

POLISH-CZECH RELATIONS AND RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION ATTEMPTS TO DISTURB THEM

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SUMMARY

-Disinformation and propaganda activities grew in importance after the Internet, and particularly the social media websites enabling the information to be easily transmitted and shared among users, became the main channels for news and information dissemination.

-A well-organised disinformation campaign seems to be a “perfect destruction weapon”. Disinformation efforts also affect international relations – they stir up animosities and cause tensions between countries and form imaginary grounds for negative attitudes towards other nations.

-It is in the interest of both Poland and the Czech Republic to maintain relations undisturbed by any disinformation efforts. Participation in the activities of the Visegrad Group and in international alliances alike is a great opportunity for the development of the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic. Combating international threats is also of importance.

Disinformation activities and citizens’ perception

Russian disinformation efforts are visible in almost every country in which the Kremlin sees the potential for the expansion and advancement of its interests. Such an activity not only causes numerous legal and organisational problems as it necessitates the implementation of special measures to fight the negative narrative, but it also forces state governments to hold talks on the violation of the fundamental principles of democracy and of the ground rules on which international relations are based. Disinformation activities are clearly visible and they stopped being just a topic of academic discussions; they have become an element on which political reactions are focused and an important matter for individual governments and organisations, particularly the European Union and NATO.

Faced with the disinformation campaigns targeted at the Czech Republic and run by the pro-Kremlin media and the so-called troll farms, in the “2016 Czech National Security Audit”, the Office of the Czech Government stressed the importance of the adoption (or strengthening) of a conceptual approach to the strategic national communication, both as regards the domestic and international activities, and the helplessness of its efforts taken to combat disinformation practices.^[1]

According to the 2019 survey carried out by the Slovak think-tank “Globsec”, the Czechs are less likely to believe in conspiracy theories than their neighbours, i.e. Slovaks, Hungarians and Poles.^[2] On the other hand,

as per the OECD statistics, young Czechs show no interest whatsoever in the politics, and rank the second in Europe, after the Lithuanians whose interest in this topic is the lowest. The younger generation's lack of interest means that the ones exposed to the dangers of disinformation are the elderly persons engaged in the political life of their country and actively searching for the relevant information in that regard.^[3] From the surveys it follows that the citizens of the V4 countries have limited trust in the mainstream media, and that only 36% of the Polish and 46% of the Czech citizens believe in their impartiality.^[4] In turn, the lack of trust in the mainstream media means that the citizens find it necessary to search for alternative sources of information – websites or social media services – which have basically become a hotbed of fake and deliberately manipulated information.

In its 2015 annual report, the Czech Information Security Service [*BEZPEČNOSTNÍ INFORMAČNÍ SLUŽBA – BIS*] advised of the Russian disinformation efforts and hybrid activities designed to disrupt and disturb the NATO and EU operations, and particularly the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic.^[5]

Polish and Czech activities for mutual growth in the region

According to the official stance of the Polish government, the Polish and Czech cooperation is more and more fruitful,^[6] also in the military area, which was stressed in the 2019 agreement on the military aviation cooperation between the two countries.^[7] At the signing ceremony, Polish Prime Minister also stated that in the past 20 years, Poland and the Czech Republic had proved to be valuable NATO members and the Alliance itself – a guarantee of mutual security.^[8] Undoubtedly, the fact that Poland and the Czech Republic together strive to ensure the top level of the military effectiveness is one of the important elements of the countries' mutual security. Therefore, the maintenance of relations undisturbed by any disinformation efforts is in the interest of Poland and the Czech Republic alike.

The relations between Poland and Czech Republic date to more than 1,000 years back. Nowadays, they are mainly pursued as part of the Visegrad (V4) Group, which allows the countries to maintain positive, complex and multidimensional international relations. The V4 Group has become a platform for negotiations on regional politics and also for the formation of informal alliances as part of the EU membership. The V4 Group also serves as a platform for the discussion and agreement on the strategic matters that affect geopolitics and the security of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia.^[9]

Nowadays, many of the foreign policy directions pursued by Poland and the Czech Republic seem to overlap. This is characterised by an attitude that is prudent towards the European Union and more favourable towards the United States, the country both Poland and the Czech Republic wish to be closer to, even at a cost of loosening their ties with Brussels. Building up the alliance through the military cooperation with the U.S. confirms the same. The on-going monitoring of the Russian influences is an important element of the Czech and Polish politics. The Kremlin's attempts to intervene in the politics of the Central Europe countries, and thus to disturb order in the entire V4 Group, have not been unnoticed. Many of the Kremlin's innovative and almost unnoticeable disinformation efforts have an actual adverse impact on the shaping of the bilateral cooperation between the Prague and Warsaw-based governments, and thus they pose a serious threat for them.

A great opportunity for the development of the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic, apart from the membership in the V4 Group, is also the membership in other international organisations like the European Union, NATO, OECD, OSCE or the Council of Europe, to name a few. Additionally, maintaining the security of borders and engaging in cooperation to combat international threats is of key importance as well.^[10] From the very beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, the Visegrad Group policy has been compliant with the EU policy, supportive of the sanctions and of the Ukraine's territorial integrity; nevertheless, there are important differences between the policies adopted by the governments of the individual V4 member states. Everything will depend on the future actions taken as part of the V4 Group membership and on the actions aimed at improving the bilateral relations between Poland and the Czech Republic and thus at tightening cooperation between the two countries.

Polish and Czech historical experience and political events as disinformation carriers

The Russian disinformation campaign in the EU has been particularly designed to widen political divisions among the nations, cause tensions that will affect the relations within the EU, and weaken the citizens' trust in NATO. Disinformation is also used to influence public sentiments, citizens' attitude towards authorities and public institutions, escalate civil conflicts and to distort the perception of other nations or immigrants. The disinformation warfare waged by Russia against Poland covers many other fields of influence, and Moscow has been consistently attacking those policies pursued by Warsaw that contradict the Russian interests.^[11] As follows from the below analysis, the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic are exposed to such efforts. It is also worth stressing that

such efforts are also carried out to “sow the seeds of conflict” between the nations that have previously cooperated with each other, and they are also an element of the Russian foreign policy whose purpose is to persuade both countries of the necessity to return to the Russia’s sphere of influence.

Numerous examples from the previous years, also from the Czech Republic, show that Russia, on a global scale, carried out disinformation activities to affect the European elections. Only two of such campaigns brought results satisfactory to the Kremlin – the 2017 parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic and Brexit.^[12] However, given the variety of factors affecting the elections, it is difficult to clearly determine the actual impact of the hostile disinformation efforts on a given party’s or candidate’s election results.

The local (both Polish and Czech) branches of the Russian propaganda network, i.e. the Sputnik news, play the most important role in the creation of the pro-Kremlin narrative affecting the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic. Sputnik is the most active news agency and broadcaster that created a constellation of smaller Poland-based websites that disclose to a wider public the news prepared by Sputnik. One should remember that the Russian information strategy is based on spreading many, frequently extremely abstract, news to create a “smokescreen” against the actual disinformation purpose. Thus released information flooding the media serves one purpose only – to hide Russia’s actual intention to disinform people using a very simple psychological mechanism. Bombarded with many abstract and seemingly false news, the recipient will most likely deem true that bit of information which stands out from the entire flood of information as the most probable, logical and true one. And this is what the publishers of fake news wait for and how the purpose of the disinformation campaign is achieved.

Sputnik defines itself as an information agency that provides information on global politics and the economy. The Economist journalist indicates that this is a kind of hybrid threat in the cyber war with Europe and the US, which combines elements of radio-electronic intelligence with the information war.^[13] According to US experts, Russia and China are the biggest threat in cyberspace.^[14] The Russian Federation is recognized by most European countries as the greatest danger in the network, in the context of disinformation (including Poland^[15], Finland^[16]). Experts also recognized it as a threat to the eastern flank of NATO and the EU in the context of cyberwar.^[17]

It is worth mentioning that the information prepared and published by the Polish Sputnik branch in fact comes, to a lesser or greater extent, from

other websites, which may be referred to as “satellites”. This is the very constellation of frequently far-right websites that is used to disclose the news to a wider public. The information published on such websites is based on facts, but the facts are conveniently altered to give them a different meaning or sense, or they are supported with a negative narrative which violates the journalists code of conduct. Such websites may also publish news based on the writers subjective opinions, tweets or unverified sources. Given catchy and shocking titles which frequently use simple and non-journalistic language and contain populist opinions, such news appeal to radical recipients, who want to be shocked by the content they read.

The attempt to discredit in the eyes of the Polish recipients the anti-government protests held in Prague in June 2019 is an interesting example of the Russian disinformation efforts. The events considered to be the biggest protest since the 1989 Velvet Revolution were presented by the Sputnik reporter as a “cultural event”, not a display of anger among the general public. To support such a statement, the reporter referred to the fact that there were many children among the protesters and that tourist coaches could be seen in the neighbouring area. According to the author, the protesters were thus “tourists” instructed to join the demonstration.^[18] The short publication presenting a biased assessment of the facts and events was released with the purpose of discrediting in the eyes of the Polish recipients the entire protest, and to cast a shadow over the legitimacy of the demonstration against the government.

Another opportunity to worsen the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic arose when the Czechs introduced additional border controls for the meat imported from Poland. These measures were taken after the discovery of salmonella in some consignments but the Polish commentators found the Czech government overcautious, which sparked the political dispute. It is not surprising that the pro-Kremlin websites decided to use this conflict to their advantage. Once the illegal abattoirs were also found to be operating in the territory of the Czech Republic, the pro-Kremlin websites tried to bias the Polish public opinion and to turn it against Czechs. To stir up the conflict between the two V4 members, the nationalistic website “Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny” [Independent Political Daily] published an article containing extremely populist opinions about “karma catching up with Poland’s neighbours and punishing them for their disgusting politics”.^[19]

The narrative of the Russian propaganda used in an attempt to change the recipients’ opinions most frequently refers to historical events and past experiences. In the case of Poland, this narrative has not changed over the

years – the Russian propaganda keeps on glorifying the Russian engagement in WWII and the cold war events, by popularising alternative historical facts so as to change the general public's opinion and perception of Russia. In the alternative historical facts, Russia is presented as a defender not aggressor, and Poland as a country ruled by an incompetent anti-Russian government and responsible for the outbreak of WWII. The use of neuralgic historical facts to cause tension between nations is not a new practice. The Russian propaganda is widespread across the Polish media channels and carries out different attacks on e.g. the Ukrainians, Israeli and Germans. Therefore, the attempts to present a different vision of history, as in the case of the 1968 events, which have been used to cause tensions between Poland and the Czech Republic on the grounds of distressing historical facts, and thus to adversely affect the relations between the two countries, are not surprising. An intriguing article about the Polish military presence in Czechoslovakia can be used here as an example. The author's intention was to prove that the Polish military intervention in Czechoslovakia was necessary, given the highly likely aggression from the Federal Republic of Germany which, as the author indicates, wanted to seize nearly one-third of the Polish territory. According to the author, such intervention of the army of the Polish People's Republic was intended to prevent such annexation. The article used as an example is even more interesting as it abstains from any catchy phrases, has the features of a quite well-written analytic publication, and is referenced to respectable political and historical authors. Nevertheless, it does contain a standard element of a pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign – it names the main past and present enemy, i.e. NATO, which according to the author, together with the United States, supported the Federal Republic of Germany in its annexation plans, and in that way attempts to weaken the trust in NATO and worsen the relations with the U.S., given the latter's military presence in Poland. This is a standard disinformation element used by the Russian propaganda across the Polish media channels.^[20] The article was published on two different extremely conservative and nationalistic websites. However, after a quick source check, it became apparent that the article's author also writes for the Polish Sputnik branch.

Another example of the falsification of history aimed at worsening the relations between Poland and the Czech Republic is the manipulation of the historical facts relating to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and its impact on the outbreak of war. The narrative presented in an article published on the Polish Sputnik website stresses the alleged anti-Russian sentiment of the Polish Chief of State – Józef Piłsudski, on whom the author blames the general “sovietophobia and Russophobia” spreading across Europe at that time. As a result of some wrong decisions made by the Polish Chief of State,

the Treaty of Non-Aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was signed and, according to the pro-Kremlin narrative, Poland took the side of Nazi Germany to prevent the Soviet attempt to build a collective security system in Europe. The narrative falsely states that since 1934 the Poles had been trying to cause disturbance in Czechoslovakia with reference to the Czech Cieszyn district (the actions to recapture the territory considered to be the Polish land were in fact taken no earlier than in 1938). According to this narrative, Poland was to threaten Czechoslovakia that in the case of a Soviet support given to Czechoslovakia in the event of a Nazi Germany attack, it would take a military action. The creation of a narrative referred to as “the Polish role in the English and French betrayal of Czechoslovakia” is one of the elements of using historical disputes for the purpose of causing present-day political tensions, as well as – and most importantly – tensions regarding the social perception of past conflicts.^[21]

As for the impact on the history, the narrative present in the traditional media should be highlighted. In the Russian daytime political talk show *VREMYA POKAZHET* [Time Will Tell], the host – Petr Tolstoy – stated that Russia lost Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary, while the historical truth is that the said countries, even though they were located in Russia’s sphere of influence, were never part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.^[22] Such messages present the mindset of the contemporary Kremlin government to which the collapse of the Eastern Bloc was a tragic and shameful event. That is why the contemporary Russian politics, also as presented in the pro-Kremlin media, postulates the restoration of the Russian influence in the region.

Noteworthy is the misinformation about post-Soviet states (including Poland) relative to the West (including the Czech Republic). The Russian opinion indicated that the eastern policy of the European Union and NATO, in fact, promotes dishonest work, disintegration, and tensions in connection with the situation in Ukraine and the entire region of Russian civilization. International organizations support neofascist in the Baltic States and the anti-Russian regime in Moldova and Georgia. This also applies to disinformation on the part of Western states and the US, which are against the integration of the Russian Federation and Belarus.^[23]

The observation of the media presentation of different countries has one very important aspect – the images created in the foreign media may often become a reflection of a country’s own problems, and they may help in noticing certain details which from the country’s own national perspective are not visible. This is also the case of the Polish–Czech cooperation and the possible Russian influences. The Polish perception of the Czechs is essential to build relations and strengthen mutual interests in the region. According

to the 2011 report by the Polish Centre for Public Opinion Research, 51% of Poles like the Czech the most.^[24] Additionally, according to the research from 2012-2015, Poles have the greatest sympathy for the Czech nation.^[25] Therefore, reference to verified sources that help in the actual maintenance of good relations is of key importance, even at the time of widespread disinformation.

The Polish media may also serve as the buffer of frustration and anger of certain Czech journalists, politicians or researchers. In some joint Polish–Czech matters, the foreign media actually play a role of an advocate or arbitrator. The foreign coverage of a given country’s problems or irregularities serves the purpose of attracting international attention and thus exerting influence on the rulers. Foreign coverage of a certain national issue or mistake enables it to be analysed from a wider perspective and addressed from the perspective of a foreign entity (e.g. Poland). However, the problem emerges when a third party unrelated to the actual issue describes it as it pleases, with a view of deriving as many benefits for itself as possible (like the Sputnik does in Poland).

Attempts are being made to influence the foreign policy of the Czech Republic in the context of the activities undertaken by the Republic of Poland. It was written that the Czech Minister of Defense, Lubomir Metnar, did not rule out the possibility of talks with NATO regarding the possible deployment of new military bases in the Czech Republic, as Poland did, titling the text: „The Czech Republic will deploy an American base on the Polish model.” This is misleading and manipulates the reception through the header. In fact, the minister pointed out that such a discussion could take place regarding the deployment of the missile defence system or missiles in the Czech Republic^[26].

It is worth mentioning that as a guard of the eastern border of the European Union and one of the biggest countries in the eastern bloc, with the concurrent very strong anti-Russian popular sentiment, Poland is one of the main targets of the Russian propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish–Czech animosities have so far been present in individual cases and they are not that visible as the Polish–Ukrainian ones, for example. Nevertheless, it should be in the interest of both countries that any display of disinformation be constantly monitored and the untrue information be rectified and communicated on an on-going basis. At the same time, it is worth stressing that despite numerous EU and social initiatives for the identification and publication of any instances of disinformation, Polish authorities have not yet adopted such a comprehensive approach to combating disinformation as the Czech government, and established a separate agency to deal with this threat.

In the modern information society in which the citizens are regularly bombarded with large amounts of information and have no possibility to verify each and every piece of information they receive, a well-organised disinformation campaign seems to be almost a “perfect destruction weapon”. Disinformation and propaganda activities grew in importance after the Internet, and particularly the social media websites enabling the information to be easily transmitted and shared, became the main channels for news and information dissemination. Unfortunately, social media websites have also contributed to the increased susceptibility of the readers to absorb manipulated contents, and to the radicalisation of beliefs. As numerous Polish and foreign examples in the Baltic region show, disinformation campaigns also employ hackers who, by breaking into the local news websites and publishing manipulated information, try to adversely affect the local communities, and thus to stir up animosities and prejudices towards neighbouring nations.

Disinformation undermines the democratic principles and citizens’ trust in public institutions, authorities and the media. An article published in the press, an online meme or an opinion-shaping post on the internet or in the social media may affect the democratic processes and the society, and, in the long run, it may also cause tensions between nations and affect the political relations between countries. It is worth remembering that disinformation is a long, complicated and comprehensive process aimed mainly at confusing the society and causing chaos, which gives rise to political and economic problems, and also affects the country’s general security. Disinformation used by a third country as a weapon helps affect election results and political decisions or cause chaos in the society, the latter of which is a strategy aimed at weakening and destabilising the political system, which in turn may lead to the citizens’ exerting influence on public authorities. Importantly, disinformation efforts also affect international relations – they stir up animosities and cause tensions between countries, and are responsible for the creation of mutual alliances.

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It is also essential to point out the European Union’s commitment to fighting disinformation. The Action Plan against disinformation initiative was created in December 2018 as a part of the European Rapid Alert System cooperation network. It proposed a set of actions that should enable a joint and coordinated EU approach to tackling disinformation. This is based on four pillars: improving the Union institutions’ ability to detect, analyze and disclose disinformation, constant and coordinated

cooperation between Member States in combating disinformation, mobilizing the private sector to fight disinformation, and raising public awareness about disinformation. Then in January 2019, the Code of Practice on Disinformation was signed. Code signatories, including Poland and the Czech Republic, have committed to tackling disinformation on the Internet.

Recommendations

As it has been stressed above, disinformation is a very strong tool that influences citizens' awareness and social sentiment, and changes social attitudes. It not only causes social tensions, both within society and among nations, but also makes citizens feel less safe, and undermines their trust in public authorities and institutions, which in turn affects public security and order. Given the nature of the threat, the focus should be on the development of an effective mechanism to mitigate the results of the publication of fake news.

The first, and at the same time the basic, element of such a system is education on the safe Internet use. This involves teaching critical thinking, developing practical skills as regards the analysis of the information published by the media (also social media) and the verification whether such news are based on facts. Such actions are possible, only if proper behaviours are instilled at early childhood. A child well-educated in that regard will likely grow into an adult fully aware of their role as a citizen. For it to be possible, we first must design relevant training courses and train persons responsible for the development and education of children. Moreover, politicians and journalists, who may have problems understanding and using certain pieces of information for own purposes, should be made aware of such dangers as well.

Tightening cooperation within the European Union, both at the legal and organisational level, is also necessary. The continuation of the work on the early warning system for fake news, also as part of the Code of Practice Against Disinformation, is a good solution. This will encourage stronger cooperation with the social media services and tech tycoons on fake news identification and deletion. Political pressures as well as the so-called negative PR that emerged when the social media services started being used for disinformation purposes, led to the implementation of solutions to identify, mark and delete fake and misleading news. The use of innovative technologies such as AI-based algorithms that will identify synthetic and manipulated news is an important element of such solutions.

Another recommendation that should be followed both at the state level and throughout the entire European Union concerns the intensification of cooperation for the retention of fact checkers. Such efforts should be focused on increasing funding for this type of organisations and on facilitating cooperation with experts and the media.

To sum up, an effective system to counter disinformation should be based on the reform of the children and teenage education, which should be focused on developing resistance of a unit, on which the system is based. Education should be also provided to those, who may be subject to disinformation on an everyday basis. On the other hand, the development of mechanisms for the identification and deletion of synthetic or manipulated contents should be based on cooperation between the media, fact checkers, civil society, and academic scientists and experts.

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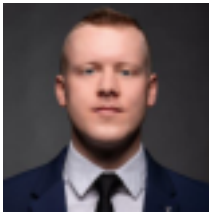


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