

# Recommendation for the Czech Strategy against Systematic Disinformation Campaigns of Foreign Powers

This strategy proposal was developed under the umbrella of Audit of National Security, organized by Interior Ministry of the Czech Republic. European Values Think-Tank served as a consultant for chapter "Influence of Foreign Powers". It was extensively consulted with Czech security forces & agencies.



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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank, which aims to unravel and confront instruments of Russian hybrid war which is focused against liberal-democratic system.

The Russian Federation's systemic disinformation campaign against the western states is considered one of the instruments of hybrid, or non-linear, efforts by Kremlin. Its aim is to disrupt EU and NATO's unity, to ruin the trust in the democratic institutions and to increase the support of the anti-systemic radical and extremist forces that are positive towards action of the Russian Federation. It is trying to make the opponent act in a way that benefits the aggressor.

The chief of the general staff of the Russian Federation armed forces [describes](#) such efforts as “*the information confrontation aiming to decrease the opponent’s fighting potential*”. The defence minister Sergej Šojgu [stated in 2015](#): “*The time has come that we all admit that the words, camera, photography, internet and information has generally become another type of weapon, another type of armed forces.*” This is the way the political system of the Russian Federation (later in text referred to as Kremlin) perceives information.

One can say that the target of these efforts is to undermine at least two specific interests of the Czech Republic as defined in the valid [Security Strategy](#):

- to secure the sovereignty and Czech political independence (Czech vital interest)
- to strengthen the NATO and EU's cohesiveness and efficiency and maintain a working and trusting transatlantic relations (Czech strategic interest)

The aggressive behaviour of the Russian Federation is reflected in the updated Czech strategic documents.

- “*Some states aim for a revision of the current international order and to reach their goals they are ready to use the methods of the hybrid fighting, mixing both conventional and non-conventional with the non-war means (a propaganda using traditional and new media, disinformation action, cybernetic attack, political and economic pressure, sending out unmarked members of armed forces)*”, [describes the Czech Security Strategy](#).
- “*(...) Russia today destabilizes the European security architecture in a significant way,*” claims the [Concept of the Czech Republic’s Foreign Policy](#).

For better clarity, we distinguish seven areas of activities of the foreign aggressive power and its allies that can be seen in the European context. The list is indicative and not exhaustive, its aim is to serve as a basic conceptualization of this often unclear phenomenon.

## Conceptual overview of Russian Federation disinformation and influence efforts on the Czech territory

Instrument	News and influence operations	Disinformation efforts	Relevant political allies	Non-governmental subjects as allies	The support of the radical and extremist forces	The ethnical minority	Economic operations
<b>General information about the instrument</b>	The interest of the aggressive foreign power is to obtain sensitive and private information on the working of its target state, its security structures, but also some key state figures. This information can be useful for blackmailing, threatening or for creating the pressure on weak spots in a key moment. For example, when deciding on the activation of the article 5 of the Washington treaty, or when deciding on talks within NATO and EU.	The Russian Federation handles its communication channels and using the disinformation methods it spreads specific statements corresponding with the current political stance and targets. Apart from the officially admitted quasi media projects (RT, Sputnik) there are several more subjects and persons that are either directly or indirectly cooperating in the favour of the Russian Federation on an ideological basis.	Kremlin supports its political allies in the European states. It is mostly ideological and political support as for example the regular ceremonial visits in the Russian Federation or finance (French Front National). These allies are used to legitimate Kremlin.	Kremlin is orchestrating or fully using its NGO allies that are defending its interests in the chosen target states. These subjects are hardly transparent following its own proprietary, personal and financial structure.	The aim of the Russian Federation is to directly or indirectly support the anti-systemic subjects that are attacking the democratic institutions and (not necessarily always) supporting the Russian Federation's interests. It is an ideological support that can be also material - like the journeys of such people to the Russian Federation or to the territories occupied by the Russian forces and interests.	For the Russian Federation, the ethnic Russians living in the European states are understood as a foreland that can be used for its war interests ( for example: Ukraine) as well as for the political aims of the pressure on the local governments (ex.: Baltic states). This alone does not mean that the significant parts of these communities are being loyal to the states they live in.	The efforts of companies close to Kremlin to gain political influence on the territory of the state. They mostly focus on strategic sectors linked with energetics. This way Kremlin asserts its interests through the cover of the commercial industries.
<b>Case study</b>	The case of agent Rachardž, who leaked some sensitive information from the AČR General Staff. Even though the details of the case are not publicly known, it can be considered a case study.	Czech version of Sputnik. Four dozens of relevant disinformation projects with mostly hidden proprietary, personal and financial structures, regularly spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories in line with Kremlin's position.	A stable consensus of the position of Kremlin's and president Zeman, KSČM leaders or for example ex-president Klaus.	The Institute of the Slavic Strategic Studies whose activities can be described as the translation of the Kremlin's position to the Czech language.	Ideological link between some of the actors of Czech radical Right (as the National Democracy), involved in the 2015 Report on Extremism in the Territory of the Czech Republic by the Ministry of the Interior.	The activities of the Artěk magazine can serve as an example. So far we cannot observe any major pro-Kremlin activities within the Czech-Russian minority.	Political activities of the representative of the Czech branch of the Lukoil company.

## **1. Possible effects of disinformation efforts of aggressive powers on the Czech territory**

Before we move on to the drafts of measures against disinformation and influence operations of aggressive foreign powers, it is necessary to think not only about the threats of today, but also about the ones that are conceivable in the next three years. Our list is not exhaustive, but rather indicative. We distinguish phenomena directly threatening the security interests of the Czech Republic and phenomena that have deeper political and security implications.

## **2. Possible scenarios impacting disinformation efforts:**

In the next three years, it is realistic that if we underestimate the response of a democratic state in the Czech Republic, seven phenomena may occur:

1. The public media may be partially silenced and nationalized by the concentrated political pressure, resulting in their inability to fulfil its current role of some of the best equipped and active epicentres of free journalism that perform a public service. On a fragmented media market evenly divided between oligarchic interests, it would mean a qualitative change for the worse.
2. Disinformation efforts can gain greater semblance of credibility when, for example, a considerable part of first-time voters no longer trust respectable news sources and in trust of conspiracy narratives will in a bulk gravitate to support extremist parties (an example being the dominance of the Hungarian Jobbik among first-time voters, or ĽSNS among first-time Slovak voters). Such a far-right-wing entity does not yet exist in the Czech Republic, but its emergence and establishment may only be a matter of time.
3. In addition to the KSČM, other relevant political actors can become more receptive to the development of pro-Kremlin narratives and become defenders of the interests of the Russian Federation in the Czech Republic. Part of voters and members of other political parties are already receptive to the pro-Kremlin message. The current leadership of the ČSSD, the ODS and the KDU-ČSL parties has the situation and its pro-Atlantic orientation under control for now, but in the case of dynamic development and personnel changes may change its positions. In the TOP 09 party, this development is not observable and movement ANO only rarely comments on foreign policy.
4. Specific authorities and state administration may come under the influence of the interests of the Russian Federation and become a security risk for the country. Such infiltration of interests and influence can potentially paralyze specific processes of national policy, for example, if a representative responsive to the interests of foreign powers becomes head of one of the power ministries. A typical example would be the Minister of Defence and Armed Forces, Foreign Affairs or Interior from KSČM.

5. Massive disinformation projects may start on the Czech market there may start, such as the Czech-language broadcast of channel RT, or influential projects such as magazines for children. As a pilot and so far unsuccessful example is the Slovak magazine, The Ink Warrior. The state must have a thoughtful strategy on how to respond to such phenomena.
6. The activities of anti-Western paramilitary groups may improve and multiply. As in the Slovak case, there may be efforts to organize summer camps for juveniles with a specific anti-system agenda. The existence and relative "success" of these groups would have a major impact on the situation in the state security corps (especially in the police and army), leading to lowering of loyalty towards the democratic state of law and their demoralisation.
7. In case of irresponsible behaviour of the government, for example, in the migration crisis, there may be a dramatic loss of its legitimacy and support, leading to a sharp increase in support for anti-systemic political forces. These are already systematically treated from the perspective of the Russian Federation and its allies. These forces can also have a strong influence on both the public and political agenda. An example might be the French National Front.

### **3. The proposed countermeasures**

There are at least eleven countermeasures, which should be adopted by liberal democracies.

Let's start with measures that should be adopted by the Czech state. The first is a series of steps that can be taken immediately or in the short term:

#### **I. It is necessary to identify organized disinformation campaigns as a priority threat and describe them in the strategic documents of state.**

- State bodies are able to systematically deal with any threat only if it is accurately described and categorized into their conceptual materials from which specific procedures and tasks for state bodies are created - the police, through the diplomatic service, the military, the intelligence services. The ongoing audit of national security is a positive step, but the fight against this phenomenon must be well coordinated and subsequently reflected in other security documents of state.
- Monitoring and countering the influence of the Russian Federation (and disinformation campaign as one of its components) must be a major priority for the Czech intelligence services and the armed forces. Following the government's assignment, they should build larger capacities.
- Connections among far-right extremist and the Kremlin should be carefully monitored and unravelled. Annual report on the state of Czech extremist scene for 2015 begins to describe these connections. Security forces should monitor both human and institutional connections, but also

material and financial support. It should become a public issue, once the appropriate authorities have particular cases on their hands.

- Czech Republic already has a representative in the EEAS East STRATCOM Team. A specific step for Czech Republic would be to send a representative to the NATO Centre of Excellence for Strategic Communication in Riga.

## **II. Czech Republic needs a specialized department for monitoring and countering hybrid threats.**

- European countries in response to the disinformation campaigns need to respond with institutional changes. Since it is mainly a threat to the democratic legal establishment, the Interior Ministry should create a team for hybrid threats (which do exist, albeit with different roles, in the diplomatic service of the EU, or the British or Lithuanian government) that should have four basic roles.
  - Firstly, this team would respond in real time to major developing misinformation. Practically, this would mean that in the case of "a man in a brown jacket" would push the police to respond immediately to popular misinformation circulating in all social networks. If Germany had such team, "Lisa" case would probably not have escalated into a demonstration of hundreds of people and an international rift, because the police authorities would have been alerted by competent authority to check background story of such information, investigate it and then publish. Another potential tool is to file a complaint for serious cases of scaremongering. Strategic communications team would follow media coverage in real time and if they saw serious misinformation, this media would be provided with additional information, for example, from the Czech Embassy in Kiev and the EU, if the case involves Ukraine. In any case, this team would not build "their own propaganda," or "censorship".
  - The second role of the team would be publishing regular review of trends and disinformation campaigns as it is perceived by politically neutral security apparatus of the state.
  - The third role of the team should be strategic sociological and political analysis. The state should have a detailed standard sociological data about the perceived geopolitical identity of its citizens and weaknesses of the society for each component of a disinformation campaign - for example, which myths and misinformation have both strong support among citizens.
  - The fourth role should be educating and training (for example, members of security forces) and the preparation of adequate methodologies for data collection and analysis.

### **III. A free society must protect its media - especially the public ones**

- Free media is one of the pillars of a democratic society. The aim of the disinformation campaign is to undermine the confidence of the people and create serious media conspiracy that "establishment stands against the people." The media will always make mistakes, and their credibility is their own responsibility. The responsibility of society and the state is to protect the media from artificial and organized hostile pressures.
- A key role is the one of public media, which in the Czech fragmented media landscape have a dominant role in news coverage. It is a public interest that the pressure on public by the pro-Kremlin actors is carefully uncovered. State security forces should pay attention to protect the public media - both in terms of physical, personal and information security.
- The role of professional journalist organizations and associations should be educational activities for Czech journalists in area of analysis of misinformation and disinformation techniques. Journalist professional organizations should also confront those who abuse the status of journalists for systemic disinformation operations. Such individuals should be ostracized by journalist communities for abusing the status of a journalist. Very low functionality of relevant professional journalistic organisations in Czech Republic does not help the cause.

### **IV. The state should enforce all its available rules and mechanisms in order to minimise disinformation influence by aggressive regimes on its territory.**

The government should assign the Ministry of the Interior to cooperate with intelligence services on compiling unlisted material, which would elaborate on further legitimate means the state could use. Some examples are publicly known. The Czech Republic can take its lesson from a number of tested practices of its European partners on the disinformation campaign of the Russian Federation. All it takes is political will:

- *Russian "journalists" lose their rights to reside in European countries or their accreditations following investigations of local counterintelligence services related to their involvement in espionage or fulfilling intelligence tasks for organs of the Russian Federation.* Similar examples are known from Poland or even from the Czech Republic. After increasing the capacities of the Czech intelligence services, it should be one of the main goals on the Czech territory.
- [Estonian counterintelligence](#) KAPO publishes examples of captured and convicted Russian agents. After appropriate preparation of the Czech security apparatus for the Russian counter-reaction this practice should be adopted – after an agreement with allies.

- *Removal of licence for domain use due to systematic violation of journalist code of ethics of Sputnik in Latvia.* There is already an official communication channel of the Russian Federation Sputnik (pretending to be a medium) in the Czech market. Responsible regulators should investigate in what ways the Latvian approach could be repeated in the Czech environment.
- *Possible removal of licence due to systematic violation of journalist code of ethics for broadcasting of the RT network in Great Britain.* It is possible that with time a TV channel like RT would try to get established in the Czech environment. It is also supported by the language proximity with Slovakia, which is together with the Czech Republic – in terms of the political and social resilience against the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns – one of the weak spots of the Alliance. If it was the case the Czech regulatory organs should then reflect the good European experiences which had already dealt with justified cases of licence removals.
- *Truly transparent funding of political parties and candidates is the founding stone of the struggle against influence of foreign superpowers operations.* European experiences show that operations of the Russian Federation can manifest even through financial support of the activities of political parties and candidates. It is in the interest of the state's security that all funding of political activities is fully transparent.
- *Various groups within the security and military forces of the state can be vulnerable in terms of disinformation and influence efforts of the Russian Federation.* The state should be able to internally measure loyalty of members of its forces, and their willingness (for instance within the potential activation of Article 5 of the Washington Agreement) to defend an ally against of potential aggression of the Russian Federation.

The second series of steps include measures which should be adopted by the state on a long-term and sustainable basis:

**V. To maintain security we have to build quality civil education and programmes of media education for young people. Otherwise they will be more and more drawn into the world of conspiracy theories and extremist groups.**

- The concept of political resilience of democratic communities is discussed within NATO. Presently, the Czech state is incapable of providing civil education and basic media literacy to young people, which results in increased support for extremist political streams by this age group, deeply ingrained lack of interest in general and non-participation in elections. At this

day and age, Czech secondary schools dedicate several hours to civil education, which are often taught by demotivated pedagogues.

- The current practical inactivity of the state represents a ticking bomb which threatens with the creation of a generation of young citizens who share basic values of constitutional order in a very limited way, and who are prone to extremist and conspiratorial influences. Therefore, the state should consider this situation a security risk, and the creation of a truly wide and quality type of civil education (for example inspired by the German model), as well as media literacy, should be one of the priorities of its education policy. The examples from Slovakia (20 % of Slovak university students voted for LSNS, who spreads conspiracy theories – this party dominated the votes of first-time voters) and Hungary (where Jobbik is dominant among first-time voters as well as on social media) show that the situation is not hypothetical.
- However, educating only primary and secondary school pupils is not enough. It is vital that media literacy and working with information sources are priorities both for pedagogical faculties and for existing educational structures for graduated and practising pedagogues. This task should be assigned to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.
- Apart from working with the main educational stream it is in the interest of the state to devote special attention to programmes of East European studies. In the long-term context the state will need loyal experts on the Eastern European area. If the state does not focus on the support and control of the results of such education programmes, it will find itself in a situation where there will be no systematic influx of experts; alternatively, these programmes will attract and manifest the soft influence of the Russian Federation.

## **VI. The state must systematically and with focus work on supporting loyalty of the Russian speaking minority to the Czech constitutional system.**

- Parts of the Russian speaking minority are a highly vulnerable part of the community, which is shown in the ongoing approach of the Kremlin to these communities in Eastern Europe. The Czech state's support of the loyalty of this community to the constitutional order is minimal. The Czech state should revise the activities of this community, which gain or used to gain its support (e.g. the magazine Artěk), and establish clear priorities of the support for the upcoming years. As a part of the revision there should be an analysis of official and unofficial activities of the Russian Federation Embassy towards the Russian speaking community.
- For preventive reasons the state should be able to conduct a profound sociological research of the Russian speaking community living on the Czech territory, as it is able to monitor the Muslim community in the Czech Republic.

- It is vital to distinguish between different groups within this heterogeneous community – according to dissimilar background and different interests. The state must be able to distinguish between the groups who are loyal and friendly to the Czech Republic, and those who can be vulnerable or prone to international political influence.

## **VII. Organisation of disinformation campaigns should be one of the priorities of the Czech foreign policy. Within the human rights framing it can be categorised together with the freedom of speech.**

- *The propaganda using the traditional as well as new media and intelligence disinformation activities* are today considered by the legitimate Security strategy of the Czech Republic a security threat to the state. If, however, this threat is present on so many levels in the Czech Republic as well as among our allies, the topic should be high up on the Czech foreign policy agenda. The Czech diplomacy should really stress out that this topic should be a high priority within the structures of the EU and NATO, as well as the fact that it should always be on any agenda of all relevant bilateral and multilateral meetings.
- The Czech Republic supports projects strengthening freedom of speech such as the Radio Free Europe/ Radio Freedom, the forming hub of Russian speaking media based in Prague, as well as it supported the Ukrainian project StopFake.org for a short while. This support should be increased and the support for the freedom of speech should be – within the tradition of the human rights foreign policy of the Czech Republic – considered a Czech brand.
- With regards to the extensive Russian espionage activities the Czech Republic can initiate the effort to systematically decrease the number of diplomatic personnel at Russian Federation Embassies in Central and Eastern European countries. If the Czech Republic decreased the number of accredited Russian diplomats bilaterally, it would result in significant decrease of personnel at the relatively small Czech Embassy in Moscow. Therefore, it would be more tactical, if the Czech diplomacy initiated negotiations with similarly thinking allied states especially in Central, Eastern, and possibly Northern Europe, which would be able to approach such systematic decrease of Russian diplomatic personnel as a group. The Russian reaction would, therefore, be naturally diffused, and it would not be directed purely at the Czech Republic.

A democratic state has to be limited in its actions. Its role is and must be limited, so that we would not find ourselves on Orwellian totalitarianism. Number of activities can be done by citizens themselves – using the existing legal framework and constitutional liberties. There are at least five steps, which the Czech civil community should do:

## **VIII. We urgently need credible projects which would bust disinformation and mendacious conspiracy theories on a daily basis.**

- In the Czech public sphere there are tens of pieces of disinformation every week, which constantly affects the citizens' trust in democratic institutions and any serious information sources. Majority of them are based on a primitive statement – The West and its representatives are bad, Russia is good, or at least similarly imperfect. The definition of disinformation is that it is based on untruthful description of reality and the effort to mislead the audience. In Ukraine, under the Russian disinformation aggression, the project StopFake.org was formed, which on a daily basis busts disinformation and mendacious conspiracy theories. In the Czech Republic the existing activities of projects such as Demagog.cz are (for capacity reasons) still insufficient. It is in the interest of the society that they are fully operational.

## **IX. It is necessary to accurately name and confront threats on the Czech political scene.**

- If some of the officials act in contradiction with vital and strategic interests of the state, it is necessary to appeal with all the determination for accountability. The security strategy of the Czech Republic names the vital interest of the state – *political independence of the Czech Republic*. As a strategic interest of the state it indicates *strengthening of cohesion and effectiveness of NATO and EU, and preservation of functional and credible transatlantic relationship*.
- If the representatives of KSČM repeatedly contest the Czech participation in NATO and regularly copy the aggressive Kremlin positions, or they assiduously work on undermining the Czech foreign policy line with their activities and travels to Donbas and Moscow, it is important to question why other democratic political parties let persons representing security risks be part of parliamentary organs for sensitive topics of national security, such as commissions for control of intelligence services.

## **X. Those who regularly spread disinformation and positions of Kremlin must be publicly identified and confronted with a series of the verified disinformation. Then they should lose their credibility.**

- In a free society there is freedom of speech, therefore no one can be prosecuted for expressing their opinion. Freedom of speech is necessary for free, yet sound, discussion within a civil society. For instance, if someone persistently defends a position of a regime which is aggressive towards

our vital interests, or spreads disinformation, it is necessary to publicly question in whose interest they are acting.

- In the Czech speaking environment there are tens of websites regularly publishing disinformation with the pro-Kremlin accent. If a media or quasi-media project regularly publishes untruthful information, it should be considered prejudiced and lose credibility. A lie is not an alternative opinion. One of the signs of a medium is also the fact that if it publishes untruthful or inaccurate information, it immediately issues an amendment and an apology. If it does not do so, it loses credibility.
- Civil society must generate social pressure on democratic politicians and public persons so that they would not appear on such websites, besmirch their names, and legitimise by their presence the conspiracy and disinformation projects with anti-system agenda.
- Professional journalist organisations should take this topic seriously and start educating their members but also ostracise those who call themselves journalists whilst systematically spreading disinformation along one political line. Such persons should be – by the professional journalist community – publicly labelled as merely hiding behind their journalist status. Auto-regulation of a given field should be a natural reaction, if given individuals systematically violate (although often unwritten) rules of the journalist code of ethics. The problem of the Czech scene is the limited functionality and real existence of such professional organisations.

## **XI. We need to systematically reveal who is behind which disinformation project.**

- On the Internet in the Czech Republic there are tens of quasi-media projects spreading disinformation. About their interests, funding and personal structure very little or nothing at all is known. If a medium is supposed to have the public's trust, the transparency of its funding and personnel is a given.
- Civil society must require such transparency. It is in public interest to know who and with what purpose spreads disinformation within the Czech debate. Revealing and uncovering of the backgrounds of disinformation projects should be one of the priorities for the Czech counterintelligence, as well as for investigative journalists.

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The European Values Think-Tank is a non-governmental policy institute defending liberal democracy.

Our vision is that of a free, safe and prosperous Czech Republic within Central Europe that is an integral part of the West.

We help to face aggressive regimes, radicalisation within the society, the spread of authoritarian tendencies and extremist ideologies including Islamism.

We provide decision-makers with expert recommendations and we systematically watch and evaluate their performance. We consider active citizens, accountable politicians, political parties that fulfil their role, as well as cohesive society that shares the values of individual freedom, human dignity and equal rights to be the principle elements of a functioning liberal democracy.

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