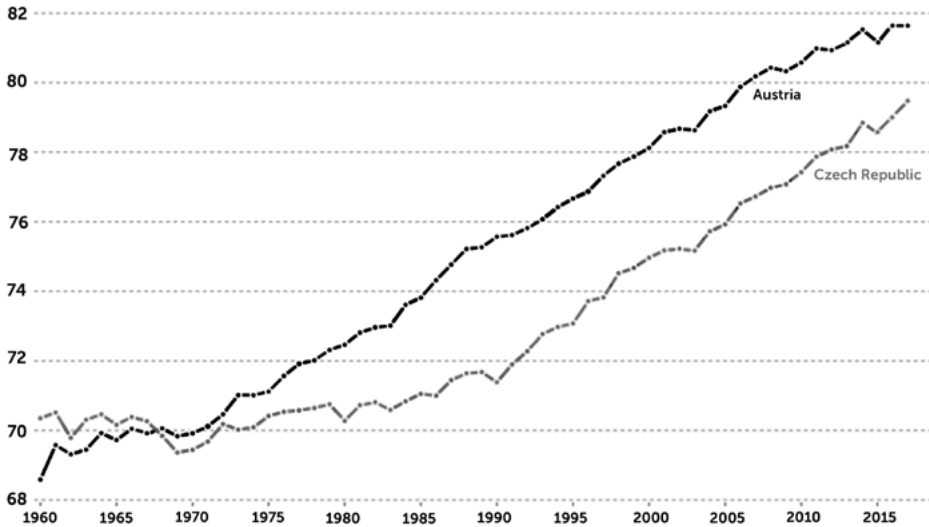
THUS,
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UNTIL TODAY

Currently, the word 'censorship' has already devaluated. In the heads of persuaded activists it means that if a private company erases a post that includes hate speech, then censorship is worse than before 1989. They are sending their content to mainstream media and if these media are not broadcasting it, activists exploring "the truth" on conspiracy websites think that this information is being censored. They see it as the current regime wanting to hide issues like chemtrails, HAARP, or prophecies about the "almighty" Vladimir Putin from the public.

WE WERE SELF-SUFFICIENT AND WE PRODUCED EVERYTHING

Disinformation or manipulative narratives are not only connected with the issues of politics and security, but also with the nostalgia exhibited by those who remember the "successes" of the socialist economy. The economic approach, let us state it clearly, ruined the earlier prospering country. By the end of the communist regime, the nominal

Figure 1: Life expectancy at birth in Austria and the Czech Republic [total; in years]



Source: World Bank (2019) Life expectancy at birth, total (years)/ Available [online]: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=AT-CZ>

GDP per capita was about six times lower than that of Austria.

In 2018, according to the World Bank data, the difference between Austria and the Czech Republic has decreased to a ratio of 2.25:1¹¹. Thus, the economic difference (nominal GDP per capita) between the two countries decreased around three times since 1989 until today.

Due to better social and economic standards, life expectancy also increased faster after the stagnation before 1989 [See: Figure 1].

However, as it was said at the beginning, for many people a convergence with the Western economies either has not been fast enough, they still have a communist

mindset, or they simply refuse to take responsibility for their own future.

The new system brought new challenges, which most Czechs did not want to accept. As a result, some of them either failed to adapt, or became the victims of the situation – for instance, if a factory where they worked for their whole life closed due to transformation. Disillusion and disappointment resurfaced, stemming from the false memories of the past and the imagined stability of communist times – which were clearly a very effective illusion created by Soviet rule.

The frustration also helped (and still does) create an imaginary world where everything is “free of charge” and accessible, but the reality was completely different. Nowadays, we may quite often encounter “arguments” that in the “good old days” people used to be nicer and maintained closer relationships, as they spent a big part of their life standing in

¹¹ https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gdp.pcap.cd?most_recent_value_desc=true

queues – even though, oftentimes, they did not even know what they were waiting for. “I do not know, I will buy what they have”, was an answer of one lady when she was approached by a Czechoslovak TV reporter in the 1980s in one such queues. Sometimes, it seems that at the moment the topic of empty shelves has been forgotten and that people remembering “good old times” have created their own reality instead.

Another narrative used in public debate is that before 1989, Czechoslovakia was a self-sufficient, prosperous country that produced everything its citizens needed, which is clearly not true. Let us illustrate this imaginary self-sufficiency with two rather telling examples from the 1980s mentioned in Czechoslovak TV.

“– Why is there not enough ketchup in our market?”

We produced enough of ketchup, but we have no tops for the bottles. Supplier promised to produce more tops next year”.

“– What can you offer to young tennis players?”

– We can offer tennis rackets, but we have no balls”¹².

CONCLUSIONS

With the fall of Communism, Central and European countries regained democracy and many freedoms, which were banned before. The process of transformation and integration to the European Union and NATO was also followed by economic growth and improvement of living standards.

However, there are still people unsatisfied with the path of development of their

countries after the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, and mostly have become a target of domestic and foreign authoritarian and extremist forces who employ fake news and manipulation. Even though these forces consider themselves *patriotic*, they are often affiliated with the Kremlin. What make these ties evident are the calls for a revision of pro-Western course and a shift backwards to “motherland Russia”.

As the saying goes: “Who sleeps during democracy, wakes up in a dictatorship”. It is precisely not falling asleep that still remains one the biggest tasks for sensitive democracies in Central and Eastern Europe.



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¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyvJ3CaY3Yc>