

State of the Czech disinformation community in 2017



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1. About this Report

The following Kremlin Watch Report deals with the activities of the Czech disinformation community. Specifically, it provides an overview of the key systematic findings about Czech disinformation outlets based on investigations into the topic carried out by the Kremlin Watch Program since November 2015. Therefore, it is not an in-depth research into individual cases, nor an overview of the whole disinformation scene, which includes non-governmental organisations, informal groups on social media, politicians and other entities. It is rather a brief excursion into the topic with some examples of the most powerful and active disinformation outlets and their practice. It will mostly serve to those exploring the topic, and it will also provide a general overview to all who are not yet aware how the Czech local disinformation scene works. Given the fact that the report deals with an issue that is dynamic and volatile, general trends that are identified in this report might slowly change depending on the receptivity of the Czech public to disinformation.

2. Actors and motivation of their behaviour

The Czech disinformation scene is disproportionately well-developed compared to the other Visegrad countries. Altogether, there are **about four dozen of relevant** (with more than 5000 monthly clicks) and **active** (with new content every week) **disinformation websites** in the Czech Republic with mostly hidden proprietary, personal and financial structures; regularly spreading disinformation, mixture of facts, half-truth and conspiracy theories in line with the Kremlin's position.

All the disinformation web platforms picture themselves as the only “truly independent” media which fight “against censorship of political correctness” or alleged Brussels/American propaganda. Based on this narrative, they also seek financial help from readers, claiming that as subjects to repression by the establishment they are on the edge of shutdown.

In 2015, the [Association of Independent Media](#), which brings together people from the disinformation community and conspiracy theorists, was founded. Every year, it awards the “Kramerius Prize for Independent Journalism”. Not surprisingly, among its declared goals, the Association accuses public media of “censorship, manipulation and influence of interest groups”.

Czech disinformation outlets differ a lot in terms of their activity and the space that they give to disinformation and conspiracy theories. There are outlets which are direct authors of disinformation (disinformation web platforms) as well as those who take the most of their content from websites on the same wavelength (disinformation sites without their own content – so-called aggregators).

We estimate that **about one hundred people are actively publishing on these platforms – most of them Czech citizens**. Since the discussion regarding pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic accelerated in 2015, the number of like-minded websites and blogs has been steadily growing. However, the core of the Czech disinformation scene is currently composed of approximately six platforms. Namely Parlamentní listy (Parliamentary Letters), AC24, AE News (also known as

Aeronet), Nová Republika (New Republic), První Zprávy (First News) and Sputnik CZ (the Czech branch of international media outlet Sputnik News).

The key individuals who are behind these platforms are most probably motivated by their personal economic interests with a lack of social responsibility (e.g. Our Media Inc.) or by their personal conviction. Those forming the second group are usually looking for alternatives to the current political system or to the Western democratic order and foreign policy, hence they admire and adhere to Vladimir Putin's Russia (AC24, Protiproud, NWO.org).

Narratives expressed in their articles are amplified by other activities. This includes organization of public events and members gatherings. For example, the New Republic outlet organizes seminars for its members on a regular basis. In the past, the AC24 set up a conspirative and esoteric print periodical called [Vědomí](#) (Consciousness), but it soon came to an end due to funding problems associated with a small number of readers. Last but not least, a few internet-based broadcastings filled with outright lies exist as well.

Although they all spread disinformation to the clear benefit of Russia, **no major direct link between Czech disinformation outlets and the Russian government has yet been proven**. The explanation is that most of the members of the disinformation community are willing to spread pro-Kremlin content only based on their ideological motivation and personal conviction. Of course, with the exception of [Sputnik CZ being](#) funded by the government of the Russian Federation in 2014. However, future cooperation cannot be excluded considering already established ties between some individuals active on Czech disinformation platforms and Russians. Recently, a group of Czech disinformers [attended](#) the Slavic Congress in Moscow, which was partially paid by Russians. Among visitors, there were also representatives of the unrecognized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic. Moreover, the chief of the Czech delegation was also privately received by the ambassador in Moscow Vladimír Remek. Similar events serve to spread pro-Kremlin thoughts and are part of the expanding Russian influence.

3. Disinformation business of Parlamentní listy (Parliamentary Letters)

Among all entities mentioned above, the most influential is **Parlamentní listy**. It is operated by the company Our Media Inc., which is owned by Ivo Valenta, a well-known Czech businessman and a member of the Czech Senate. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, Our Media Inc. has developed a whole business model unprecedented within Czech disinformation platforms. Besides Parlamentní listy, it operates several other disinformation or manipulative servers including some strongly pro-Kremlin websites.

Because of its name and the use of the national emblem, readers were confused and thought that it was operated by the Czech Parliament. Therefore, the [Chamber of Deputies](#) released a public statement in which it distanced from Parlamentní listy.

Together with Sputnik CZ, they are also the most active with up to 1200-1400 articles monthly. However, Parlamentní listy is the most read. With more than 700.000 readers per month (in a country of 10 million people), it is now on the 49th place in terms of traffic rank within the country measured with the [SimilarWeb](#).

According to a [research](#) conducted by the Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, Parlamentní listy oscillates between “the grey zone of pro-Kremlin manipulation” and serious media. What is more, it uses manipulative techniques even more often than Sputnik CZ. To illustrate this issue, in the past, one of the well-known conspiracy theorists Paul Craig Roberts was presented as “[well-acquainted expert from Washington](#)”. Nevertheless, despite the evident violation of the principles of serious journalism, they are considered a trusted source of information by some politicians across the political spectrum.

The Parlamentní listy outlet gives de facto unlimited space for politicians from various groups, including extremists, who can set up an account. Via their personal profile, they reach the public by posting opinion articles and answering reader’s questions. In addition, there are plenty of politicians as well as experts from various fields who frequently give interviews to Parlamentní listy and similar disinformation outlets. Not only members of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which openly backs the Russian political regime and promotes disinformation platforms on its official webpage, but also some members of the largest political parties that stand firm to support the pro-Atlantic orientation of the Czech Republic, such as ANO or the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD).

4. Symbiosis between some Czech politicians and disinformation outlets

Some politicians are living in symbiosis with disinformation outlets. Among them, the Czech president Miloš Zeman is probably the most important ally of the so-called alternative media which he considers to be trustful. Especially the Parlamentní listy outlet received considerable [support](#) from the Czech president, who is also well-known for his negative attitude towards journalists and media outlets that are criticising him. For this reason, he accuses mainstream media, [especially](#) the Czech Television, of being dependent, unprofessional and biased. In exchange for his support to alternative outlets, he is endorsed by them. But it is not only his advocacy for disinformation outlets but also his alignment with the Kremlin that raises concerns among experts. All in all, he has repeated false statements propagated by the Kremlin on several occasions and is used the most by the domestic Russian propaganda for the legitimization of the Putin regime.

Undoubtedly, there are social consequences arising from his behaviour. Firstly, he undermines trust in democratic institutions such as the main public broadcaster. Secondly, he serves as a source of legitimacy and credibility of disinformation platforms. Finally, he is used for the legitimization of the Putin regime; thus, heading the Czech Republic off the West. Nevertheless, Miloš Zeman is not the only politician spreading the Kremlin’s lies, other names can be found in the Czech language Kremlin Watch Report [Who shares pro-Kremlin sites on Facebook](#).

5. Infiltration into the public media

There have already been some cases of infiltration into the public media. Probably the most crucial is the case of René Zavoral, the director of the Czech public broadcaster *Czech Radio* who attended the Kramerius Prize for Independent Journalism ceremony, organized by the [Association of Independent Media](#), two times. It is controversial that a person leading such a highly professional and trustworthy medium finds himself in a society of people whose activities violates practically all the rules of quality and independent journalism.

Another example includes Radio commentators Jan Petránek, who repeatedly [claimed](#) that Vladimir Putin had to annex Crimea as the FBI and CIA had built their bases there, and Petr Žantovský – a frequent commentator for *Parlamentní listy* and one of the founders of the Association of Independent Media.

Nevertheless, the state of mainstream and public media in the Czech Republic is generally good. This is supported by the [Freedom of the Press](#), where the Czech Republic is labelled as “free”, compared to two other Visegrad countries Poland and Hungary, both “partially free”. What is more, according to the [2017 World Press Freedom Index](#) compiled by Reporters Without Borders, the Czech Republic ranked 23rd out of 180 countries.

6. Major topics

With some exceptions (e.g. *Parlamentní Listy*), internal affairs-related articles are rather limited compared to issues of global importance. Judging by the number of articles on the disinformation outlets that are focused on the anti-Americanism, Czech disinformation outlets pits the Czech Republic against the United States. In comparison with other important topics, such as the Czech membership in the European Union and NATO, the USA is obviously the main one. The reason for this may be the fact that most of their foreign sources are rather anti-USA than anti-EU.

Czech disinformation outlets use very similar arguments to Kremlin-controlled media such as Sputnik CZ. In a nutshell, no matter what happens in the international affairs, the USA is solely to blame. The common narrative includes “U.S. aggression around the world”, “NWO and Deep State conspiracies”, “USA meddling in the internal affairs of their less influential counterparts”, etc.

Not surprisingly, Czech disinformation platforms challenge the Czech membership in the European Union and NATO. These entities seek to undermine the public support and trust towards these institutions and towards those politicians who support Czech belonging to the West. They accept and publicly defend Kremlin’s call to lift sanctions and its interpretations such as “NATO’s encirclement of Russia”. In addition, they use sensitive issues such as the migration crisis to blame the EU. Some outlets even call for “Czexit”, which was defined by the Security Strategy of the Czech Republic (2015) as the most significant threat to the Czech national interests.

7. Trends in the activities of the Czech disinformation web platforms:

Regarding the Czech disinformation scene, we observe the following trends:

- Trend 1: Most of the Czech disinformation sites are **non-transparent**. Frequently, it is not possible to identify their ownership and editorial structure, how they are funded, or how do they create and select content for publishing. Very rarely do disinformation sites provide such information on request. And if they do, only those that also provide it publicly on their websites.

Only a fraction of the people who make up the content of disinformation outlets is known. Some servers are based on the anonymity of the most active authors, who are hidden behind anonymous editorial abbreviations. These include *AE News*, *First News* and *Parliamentary letter*. Based on the investigation of the Kremlin Watch team and some Czech investigative journalists, we estimate that identity of only a third of those who are the authors of disinformation articles is known. Consequently, there is a lack of transparency in the authors' contributions and responsibilities.

- Trend 2: In the case of disinformation outlets whose authors are not anonymous, there is a **personal interconnection**. Commentators on disinformation servers are repeating and their articles are being taken by akin servers. A case supporting this trend is the activity of businessmen Ondřej Geršl, who owns one of the most read pro-Kremlin servers called *AC24* and another disinformation server *Svět kolem nás* (World Around Us). Noticeable is also a group of constantly repeating commentators publishing on various disinformation outlets, whose articles are being republished.

Sometimes, there is also an **interconnection with Slovak** disinformation entities. For example, a Slovak author of a propaganda project *Zem & Vek* moved into the Czech disinformation project *Vědomí* (Consciousness), which used to be published by *AC24*.

- Trend 3: Disinformation servers are also **linked to each other in content**. Only a limited number of disinformation or misinformation appear only on one web page. Usually, it is reproduced or recycled by allied or ideologically similar pages with slight adjustments or completely unchanged. This is one of the reasons why it is sometimes problematic to find out where the false information has originated. Another reason is that they practically ignore the standards of journalism such as citation, differentiation between facts and presumptions, etc.

- Trend 4: For some servers, **foreign disinformation platforms serve as the source of information and content** as well as the source of inspiration. These sources also repeat. In addition to the official Russian outlets Sputnik news agency and Russian television network RT, another widely cited pages are Global Research, Southfront, What Does It Mean, Breitbart, Zerohedge, etc. For example, the already mentioned web page *AC24* mostly cites Breitbart, Snews, Zerohedge, South Front and Prison Planet. Czech disinformation platforms also use some typical manipulation techniques that these web pages regularly use in their texts. From this point of view, they are not much different in form. What is distinguishable is the degree of expressiveness and vulgarity.

- Trend 5: Plagiarism is commonplace under the auspices of citations. The cited content is often deformed by selective choice and commentaries of editors. In this manner, **disinformation platforms widely cite politicians and (purported) experts** without their knowledge in order to support the platforms' narratives and to create an image of credibility and legitimacy.
- Trend 6: **The amount of disinformation platforms is quite surprising** considering their constant complains about the lack of financial resources, their limited number of contributors and also relatively limited thematic focus. Despite the poor visual and content quality (grammatical mistakes) and generally inadequate quality of provided information, many of these websites maintain their reading base and continue in publishing a large number of articles per month, which are being shared on other websites and social networks.
- Trend 7: **Some outlets diminish their responsibility for the content produced by minimizing their own authorized content.** Currently, we might observe that they shift their focus to republishing and recycling articles from other like-minded platforms. Both very active outlets, such as Parlamentní listy and Sputnik, as well as single-man projects tend to rely on articles taken from other web pages and to refer to politicians, journalists or alleged experts who fit into the general narrative. Consequently, they disclaim liability for their content by claiming that it is not an editorial opinion.
- Trend 8: Disinformation outlets **prefer foreign policy issues to domestic ones.** Since the beginning of the year, the outlets paid attention mainly to the U.S. and to the European Union, with a very critical attitude towards these institutions. In addition to the criticism of both actors, disinformation and conspiracy theories were common.

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