

Struggle against Disinformation in the Czech Republic: Treading the Water¹

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Abstract: *In the last decade, the Czech Republic's foreign and security policy were destabilised with the activities of external actors, with Russia in the leading role, and also internal actors who followed the Russian and pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation campaigns and/or actively participated in such subversive activities. After 2015, within the set of crises and their securitisation, the disinformation network in Czechia was developed using the social media and the so-called alternative online media for the dissemination of disinformation, misinformation, fake news and chain mails including and disseminating these campaigns. As far as the leading persons in the executive belonged to the disinformers, the government did not develop working strategies against the disinformation campaigns as the new hybrid threat until 2021. At the end of 2021, the new government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala commenced in the Czech Republic with a new strategy regarding the hybrid threats, including disinformation. The one-year plan to establish the systemic platform for the struggle against such threats was challenged with the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The surprisingly strong response to disinformation campaigns after February 24, 2022, suggested a more systematic approach by the government against fake news and incitement to hatred. A year and a half on, however, we are seeing a stalling in place.*

Key Words: *hybrid threats; disinformation campaigns; propaganda; Russia; Czech Republic*

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1. Introduction

The Czech Republic belongs to the group of so-called new democracies and new NATO- and EU-member states. It also belongs to the Visegrád Group (V4), the cooperation of four Central European nations that share a similar historical experience and legacy. As the most important and negative of such legacies, the totalitarian rule of Communist ideology and parties and general inclusion into the Eastern Bloc controlled by the Soviet Union is reflected. As an important modality of this Soviet control over Eastern and Central Europe, repeatedly confirmed by the direct Soviet interventions against the liberalisation processes in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, the continuation of older Russian imperial projects is often discussed within the V4 political and societal discourse (Waisová 2020). The effort to dismantle the (post-)Communist framework and (re-)create the democratic order, liberal economy and civic society in Central Europe also covers the permanent solution of the geographic proximity of the region and security dilemma related with the Russian activities and geopolitical conceptions.

Naturally, not all actors in the V4 societies accept and follow the above-mentioned axioms and stances, and within the polarised societies and political elite we can observe an *ad hoc* or even a stable ‘Russian factor’ influencing the public debate and in some cases also the public policies. As one of the recent analyses summarised: ‘The CEE region represents a very unique space within the Euro-Atlantic area. Particularly because of its countries’ several historical, linguistic, or ethnic ties to Russia, the narratives that are being circulated there often differ considerably from those observed in Western Europe or North America. As a result, the CEE region can be perceived as intrinsically more vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, especially because of the wider range of narratives that Russia can exploit there for such a purpose, including the Russian World, Slavic Unity or Ostalgia narratives. Simultaneously, the CEE region faces numerous deleterious trends that are favourable to Russian information warfare tactics. Most evident has been a continuous decline in citizens’ trust in traditional media platforms, which are the least likely to be polluted with disinformation and misinformation’ (Bokša 2022: 18).

Regarding the Czech Republic, the Russian ‘factor’ has been discussed since 1989 specifically with the continuation of the occurrence of the only partly-reformed and in many regards neo-Stalinist Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, KSČM), which was present in all parliaments elected between 1990 and 2021 and which participated actively in the existence and policies promoted by at least two governments in this period – the left-centrist government led by Social Democrat Jiří Paroubek (2005–2006) (Cabada 2015; Kopeček – Pšeja 2007), and the government led by the oligarchic leader of the populist movement ANO 2011 Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) (Cabada

2018; Popálený – Cabada 2022). Furthermore, the pro-Russian activities and stances of Presidents Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman have often been discussed; in the case of Miloš Zeman his positive views on the authoritarian politics of Chinese and Russian leaders became one of the symbols of the democratic backsliding of Czech (foreign) policy (Cabada 2020).

Together with Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico, M. Zeman and A. Babiš became the most visible Central European political actors repeatedly undermining the joint EU and the general Western position towards Putin's Russia. Furthermore, Prague became the hub of Russian intelligence and subversive activities in East-Central Europe, operated by the oversized Russian embassy. Their strategy also included the extensive use of disinformation (including the cooperation with the alternative media and other sources of disinformation campaigns), specifically in the case of M. Zeman. Let us recall that Zeman belonged to the small group of European politicians who also developed extensive and friendly relations with V. Putin after the Russian annexation of Crimea, that he continually casted doubts upon the Western sanctions against Russia (Kratochvíl 2014) and that he strongly promoted the participation of Russian state-owned firms in the tenders for the new nuclear block in Czech power plants, etc. All this brought him into the conflict not only with the right-wing political parties in the country, but also with the Czech intelligence, above-all the BIS and its Director Michal Koudelka. Repeatedly, Zeman questioned the activities of the BIS and the qualification of its director, for the public he labelled the BIS dabblers (in Czech 'čučkař'). Despite the government's repeated proposal to promote Koudelka to the rank of general, Zeman rejected this proposal repeatedly, including in autumn 2022 (Hrdlička 2022).

Only after April 2021 and the outburst of the so-called 'Vrbětice case'² did the situation (partly) change. Indeed, President Zeman continued in his pro-Russian activities till 24 February 2022, the beginning of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Furthermore, his – in time and scope very limited – declarations about his misunderstanding regarding the intentions of V. Putin, do not give the impression of real turnabout. Specifically, we have to stress the role of

2 The Vrbětice case presents the most intensive and visible Russian interference in the Czech Republic. In October and December 2014, in the munition storehouse in Vrbětice two series of detonations happened, and also two persons were killed. In April 2021, the Czech government declared that based on the BIS investigation, the main directorate of the general staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) was responsible for these acts of sabotage. While President Zeman continued in pro-Russian activities, the government carried out a set of measures including the expulsion of dozens of Russian diplomats (and/or agents) from the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, several analyses reflect the delayed response of Czech institutions including the delayed announcement of the BIS investigation. Furthermore, evidence exists that the chair of the Social Democratic Party and at that time also minister of internal affairs as well as minister of foreign affairs, Jan Hamáček, was thinking about the import of Russian anti-Covid vaccines Sputnik-V in exchange for secreting the role of Russia in the terrorist attacks in Vrbětice (Dvořáková – Srovátka 2022).

Zeman's main advisor, Martin Nejedlý, and his direct ties to the leading persons of Putin's regime (Gabal 2022).

As showed, in the Czech Republic there are active strong political actors with a pro-Russian inclination using the colourful set of instruments and measures for the dissemination of fake news and disinformation disseminating (pro-) Russian propaganda. In the case of Czech president Zeman, these activities began immediately after his entrance into office, in the case of Andrej Babiš, they began as early as the so-called migration crisis in 2015. Both politicians, along with the leader of the radical, and in some issues extreme-right, political party Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD), Tomio Okamura, addressed the part of the Czech population prone to disinformation campaigns using the 'politics of fear' strategy (Spalová et al 2022). Specifically, between 2017 and 2021, these actors cooperated in strengthening such disinformation discourse – A. Babiš became the prime minister and his minority government often depended on the support of the president as well as SPD-deputies in the parliaments. Naturally, in such an environment the struggle against the disinformation, and more generally for (cyber) security became only rhetorical adornment without any clear content.

Furthermore, the set of new crises – COVID-19 and the pandemic, the economic crisis, and energy insecurity, all framed against the Russian war against Ukraine – strengthened the polarisation of Czech society as well as the activities of negative (so-called 'desolates') and extremist actors in Czech society and politics. As the recent annual report of the Czech Security Information Service (*Bezpečnostní informační služba*, BIS) notes: 'In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation narratives gained increased popularity in the Czech society, as disinformation spread with growing speed on social media. In 2021, the most prevalent narratives in the online disinformation space focused on COVID-19, vaccination and pandemic-related restrictions... One of the main sources of the information shared among supporters of the COVID-denial movement were articles published by disinformation media. The BIS noted some disinformation narratives originating from foreign-language websites, too. In the course of 2019,³ some COVID-denial activists underwent a slow radicalisation in terms of opinion and rhetoric, however, their beliefs and protest activities failed to appeal to the most of the society. Having a mostly symbiotic relation with the COVID-denial movement, pro-Russian activists used COVID-19 as a vehicle for spreading conspiracy theories, disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda' (BIS 2022: 16).

The aim of this short analytical article is to examine the most important changes in the Czech discourse on disinformation after the 24 February 2022; i.e., after the beginning of Russian war against Ukraine. Furthermore, our goal

3 We assume that there is a mistake in the report, and the years 2020 and 2021 were meant.

is also to discuss the menace of disinformation campaigns for the stability of the democratic order and security of the Czech Republic, and above all the recent political and public discussion about the proper and functioning measures against the disinformation campaigns.

The Czech government of Petr Fiala, the main actor of the changes (or attempted changes), existed for only two months, when the aggression started. Having the newly presented government manifesto, the government was challenged to change, modify or supplement its plans. As long as we focus on an ongoing and unfinished political process, we cannot fully use scholarly publications, but rather a mixture of sources including reports, policy and position papers and journalist articles. Methodologically, our article is rooted in the process tracing method and discourse analysis. We will analyse firstly the security eco-system in the Czech Republic, especially the challenges of new hybrid treats. Specifically, we will focus on cyber security and disinformation, comprising distinctive segments of new threats. Secondly, we will focus on legal, political and institutional changes in the Czech security eco-system reflecting the individual domain of struggle against the disinformation.

2. The Czech security eco-system and the struggle against the hybrid treats

The Czech Republic is part of the Western security community, where NATO- and EU-membership is the most important delimitation. Compared with two of three partners in the V4, Hungary and Poland, and similar to Slovakia, the Czech Republic does not strongly prioritise the so-called national interest in the strategic document, but the belonging to the international security community. The Czech strategy documents are generally working with the issue of hybrid threats; a specific impetus for the development of this partial issue was the Russian occupation of Crimea. ‘The Czech Republic has a system of security documents (strategies and related plans, concepts, etc.), which are basically hierarchically organised and interconnected. Although they show a departmental approach, they are generally designed to have an impact on the entire spectrum of public administration.... The Security Strategy of the Czech Republic is the document with the highest political (not legal) force in the Czech security sphere. Its latest version from 2015 contains important passages on hybrid warfare, which was a reaction to the then developing crisis in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. In 2016, a unique document “outside of the hierarchy” of the strategies and concepts outlined above was also prepared, namely the National Security Audit, which included a chapter on hybrid threats. This chapter was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence, while the entire document was under the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior and was approved by the government. In 2021, the government then approved a specialised strategy document

prepared by the Ministry of Defence called “National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Operations” (Mareš – Kraus – Drmola 2022: 344–345).

The focus on hybrid threats presents these threats in a very inclusive manner, reflecting both the changeable nature and modalities, and the mutual interconnection of them. “The Security Strategy of the Czech Republic works with the concept of “hybrid warfare methods”, which, according to the Strategy, combine “conventional and unconventional military means with non-military tools (propaganda using traditional and new media, intelligence disinformation actions, cyberattacks, political and economic pressure, sending unmarked members of the armed forces)” (ibid: 345).

J. Daniel and J. Eberle (2018: 907) analysed the role of the main relevant actors, such as bureaucrats, scholars, journalists, think-tanks and non-governmental organisations, shaping the paradigmatic turn in Czech security discourse. Summarising the result of the analysis, Mareš et al. note: ‘The factor of the combination of conventional and unconventional armed forces in combat operations was thus neglected, and non-military and non-violent (or at least less violent) forms of conflict, such as propaganda, embargoes or attacks in cyberspace, which are intended to destabilise society, came to the fore’ (Mareš – Kraus – Drmola 2022: 344–349).

As already mentioned in the introductory part, one of the most challenging menaces from the group of hybrid threats is the disinformation campaigns. Here the situation in the Czech Republic partly follows the more general trends in Western societies affected by the wave of neo-illiberal populism (Tucker 2020), nativism, cultural backlash (Norris – Inglehart 2019) and in some cases even democratic backsliding and de-democratisation (Ágh 2019; Cianetti – Dawson – Hanley 2019). The liberal political and media mainstream, as well as the scholars in social sciences, reflect the disinformation as a serious hybrid threat based on some partial events, but also based on the continuous development of the disinformation strategies. Among the first events that provoked the debate about the impact of disinformation dissemination were the beginnings of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013, the pro-Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom, the possible influencing of the US presidential elections in 2016 (Allcott – Gentzkow 2017) and, from more recent issues, the disinformation campaigns concerning the socially questionable issues such as *Black Lives Matter*, the *Green Deal*, mass migration from the MENA region to Europe, obligatory vaccination against the COVID-19 illness, etc. In the Czech case, we have to specifically mention the use of disinformation in both the direct Presidential elections in 2013 and 2018 by the team surrounding the candidate, and later president, M. Zeman. In 2018, analysts also demonstrated the use of disinformation against Zeman before the second round of elections. As the main sources of disinformation, the analysis detected the information web Aeronet.cz (Syróvátka – Hroch 2018), hosted in the Netherlands by an Indian client, to

be providing services to Russian companies and spreading pro-Kremlin narratives (Baqués-Quesada – Colom-Piella 2021: 42).

The Czech authorities formally responded on the strengthening disinformation. Based on the security document mentioned above as well as the lessons learned from the presidential campaigns, the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (*Centrum proti terorismu a hybridním hrozbám*, CTHH) was established within the Ministry of Internal Affairs. As declared by the then minister of internal affairs, Social Democrat M. Chovanec, the aim of the group with nine members at maximum, is the expert, analytical and communication focus on mainly hybrid security threats such as terrorism, attacks against hard and soft targets, and security aspects of migration, extremism, mass events, breach of peace and various criminal offences, or the security aspects of disinformation campaigns related to the internal security of the nation. The directors of the Centre repeatedly stressed that the role of the institution is not censorship or even punishment, but mainly communication with the public, including the information about the most visible disinformation sources.

Since the very beginning of its existence, the Centre's main enemy has been President Zeman, but also Prime Minister Babiš not only dismissed the Centre but took actions against its activities. In July 2021, During the debate within the National Security Council (*Bezpečnostní rada státu*) about the report on disinformation prepared by the Centre, the prime minister stopped it/postponed it, asking (for time) to rework the material. As the insiders shared with the media, Babiš rejected the recommendation to centralise the struggle against the disinformation under the State Department. Paradoxically, the last meeting of the National Security Council before the parliamentary elections in October 2021 was cancelled (so the reworked report was not discussed). The main reason was Babiš's electoral campaign, when he visited Hungarian prime minister Orbán, stressing that the main information issue is migration. As the media has pointed out, specifically with regard to migration issues Babiš is the Czech Republic's most prominent disinformant (Valášek – Horák 2021).

Generally, under the government of A. Babiš the activities of the CTHH were strongly restricted (financially, personally and also regarding preference of other priorities). As the recent director of the Centre B. Vangeli notes: 'Our role was limited on what was allowed to us. We were devoted primarily on monitoring and internal security analyses incl. disinformation. None of the other institution on the state administration die do that; and none of the institutions provides this analysis systematically, as yet.... We were trying to offer our help in the period of the previous government (Prime Minister A. Babiš – quoted by L.C.) reign, but the interest was minimal.' As Vangeli concludes: 'With the arrival of new Minister of Internal Affairs Rakušan we can be more open' (Bartoníček 2022).

In the situation of limited government activities against the disinformation campaign, the detection of disinformation campaigns and prominent disinform-

mation sources became the activity of several non-governmental organisations, such as the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), the Czech elves (*Čeští elfové*), Manipulátoři.cz, Demagog.cz, the project 'NELEŽ'⁴ as the Czech franchise of the Global Disinformation Index, and many others. As J. Bartoníček stressed, the volunteers and NGOs have already been warning the public for several years before the massively disseminated lies, but only during the government led by prime minister Andrej Babiš did the state institutions fight against the disinformation exceptionally. All this despite the matter of fact that such lies often endangered health and lives, for example during the Covid-19 pandemics. As Bohumil Kartous from the NGO Czech elves (*Čeští elfové*) noted, 'the government could only hardly act effectively when Babiš himself positively reflected the disinformation chain mails and disseminated the fake news in the electoral campaign' (Valášek – Horák 2021).

The Czech academic institutions also developed an institutional framework for the struggle against disinformation. With the support of the Technological Agency of the Czech Republic, in 2020, the team at Charles University in Prague, led by prominent journalist and scholar V. Moravec presented the portal Info-more.cz, devoted to the disinformation related to the COVID-19 illness. Based on this activity, in the beginning of February 2022 (only two weeks before the Russian attack on Ukraine) Moravec presented the follow-up project of the Central European Digital Media Observatory, interconnecting the stakeholders from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. The Centre belongs to the group of eight similar centres included into the European Digital Media Observatory network (Jetmar 2022). A similar focus on disinformation campaigns and general media literacy and civic education has led to the international project Media Literacy Observatory for Active Citizenship and Sustainable Democracy (MELIA), supported by the Danube Transnational Programme – from the Czech Republic Metropolitan University Prague as well as the NGO Edhance Plus implemented the project (MELIA 2023).

Based on the mentioned, as well as many other, project and activities, we can observe a plethora of scientific outcomes and journalist reports including the repeatedly updated lists of prominent disinformation sites. Not only are the primarily pro-Russian web sites located at these lists, but also the actors who generally contribute to the creation of the alternative media network. These actors, should it be online media (as the flag ship within this group *Parlamentní listy* might be mentioned), an information portal with fake news and disinformation, or the individual pages, mostly discuss relatively different issues – migration, pandemic, energy crisis, the Russian invasion against Ukraine and others – and flexibly interconnect them.

4 In Czech translation two different, but interconnected, meanings – 'do not be lying', but also 'not-lie'

Nevertheless, as the recent annual report of the BIS stressed: 'The disinformation scene in 2021 had an interconnected but centralized structure and disinformation and conspiracies were spreading mainly within the disinformation scene itself. Disinformers directed their activities mainly towards persons experiencing difficult life situations and disconnected and frustrated individuals. A key element of their motivation was to make financial profit, e.g. in the form of financial donations from their audience' (BIS 2022: 16). A similar attitude was presented by the advisor to the government for the strategic communication and fight against disinformation, Dominik Presl, who specifically stressed the interest of the disinformants in advertisement and the necessity to prevent any advertisement order made by the state-related institutions at such sites. He also confirmed the weaker media education in the Czech Republic compared with the EU-15: 'Compared with the West, mainly with the Scandinavia, the problem of disinformation campaign is much bigger in Czechia, we do have much stronger eco-system of disinformation websites and also the disinformation influencers, thus the impact is bigger' (Hübscherová 2022).

3. Russia as the key actor of hybrid threats and disinformation campaigns

On 18 October 2022, the Czech Security Information Service (BIS) presented its annual report for the year 2021. The relatively short document (about 30 pages) reflects the most important challenges and menaces the Czech Republic is facing. Reading the document, structured into several chapters, the part 'Intelligence and Subversive Activities Targeting the Czech Republic' has to be specifically stressed as reflecting cybersecurity issues generally and particularly the disinformation activities. The chapter is divided into five sub-chapters with titles that very clearly show the main actors and matters in the cybersecurity area; the titles are 'Russia', 'China', 'Iran', 'Cybersecurity', and 'Activities contrary to the principles of democracy'. While the three subchapters dedicated to the activities of foreign governments against the Czech Republic make up the bulk of diverse subversive operations, the last two mentioned parts specifically focus on defined 'single-issue' activities considered important components of post-modern hybrid warfare. While the first describes the cyber-attacks such as state-sponsored cyber-espionage including 'the spreading surveillance malware, exfiltrating data from compromised victims or controlling of some attacker's infrastructure in other countries.... The attacks were committed by a range of cyber actors (involved in either espionage or crime, including ransomware attacks and crypto mining)' (BIS 2022: 13–14).

As the report further notes: 'Disinformation platforms often displayed narratives consistent with interest of foreign powers (namely the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China). However, numerous disinformers worked

on their own initiative and their activity was only loosely inspired by these narratives. Some representatives of anti-establishment and populist political entities took part in spreading the narratives on disinformation platforms' (ibid: 16). Such a statement is in concordance with the recent scholarly research. We will present here two such analyses, one aimed on the Czech case, the second one at the V4.

As regards the (pro-)Russian propaganda, interesting outcomes were presented for example in an article written by M. Gregor and P. Mlejnková. The authors analysed four selected model-cases – *Parlamentní listy* (parlamentnilisty.cz), AC24 (ac24.cz), *Svět kolem nás* (svetkolemna.info) and Sputnik (cz.sputniknews.com). The analysis confirmed the majority of manipulative techniques such as blaming (pinpointing the enemy responsible for the event or situation), demonisation (dehumanisation of the opponent), appeal to fear, fabrication (presenting the false information as true), labelling and relativisation (Gregor – Mlejnková 2021: 546–557). As they noted in their concluding remarks, the disinformation campaigns are not (only) rooted in lies: 'The disinformation campaigns in the Czech Republic do not necessarily need to lie to the audience.... It is about choosing a narrative from the selected topics and stories and combining it with carefully chosen manipulative techniques. This could be seen as regards the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Data shows that the importance of the topic and Russian activities in both countries were relativized in order to persuade readers that nothing serious was happening there. In the case of Syria, the relativization of Russian activity was done by putting it in obvious and false counterbalance to US activities somewhere else and at a different time... manipulation was more sophisticated than obviously serving Russia as the only partner and alternative to the West. In our findings, Russia was mentioned in about a third of the news articles, but mostly in a neutral manner. Articles portraying Russia positively and negatively were about equal in number. In general, disinformation campaigns are more about redirecting blame onto others and lowering the level of trust in governments, elites, and established media within the general public' (ibid.: 559).

L.S. Bánkuty-Balogh (2021: 197–190) extended the analysis of disinformation campaigns on the V4. She identified five meta-narratives: '(1) growing Russophobia in the West; (2) the preparation of a war against Russia by the US and NATO; (3) the United States seeking global hegemony; (4) the establishment of a system of Post-/Neo-Atlantism by dividing Europe; and (5) the envisioned collapse of the European Union'. The author specifically analysed the disinformation campaigns in favour of Russia summarising that 'the main focus of supposed western disinformation campaigns against Russia involved the Skripal and Navalny cases, insinuating Russian involvement in the United States presidential elections and rewriting or falsifying Second World War history in a way that depicts Russia as an aggressor. Narratives identified from the articles con-

cerning Russia were overarching for all V4 countries; however, differences could be found in the frequency of mentions among them on a country-to-country basis.... Czech and Slovak language articles frequently featured alleged FBI and CIA involvement in manipulating local media to spread anti-Russian sentiment with particular focus on the Skripal case' (ibid.: 178–179).

Specifically regarding the Ukraine she notes that the 'common narratives for the four countries included the hypothesised role of the United States in organising the Euro-maidan, a wave of demonstrations in Ukraine which began in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv, later on followed by the Crimean crisis. The supposed rationale of the US was the provocation of Russian involvement in the Crimean crisis and ultimately the incitement of economic sanctions against Russia as well as nurturing Russophobia in neighbouring countries. The MH17 disaster was also linked as a planned incident to punish the Russian Federation for the annexation of Crimea. In both the Hungarian and Czech language news, the Nagorno-crisis has been connected to Ukraine as well, with the alleged support of Kyiv to Azerbaijan during the conflict' (ibid.: 179).

As we stressed in the introduction, Russia develops extensive subversive activities in the Czech Republic, and the key Czech institutions ignored this fact until 2021, or even cooperated in such subversive activities, including the disinformation campaigns. Nevertheless, the analysis presented above also showed that in many cases, the disinformants are not directly connected to Russian officials and we also do not find the evidence of direct payments from Russia for these actors. This is also valid for the organisers of anti-government and pro-Russian demonstrations in autumn 2022 where we have observed colourful mixtures of domestic (from the radical-right SPD party, the Communist Party, the ultraconservative and national-populist scene, pro-Russian pan-Slavonic streams, etc.) and also international (representatives of the German Alternative for Germany party or the Serbian ultra-nationalist scene). Repeatedly, the organisers and speakers stressed that the protest should be transformed into riots and finally towards the violent takeover of power (Soukup – Trousilová 2022). Such concentration of anti-system and extremist actors proves the continuation of development in the last decade. Let us quote from the annual report of BIS, stressing that in the year 2021 'it has been confirmed that the disinformation scene in the Czech Republic makes pragmatic use of any new topics which arouse strong emotional reaction.... At the end of the year, the most prominent activists organised a series of protest meetings, which were attended also by individuals from the anti-establishment milieu (including extremist and militia groups). As a result, the COVID-denial movement facilitated the spreading of radical and extremist views in the society' (BIS 2022: 15–16).

4. Czech government plans and the effect of Russian aggression against Ukraine

As repeatedly stressed, before the end of 2021, important Czech political actors underestimated and downplayed the seriousness of disinformation campaigns undermining and weakening the democratic order in the country. Furthermore, some of the leading politicians participated in the use of disinformation campaigns. The new government led by Prime Minister P. Fiala and comprising of five political parties with rather colourful ideological orientations,⁵ stressed in its Policy Statement presented on 7 January 2022 the intention to struggle against the hybrid threats and disinformation. Let us quote directly from the document and its chapter Security:

- ‘By the end of 2022, we will establish the “National Security Adviser” at the Office of the Government of the Czech Republic as the supra-ministerial coordinator for hybrid threats, disinformation and other serious supra-ministerial security issues. Therefore, the Office of the Government will have a platform for coordination and communication between security policy entities to ensure closer cooperation between intelligence and security forces and effective action against disinformation and hybrid threats.
- We will introduce rules for more transparent functioning of media: listing of publishers, owners, major sponsors and publishing of financial statements.
- We will adapt to the development of the security environment and promote a more professional approach to defence in the information space. Defence against disinformation must be fast and scalable. Following examples from abroad, we will prepare legislative and non-legislative measures that will allow us to better defend against harmful disinformation without compromising the freedom of expression’ (Government of the Czech Republic 2022).

As the government’s statement declared, the Office of the Government (*Úřad vlády*) should become the incubator for the centre struggling against disinformation. Parallely, the government promised to create the position of the coordinator of the hybrid menaces, disinformation and other serious security risks. In January 2022, the Czech minister of internal affairs Vít Rakušan assumed that the coordinator will be declared by the end of 2022. Regarding this issue Rakušan declared that ‘Czechia needs the coordination of security community, should it be in the matters of disinformation, intelligence, or the strategic communication of the state’ (Bartoníček 2022).

5 The government comprises from two liberal conservative parties – the Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) and Tolerance, Responsibility, Prosperity 09 (TOP 0 and Christian-Democratic party (KDU)); these three actors created the electoral alliance Together (*Spolu*) for the elections. The second alliance was created by the centrist Mayor and Independent Candidates movement (STAN) and the Czech Pirate Party.

Indeed, the Russian aggression against Ukraine accelerated the preparatory phase and one month after the beginning of the war the government agreed upon the person to fill the role of new government coordinator for the media and disinformation, Michal Klíma. Klíma has been working as a media manager and also acted within several NGOs engaged in media ethics and education, such as the Czech National Committee of the International Press Institute; he also acted as the Chairperson of the Foundation for Holocaust Victims (*Nadační fond obětem holocaustu*). The new coordinator serves as the advisor to the government and is subordinate directly to the prime minister. As Klíma stressed in his first declarations, the government will specifically examine the purpose of disinformation campaigns (ibid.).

The coordinator for the media and disinformation is included in the broader framework of the prime minister's advisors for the security issues. Former diplomat Tomáš Pojar, became the leader of this group and is expected to become the new national security coordinator based on his Israeli (Pojar served as the Ambassador to Israel) or U.S. experience. Alongside Klíma, another important role is had by the former elite soldier Petr Matouš, who – along with other activities – served in Afghanistan. He came to work at the Office of the Government during the previous government's term as the coordinator of the newly formed group struggling against hybrid threats (Horák 2021). While Klíma has to focus mainly on media and disinformation, Bečvář has to study the hybrid threats more comprehensively and holistically. As he stressed: 'Disinformations present only small fragment from the mosaic we focus on'. As he further noted, the hybrid threats got a media shortcut in disinformation and partly also in cyber-attacks, but the scope is much broader. Nevertheless, as one of the important pre-requisites for the successful implementation of the Action Plan to the National Strategy for the Hybrid Activities Confrontation he declared the legislative eco-system for the struggle against disinformation (Bartoníček 2022).

The short overview of the new governments' plans shows that the general intention was to build-up the new institutional framework for the struggle with the hybrid threats during the year 2022. Nonetheless, the Russian aggression against Ukraine caused the acceleration of this process, and also brought about the need for some extraordinary measures against the disinformation campaigns.

On 25 February 2022, the Czech internet society CZ.NIC⁶ decided to blockade eight disinformation websites.⁷ Such an unprecedented decision was made after consultations with the security services and based on the recommendation of the Czech government. As the Executive Director of the society Ondřej Filip

6 CZ.NIC operates the domain register with the Czech national ending '.cz'.

7 Aeronet.cz, Protiproud.cz, Ceskobezcenzury.cz, Voxpopuliblog.cz, Prvnizpravy.cz, Czechfreepress.cz, Exanpro.cz and Skrytapravda.cz

declared, such an extraordinary measure is the response to the military attack of the Russian Army against the sovereign Ukraine and the disinformation campaign that accompanied and still accompanies this attack. As Filip further stressed, the blocked websites spread disinformation related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The government representatives refused to comment on the issue, including about the legal framework for the blockade. Nevertheless, at the press conference organised by the government such an arrangement was in general bespoken. 'We are in the disinformation war, and I will not divulge the strategy we follow' so said Prime Minister Fiala (Echo.24 2022).

Less than one week later, on 1 March 2022, Czech mobile operators blocked six disinformation webpages in the Czech language.⁸ As the Association of the mobile networks providers (*Asociace provozovatelů mobilních sítí*) stressed, the providers satisfied the appeal of the government and the National Centre for Cybernetic Operations (*Národní centrum kybernetických operací*, NCKO) operating within one of the Czech security services, namely the Military Intelligence (*Vojenské zpravodajství*, VZ) and joined the measures against the dissemination of Russian propaganda in Czech cyberspace. As the President of the Association Jiří Grund declared: 'The appeal of the state institutions stressed the extraordinariness and urgency of the situation embodied in the ongoing aggression of the military forces of the Russian Federation at the territory of Ukraine. The menace for the Czech Republic's security presents the dissemination of untrue and misleading information serving to the aggressor to deceive and manipulating the Czech citizens with the aim to justify and endorse the recent aggression against the Ukraine.' The steps of the mobile networks' providers followed their previous activity, namely the blockade of Russian state television programmes.

Paradoxically, the described (extraordinary) blockade of disinformation, internet media and content happened only a few days after the media inquiry focusing on one of the new governments' goals, namely the struggle against disinformation. One week before the Russian attack on Ukraine the internet media *Aktualne.cz* concluded that we can observe the first signs, several state institutions more intensively the most untrue, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is preparing the campaign trying to calm down polarised Czech society. On the other hand the inquiry reflected the recommendations to the government to dedicate more determination and more people to this issue (Bartoníček 2022).

The described and discussed blockade does not have any clear support in the Czech legislature which does not recognise the term (and crime) of disinformation or propaganda. The use of disinformation or propaganda can be then prohibited and punished only when related to different types of criminal acts such as interference in an individual's rights, slander, calumny, defamation of

8 cz.sputniknews.com, Cz24.news, Nwoo.org, Slovanskenebe.com, Svobodnenoviny.eu a Zvedavec.org.

nation, race, ethnic or other group of persons, instigation of hate against a group of persons or limiting their rights and freedoms, scaremongering news dissemination, endorsing a criminal offense, instigation of the criminal offense or declaring the declaration of liking towards the movements oriented on the suppression of the human rights and freedoms (Ministry of Internal Affairs 2022).

As P. Prchal in his comprehensive legal analysis of this extraordinary measure noted, ‘only about April 2022, the server iROZHLAS.cz succeeded to get and verify the information that NCKO asked with a letter the director of CZ.NIC for the blockade, or more precisely the technically denies access to the proposed websites’. Prchal labels such an approach of state institutions as miserable. He also stresses that one of the main challenges is to define the disinformation (Prchal 2022). On the other hand, the already mentioned advisor to the government for the strategic communication and fight against disinformation Dominik Presl thinks that the definition of disinformation exists, namely ‘the untruthful information that are wilfully disseminated’ (Hübscherová 2022).

The extraordinary blockade of selected disinformation websites was terminated three months after it began, i.e., on 25 May 2022. The exceptional case was the domain Aeronet.cz, where the CZ.NIC declared the absence of correct information about the possessor in the domain register. As the spokesperson of CZ.NIC noted, the continuation of the blockade would be possible only based on the court or a police order, or the order of another competent state institution (Fišer 2022).

As the above-mentioned extraordinary blockade showed, (not only) the Czech legal system is challenged with the fuzzy definition of disinformation and above-all the necessity to prevent any censorship. This ‘optimism’ became much more sober after several declarations given during March and April 2022 by some government members, including the minister of justice P. Blažek and the government coordinator for the media and disinformation M. Klíma, who mentioned the work on the new act against disinformation. On 13 April 2022, the Director of Legislative Division at the Office of the Government, J. Večeřa, denied that the new Act would be in process of preparations. The non-existence of such activities was declared also by the spokesperson of the Czech Pirate Party V. Šmídová. The Party is represented in the government by the party chairman and minister for digitalisation, I. Bartoš, as well as the minister for legislating, M. Šalamoun. Also, the minister for internal affairs V. Rakušan stressed that ‘the repressive steps in form of new legislature present the uttermost solution that is recently discussed only theoretically’ (Cibulka 2022).

Such a rational approach confirmed that the specialised legislature against disinformation is an extremely challenging issue. As Prchal (2022) notes: ‘It is obvious that the problem the society and the law as the regulatory instrument are confronted with, is the formation of so-called social bubbles that might – in the uttermost case – present the security risk’.

5. Conclusions

On 26 October 2022, the District Court in the Central Bohemian city Kladno sentenced two visible members of the Czech disinformation scene – T. Čermák and P. Tušl. As the public prosecutor mentioned, both defendants presented in August 2022 the video on social networks, where they disparaged the Ukrainian as refugees. As the prosecutor stressed, both defendants used the disinformation as well as threats in the past, also against the representatives of the Czech Chamber of Medicine Doctors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on such continuous activities they were in custody between August and October, 2022. Based on the court's decision, Čermák was given a six-month sentence and Tušl ten-months, because they committed defamation of nation and instigation of hate (ČTK 2022). This lawsuit is the precedent decision showing that Czech justice is able to punish disinformation campaigns based on the recent legislature. On the other hand, it also shows that in all cases the police and later the court need to find clear intent. Furthermore, it is also visible that only the repeated inappropriate activities – and maybe also the extraordinary situation caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine – brought the state institutions towards relatively resolute, and also a relatively fast solution. Both Čermák and Tušl were later charged with other crimes, including promoting terrorism, and sentenced to additional sentences. Their acts included calls for attacks on political institutions (burning of the Senate) and individual politicians. Cermak was sentenced to an unconditional sentence of 5 and a half years (Mrázová 2023).

Thus, we have to stress that recently we cannot observe any visible change regarding the struggle against the disinformation campaigns in the Czech Republic. After the three-month long blockade the situation returned to its previous state. Here we fully agree with M. Fendrych, who noted in October 2022: 'Beginning with the invasion to Ukraine the Russian state media and the dissemination of their content were prohibited in the EU-member states. Indeed, the impact on Czech case was not significant. Paradoxically, in Czechia the Russian propaganda is mainly spread by Czechs and Czech disinformation websites, Facebooks groups, the Czech disinformation influencers. Without this Russian disinformation "fifth convoy", the Russian propaganda would have much smaller effect' (Fendrych 2022).

Such sceptical assessment was also basically confirmed in the most recent annual report of the BIS, despite the fact that this report officially reflects the situation in 2021; being published only on October 2022, it surely included also the impulses given during 2022. As the report points out: 'The most prominent element in the disinformation ecosystem were websites which either contained disinformation or manipulated true information. Due to their far-reaching popularity, these websites had an impact of the rest of the alternative media scene and their articles were widely shared on social media.... The disinformation

eco-system is interconnected. Disinformation continues to spread primarily on Facebook, disinformation websites and through chain e-mails. A part of the anti-establishment scene used Telegram for communicating radical-toned views. The dominant vehicle of disinformation were alternative websites whose content projected into disinformation groups on social media' (BIS 2022: 15–16). The interconnectedness of actors with a pro-Russian orientation, support for disinformation sources, critics of alleged censorship, etc. has been confirmed by other sources (Krátka Špalková et al 2023).

As the recent analyses show, throughout 2021, at the 46 active pro-Kremlin websites in the Czech Republic more than 197,000 articles were published and disinformation trends were strengthening. The three biggest Czech disinformation websites in the Czech Republic have had an average of almost 14,500,000 user visits per month. As disinformation expert M. Gregor completes, 'the published data confirm the matter of fact that Russia was preparing itself for the war for the long time. It is exactly Russia who mostly supports the disinformation and propaganda web sites in Czechia' (Novotná – Juna 2022).

The most positive outcome of our analysis might be the matter of fact that the new government showed after 24 February 2022, but already before within its Policy Statement that it considers the hybrid threats including the disinformation campaigns as activities contrary to the principles of democracy and a very serious threat for the security. The extraordinary blockade of selected disinformation websites showed that the government and even more the intelligence services continually collect the needed data and information on the subversive actors. Furthermore, the new government also showed its interest in the intelligence services work and clear support for these activities. Fendrych points out the symbolic arrangement of the press conference, where the director of BIS Michal Koudelka presented the recent Annual report. Namely, next to him Prime Minister P. Fiala was situated. As Koudelka recalled: 'It is for the first time after 24 years, when the representative of the state comes forward before the journalists after visiting the BIS. Last time it was the President Václav Havel'. Koudelka also noted that 'we (SIS – quoted by L.C.) understand the disinformation as one of the biggest recent risks for the security of Czech Republic'. As extremely dangerous group of disinformants he considers the 'state actors who attack our nation by disinformation. The state actor number one is Russia, followed by China, but also Iran is here, and others' (Fendrych 2022).

The scepticism that the government's proactive post-February 2022 approach has been diluted in recent months and the fight against disinformation stands still is supported by the fact that on 15 February 2023, the government abolished the position of government media commissioner. As a key reason, the government has highlighted that its remit to combat disinformation is being transferred to National Security Coordinator Tomáš Pojar. (Pika – Kubant 2023). Analysts agreed that some of Klíma's statements have raised suspicions that he

is planning censorship tools to control the media and to distinguish between positive and negative media, including financial support for the former group. The government was also approached in this context by the Publishers' Union (Unie vydavatelů), which criticised the draft Action Plan to counter disinformation. These and other actions and statements led to a loss of confidence on the part of the government. (Dohnalová 2023). A few months later, advisor to T. Pojar, who was in charge of the fight against disinformation, Dominik Presl, resigned. On his departure, he stressed that the government had given up on the fight against disinformation because it was a “toxic” topic (Doubravová 2023). The key question is to what extent this coordinator with a very limited apparatus can address other aspects of building and protecting democratic media besides the security dimension of disinformation.

To sum up, during the year the new Czech government overcame the previous period of questioning the activities of intelligence services, represented mainly by President Zeman, and also returned officially and clearly to the necessity to consider the disinformation campaigns as an important part of the new hybrid threats for the nation. Specifically, creation of a new institutional framework for the struggle against the hybrid threats, rooted in legislature, will be important. Only such a system will be robust and stable enough to endure future attacks from outside, but even more from the internal actors being part of the disinformation scene and/or using the disinformation strategies.

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