

Russian Aggression against Ukraine as the Accelerator in the Systemic Struggle against Disinformation in Czechia

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Abstract

In the last decade Czechia's foreign and security policies were destabilised by the activities of external actors, with Russia in the leading role, and also by 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, a disinformation network was developed in Czechia using social media and so-called 'alternative online media' for the dissemination of disinformation, misinformation, fake news and chain mails to spread these campaigns. As leading persons in the executive belonged to the disinformers, the government was not able to develop working strategies against the disinformation campaigns as the new hybrid threat until 2021. At the end of 2021, the new Czech government of Prime Minister Petr Fiala launched a new strategy regarding hybrid threats which contained disinformation. The one-year plan to establish a systemic platform for the struggle against such threats was challenged by Russian aggression against Ukraine. In this article, we analyse the development of the security eco-system in Czechia against these hybrid threats, specifically the acceleration and intensification of this activity after 24 February 2022.

Keywords

Czechia, disinformation campaigns, hybrid threats, propaganda, Russia

1. Introduction

Czechia belongs to NATO and the EU, it is one of the so-called 'new democracies'. It also belongs to the Visegrád Group (V4) which is the cooperation of four Central European nations that share a similar historical experience and legacy. The most important negative legacy upon these countries is their former membership of the Eastern Bloc controlled by the Soviet Union. As such they were subjected to the totalitarian rule

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of communist ideology and communist parties. As an important modality of this Soviet control over Eastern and Central Europe the continuation of older Russian imperial projects is often discussed within the V4 political and societal discourse, such discussions are repeatedly confirmed by direct Soviet interventions against the liberalisation processes in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia [1]. 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 to Russia and security dilemmas related to Russian activities and geopolitical conceptions.

Naturally, not all actors in 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 public debate and in some cases also public policies. As one of the recent analyses summarised:

The CEE [Central and Eastern European] 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 [2, p. 18].

Regarding Czechia, 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 of and policies promoted by at least two governments in this period – the left-centrist government led by Social Democrat Jiří Paroubek (2005–2006) [3, 4] and the government led by the oligarchic leader of the populist movement ANO 2011 Andrej Babiš (2017–2021) [5, 6]. 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 [7].

Together with Viktor Orbán, Miloš Zeman and Andrej 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 CEE, operated by the oversized Russian embassy. Their strategy also included the extensive use of disinformation (including cooperation with alternative media and other sources of disinformation campaigns), this was specifically so in the case of Zeman. Zeman belonged to the small group of European politicians who developed extensive and friendly relations with Vladimir Putin after the Russian annexation of Crimea, he continually cast doubts upon Western sanctions against Russia [8], and he strongly promoted the participation of Russian state-owned firms in the tenders for nuclear reactors in the new Czech power plants. All this brought him into conflict not only with the right-wing political parties in the country, but also with Czech intelligence, above-all BIS ('*Bezpečnostní informační služba*' - Czech Security Information Service) and its Director Michal Koudelka.

¹ The Vrbětice case presents the most intensive and visible Russian interference in Czechia. In October and December 2014 there were two series of detonations in the munition storehouse in Vrbětice, killing two people. 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 his pro-Russian activities, the government carried out a set of measures including the expulsion of dozens of Russian diplomats (and/or agents) from Czechia. 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 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 [10].

² We assume that there is a mistake in the report, and the years 2020 and 2021 were meant.

Repeatedly, Zeman questioned the activities of BIS and the qualification of its director, for the public he labelled BIS 'dabblers' (in Czech 'čučkař'). Despite the government's repeated proposal to promote Koudelka to the rank of general, Zeman consistently rejected this proposal, including in autumn 2022 [9].

Only after April 2021 and the so-called 'Vrbětice case'¹ 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 declarations about his misunderstanding regarding the intentions of Putin, although limited in time and scope, did not give the impression of a real turnabout. Specifically, we have to stress the role of Zeman's main advisor, Martin Nejedlý, and his direct ties to the leading persons of Putin's regime [11].

As showed, in Czechia there are strong and active political actors with a pro-Russian inclination using a colourful set of instruments and measures for the dissemination of fake news and spreading of (pro-)Russian propaganda disinformation. In the case of Czech president Miloš 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 [12]. Specifically, between 2017 and 2021, these actors cooperated in strengthening such a disinformation discourse – 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 disinformation, and more generally for (cyber) security, became mere rhetorical adornment without any clear content.

Furthermore, the set of new crises – COVID-19 and the pandemic, the economic crisis and energy insecurity – 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 notes:

In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation narratives gained increased popularity in Czech society, as disinformation spread with growing speed on social media. In 2021 the most prevalent narratives of 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. BIS noted some disinformation narratives originating from foreign-language websites too. In the course of 2019² some COVID-denial activists underwent a slow radicalisation in terms of opinion and rhetoric, however, their beliefs and protest activities failed to appeal to most of society. Having a mostly symbiotic relationship with the COVID-denial movement, pro-Russian activists used COVID-19 as a vehicle for spreading conspiracy theories, disinformation and pro-Kremlin propaganda [13, p. 16].

The aim of this short analytical article is to examine the most important changes in the Czech discourse on disinformation after 24 February 2022, i.e. after the beginning of Russia's war against Ukraine. Furthermore, our goal is also to discuss the threat of disinformation campaigns to the stability of the democratic order and security of Czechia, and above all the recent political and public discussion about proper and effective measures against disinformation campaigns.

The Czech government of Petr Fiala, the main actor in the changes (or attempted changes), existed for only two months, at the time when Russia's aggression started. Having the newly presented government manifesto, the Czech 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 articles by journalists. Methodologically, our article is rooted in the process tracing method and discourse analysis. We will analyse firstly the security eco-system in Czechia, especially the challenges of new hybrid threats. Specifically, we will focus on cyber security and disinformation which comprise the 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 disinformation.

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

Czechia is part of the Western security community, where membership of NATO and the EU is the most important delimitation. Compared with two other V4 partners, Hungary and Poland, and similar to Slovakia, Czechia does not strongly prioritise the so-called 'national interest' in its strategic documents, but rather belonging to the international security community. The Czech strategy documents generally work 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" [14, pp. 344–345].

A very inclusive manner is used to focus on hybrid threats, reflecting their changeable nature, modalities and mutual interconnection. 'The Security Strategy of Czechia works with the concept of "hybrid warfare methods", which, according to the Strategy, combine "conventional and unconventional military means with nonmilitary tools (propaganda using traditional and new media, intelligence disinformation actions, cyberattacks, political and economic pressure, sending unmarked members of the armed forces)" [14, p. 345].

Jan Daniel and Jakub Eberle [15, p. 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 the 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 nonmilitary and nonviolent (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' [14, p. 349].

3. The challenge of disinformation campaigns

As already mentioned in the introduction, one of the most challenging problems from the group of hybrid threats is the disinformation campaigns. Here the situation in Czechia partly follows the more general trends in Western societies affected by the wave of neo-illiberal populism [16], nativism, cultural backlash [17] and in some cases even democratic backsliding and de-democratisation [18, 19]. 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 a debate about the impact of disseminating disinformation 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 [20] and, from more recent issues, the disinformation campaigns concerning socially questionable issues such as Black Lives Matter, the European Green Deal, mass migration from the MENA region to Europe, and obligatory vaccination against COVID-19. In the case of Czechia, specific mention needs to be made of disinformation in both the direct Presidential elections in 2013 and 2018 by the team surrounding the candidate, and later president, Miloš 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 [21], hosted in the Netherlands by an Indian client to be providing services to Russian companies and spreading proKremlin narratives [22, p. 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 Milan 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 the peace and various criminal offences, as well as security aspects of disinformation campaigns related to the internal security of the nation. The directors of CTHH repeatedly stressed that the role of the institution is not censorship or even punishment, but mainly communication with the public, including information about the most visible disinformation sources.

Since the very beginning of its existence, the main enemy of CTHH has been President Zeman. Prime Minister Babiš also dismissed CTHH and took actions against its activities. In July 2021 during a debate within the National Security Council (*Bezpečnostní rada státu*) about the report on disinformation prepared by CTHH, the prime minister stopped it, asking (for time) to rework the material. As insiders shared with the media, Babiš rejected the recommendation to centralise the struggle against 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 was migration. As the media has pointed out, specifically with regard to migration issues, Babiš is Czechia's most prominent disinformant [23].

Generally, under the government of 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 Benedikt Vangeli notes:

Our role was limited on what was allowed to us. We were devoted primarily on monitoring and internal security analyses incl.[uding] disinformation. None of the other institutions on the state administration

³ In Czech translation two different, but interconnected, meanings – 'do not be lying', but also 'not-lie'

do that; and none of the institutions provide this analysis systematically, as yet [...] We were trying to offer our help in the period of the previous government [of Prime Minister Babiš – quoted by Ladislav Cabada], but interest was minimal.

As Vangeli concludes: 'With the arrival of the new Minister of Internal Affairs, Rakušan, we can be more open' [24].

In the situation of limited government activities against disinformation campaigns, their detection as well as the identification of prominent disinformation 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*, project 'NELEŽ'³ as the Czech franchise of the Global Disinformation Index, and many others. As Radek Bartoníček stressed, the volunteers and NGOs had already been warning the public for several years before the lies were widely disseminated, but only during the government led by prime minister Andrej Babiš did the state institutions fight against such disinformation exceptionally hard. All this despite the fact that such lies often endangered health and lives, for example during the Covid-19 pandemics. As Bohumil Kartous from the NGO Czech Elves noted, 'the government could hardly act effectively when Babiš himself positively reflected positively upon the disinformation chain mails and disseminated this fake news in the electoral campaign' [23].

Czech academic institutions also developed an institutional framework for the struggle against disinformation. With the support of the Technological Agency of Czechia, in 2020 the team at Charles University in Prague, led by prominent journalist and scholar Václav Moravec presented the portal *Infomore.cz*, devoted to the disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic. 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 Czechia, Slovakia and Poland. The Centre belongs to the group of eight similar centres included the European Digital Media Observatory network [25]. 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. The Czech Republic Metropolitan University Prague as well as the NGO Edhance Plus have implemented the project [26].

Based upon the above mentioned project, as well as many others, there exists a plethora of scientific reports and journalist's articles including the repeatedly updated lists of prominent disinformation sites. Not only are the primarily pro-Russian websites located on these lists, but also the actors who generally contribute to the creation of the alternative media network. Such actors include online media and individual web pages. The flagship within this group is *Parlamentní listy* - an information portal which spreads fake news and disinformation. What they all have in common is their ability to flexibly interconnect different issues, for example: migration, the pandemic, the energy crisis, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, as the recent annual report of BIS stressed:

The disinformation scene in 2021 had an interconnected but centralised structure, disinformation and conspiracies were spreading mainly within the disinformation scene itself. Disinformers directed their activities mainly towards persons experiencing difficult life situations or 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 [13, p. 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 orders for advertisements made by state-related institutions at such sites. He also confirmed that education about the media was weaker in Czechia than in the EU-15: 'Compared with the West, mainly with Scandinavia, the problem of disinformation campaign[s] is much bigger in Czech Republic, we do have [a] much stronger eco-system of disinformation websites and also the disinformation influencers, thus the impact is bigger [4].

4. 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 threats Czechia 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 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 Czechia 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. The sub-chapter Cybersecurity describes cyber-attacks as state-sponsored cyber-espionage including: 'the spreading of surveillance malware, exfiltrating data from compromised victims or controlling of some attacker's infrastructure in other countries.' It also states that 'the attacks were committed by a range of cyber actors (involved in either espionage or crime, including ransomware attacks and crypto mining)' [13, p. 13–14].

As the report further notes:

Disinformation platforms often displayed narratives consistent with [the] 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 [13, p. 16].

Such a statement is in concordance with 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 Miloš Gregor and Petra Mlejnková. The authors analysed four selected model cases – *Parlamentní listy* (parlamentnilisty.cz), *AC24* (ac24.cz), *Svět kolem nás* (svetkolemнас.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 false information as true), labelling and relativisation [27, p. 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 [27, p. 559].

Lilla Sarlota Bánkuty-Balogh extended the analysis of disinformation campaigns on the V4. She identified five metanarratives: '(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' [28, p. 187–190]. 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 concerning Russia were overarching for all V4 countries; however, differences could be found in the frequency of mentions among them on a countrytocountry 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 [28, 178–179].

Specifically regarding Ukraine she notes that:

Common narratives for the four countries included the hypothesised role of the United States in organising the Euromaidan, 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 Nagornocrisis has been connected to Ukraine as well, with the alleged support of Kyiv to Azerbaijan during the conflict [28, p. 179].

As stressed in the introduction, Russia develops extensive subversive activities in Czechia, 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, neither is there found any 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 which included colourful mixtures of domestic (from the radical-right SPD party, the Communist Party, the

⁴ The government comprises of two liberal conservative parties – the Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS) and Tolerance, Responsibility, Prosperity 09 (TOP 09) 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.

ultraconservative and national-populist scene, and pro-Russian pan-Slavonic streams among others) and also international actors (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 [29]. Such a concentration of anti-system and extremist actors proves a continued development in the last decade. To 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 a strong emotional reaction [...] At the end of the year, the most prominent activists organised a series of protest meetings, which were also attended 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 society [13, p. 15–16].

5. New government plans and the effect of the Russian War 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 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 Petr Fiala which was comprised of five political parties with rather colourful ideological orientations⁴ stressed in its Policy Statement presented on 7 January 2022 the intention to struggle against the hybrid threats and disinformation. According to the document's chapter entitled 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 [30].

As the government's statement declared, the Office of the Government (Úřad vlády) should become the incubator in the struggle against disinformation. In parallel, the government promised to create the position of the coordinator of hybrid threats, disinformation and other serious security risks. In January 2022, the Czech minister of internal affairs Vít Rakušan assumed that the coordinator would be declared by the end of that year. Regarding this issue Rakušan declared that ‘Czech Republic needs the coordination of the security community, should it be in the matter of disinformation, intelligence, or the strategic communication of the state’ [24].

Indeed, 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 had worked 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 statements, the government will specifically examine the purpose of disinformation campaigns [24].

The coordinator for media and disinformation is included in the broader framework of the prime minister's advisors for 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 held 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 [31]. While Klíma has to focus mainly on media and disinformation, Bečvář has to study the hybrid threats more comprehensively and holistically. As he stressed: 'Disinformation presents only a 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. As he further noted, the media underplay the significance of hybrid threats, particularly of disinformation, but also of cyber-attacks. The scope of the threat is in reality much broader than is brought to public attention. Nevertheless, as one of the important prerequisites for the successful implementation of the Action Plan for the National Strategy for the Hybrid Activities Confrontation he announced the legislative eco-system for the struggle against disinformation [24].

This short overview of the new governments' plans shows that the general intention was to build up a new institutional framework for the struggle with hybrid threats during 2022. Nonetheless, 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.NIC⁵ decided to blockade eight disinformation websites⁶. Such an unprecedented decision was made after consultation with the security services, it was also based on recommendations from the Czech government. As the Executive Director of the society, Ondřej Filip declared such an extraordinary measure as a response to the military attack of the Russian Army against Ukrainian sovereignty as well as to the disinformation campaign that accompanied and still accompanies this attack. As Filip further fully stressed, the blocked websites spread disinformation related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Government representatives refused to comment on the issue or on the legal framework for the blockade. Nevertheless, at the press conference organised by the government their position was made clear: 'We are in a disinformation war, and I will not divulge the strategy we follow' said Prime Minister Fiala [32].

Less than one week later, on 1 March 2022, Czech mobile operators joined the measures against the dissemination of Russian propaganda in Czech cyberspace when they blocked six disinformation webpages in the Czech language⁷. As the Association of Mobile Network Providers (*Asociace provozovatelů mobilních sítí*) stressed, this action satisfied the appeal from government and the National Centre for Cybernetic Operations (*Národní centrum kybernetických operací*, NCKO)⁸ which operated within one of the Czech security services, namely Military Intelligence (*Vojenské zpravodajství*, VZ) As the President of the Association Jiří Grund declared:

The appeal of state institutions stressed the extraordinality and urgency

⁵ CZ.NIC operates the domain register with the Czech national ending '.cz'.

⁶ Aeronet.cz, Protiproud.cz, Ceskobezcenzury.cz, Voxpopuliblog.cz, Prvnizpravy.cz, Czechfreepress.cz, Exanpro.cz and Skrytapravda.cz.

⁷ cz.sputniknews.com, Cz24.news, Nwoo.org, Slovanskenebe.com, Svobodnenoviny.eu a Zvedavec.org.

⁸ NCKO operates within one of the Czech security services, namely Military Intelligence (*Vojenské zpravodajství*, VZ)

of the situation embodied in the ongoing aggression of the military forces of the Russian Federation in the territory of Ukraine. The threat for the Czech Republic's security presents the dissemination of untrue and misleading information serving to the aggressor to deceive and manipulate Czech citizens with the aim to justify and endorse the recent aggression against Ukraine.

The steps of the mobile network 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 government's goals, namely the struggle against disinformation. One week before the Russian attack on Ukraine the internet media website *Aktualne.cz* concluded that they could observe the first signs of the forthcoming attack. In response the new government launched several activities against the fake news and disinformation. Among others, the Ministry of Internal Affairs was 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 [24].

The blockade discussed above 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 only be prohibited and punished when related to different types of criminal acts, namely: interference in an individual's rights, slander, calumny, defamation of 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 a criminal offense or declaring the declaration of liking towards movements oriented to suppression of human rights and freedoms [33].

As Petr Prchal noted in his comprehensive legal analysis of this extraordinary measure: 'only in April 2022, the server *iROZHLAS.cz* succeeded to get and verify the information that NCKO asked the director of CZ.NIC for the blockade.' Prchal labels such an approach of state institutions as miserable. He also stresses that one of the main challenges is to define the disinformation [34]. On the other hand, Dominik Presl, advisor to the government for the strategic communication and fight against disinformation, believes that a definition of disinformation exists, namely 'untruthful information which is wilfully disseminated' [35].

The extraordinary blockade of selected disinformation websites was terminated three months after it began, i.e. on 25 May 2022. An 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 a court or police order, or the order of another competent state institution [36].

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 Pavel Blažek and the government coordinator for media and disinformation Michal 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, Jan Večeřa, denied that the new Act would be in process of preparations. The non-existence of such activities was also declared by the spokesperson of the Czech Pirate Party, Veronika Šmídová. The Party is represented in government by

the party chairman and minister for digitalisation, Ivan Bartoš, as well as the minister for legislating, Michal Šalamoun. Also, the minister for internal affairs Vít Rakušan stressed that 'the repressive steps in the form of new legislation present the utmost solution that is recently discussed only theoretically' [37].

Such a rational approach confirmed that the specialised legislature against disinformation is an extremely challenging issue. As Prchal notes: 'It is obvious that the problem society and [also] the law as the regulatory instrument are confronted with, is the formation of so-called social bubbles that might – in the utmost case – present a security risk' [34].

6. Conclusions

On 26 October 2022 the District Court in the Central Bohemian city Kladno sentenced two visible members of the Czech disinformation scene – Tomáš Čermák and Patrik Tušl. As the public prosecutor mentioned, both defendants presented the video on social networks in August 2022, where they disparaged Ukrainians 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 custodial sentence and Tušl ten-months, because they committed defamation of nation and instigation of hate [12]. This lawsuit is a precedent showing that Czech justice is able to use recent legislature to punish disinformation campaigns. 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 repeated inappropriate activities – and possibly the extraordinary situation caused by Russian aggression against Ukraine – brought state institutions towards a solution which was both relatively resolute and fast.

Thus, we have to stress that recently we cannot observe any change in the struggle against disinformation campaigns in Czechia. After the three-month long blockade the situation returned to its previous state. Here we fully agree with Martin Fendrych, who noted in October 2022:

Beginning with the invasion of Ukraine, Russian state media and the dissemination of their content were prohibited in EU-member states. Indeed, the impact on the Czech case was not significant. Paradoxically, in the Czech Republic Russian propaganda is mainly spread by Czechs and Czech disinformation websites, Facebook groups, and Czech disinformation influencers. Without this Russian disinformation "fifth column" Russian propaganda would have a much smaller effect [39].

Such a sceptical assessment was also confirmed in the most recent annual report of BIS, despite the fact that this report officially reflects the situation in 2021; being published only in October 2022, it also surely included the impulses given during 2022. As the report points out:

The most prominent element in the disinformation ecosystem was websites which either contained disinformation or manipulated true information. Due to their far-reaching popularity, these websites had an impact on the rest of the alternative media scene and their articles were widely shared on social media [...] The disinformation ecosystem 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 views. The dominant vehicle of disinformation was alternative websites whose content projected into disinformation groups on social media [13, p. 15–16].

As the recent analyses show, throughout 2021, at the 46 active pro-Kremlin websites in Czechia more than 197,000 articles were published and disinformation trends were strengthening. The three biggest Czech disinformation websites in Czechia have had an average of almost 14,500,000 user visits per month. As disinformation expert Miloš Gregor concludes: 'the published data confirm the fact that Russia was preparing itself for the war for a long time. It is exactly Russia who mostly supports the disinformation and propaganda websites in Czech Republic' [40].

The most positive outcome of our analysis might be the fact that the new government showed after 24 February 2022, and beforehand with its Policy Statement, that it considers hybrid threats, including disinformation campaigns, as activities contrary to the principles of democracy and as a very serious threat to security. The extraordinary blockade of selected disinformation websites showed that the government, and even more the intelligence services, continually collect the necessary data and information on subversive actors. Furthermore, the new government also showed its interest in the work of the intelligence services and gave 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 with Prime Minister Petr Fiala seated next to him. 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 BIS. Last time it was President Václav Havel'. Koudelka also noted that 'we (BIS – quoted by Ladislav Cabada) understand disinformation as one of the biggest recent risks for the security of the Czech Republic'. He considers the following to be extremely dangerous: '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' [39].

To sum up, during the year 2022 the new Czech government overcame the previous period characterised by questioning the activities of the intelligence services, this period was represented mainly by President Zeman. The new Czech government also returned officially and clearly to the necessity of considering disinformation campaigns as an important part of a new hybrid threat to the nation. Of specific importance is the creation of a new institutional framework, rooted in legislation in the struggle against hybrid threats. Only such a system will be robust and stable enough to endure future attacks from both outside and more importantly from internal actors who are a part of the disinformation scene and/or are using disinformation strategies [41].

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