

# THE PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

TYPES OF MEDIA SPREADING  
PRO-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA,  
THEIR CHARACTERISTICS  
AND FREQUENTLY USED NARRATIVES

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## INTRODUCTION

**“Today, nobody questions the fact that Putin has waged an information propaganda war in our country,” explained Slovak activist Juraj Smatana, who in February 2015 published a list of websites that spread pro-Kremlin propaganda in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Both countries, with relatively small Russian minorities and only a handful of Russian-language media outlets, have been recently awakened by a new phenomenon – a pro-Kremlin propaganda campaign in the Czech and Slovak languages spread by media and websites that, despite strong rhetoric, claim no allegiance to the Kremlin. These pro-Russian media show a high level of similarity, using the same language and narratives. Individual disinformation campaigns appear to be spreading in a joint effort, re-posting the same articles, using identical arguments, citing Russian sources, and referring to the same pro-Kremlin public personalities. Their appearance correlates with the Ukrainian crises, however, many were founded before 2014, suggesting that the system might have been years in making.**

**This paper provides an overview of the pro-Russian disinformation activities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, identifies frequently used narratives, and brings attention to the similarity of arguments and messages used by a pro-Russian media with no formal links to Russia, versus media that are founded and funded by the Russian Federation. Moreover, the paper will discuss the characteristics and strengths of this pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. A number of recommendations, based on research by experts on Russia’s information warfare and propaganda, are offered, adjusted to the local circumstances.**

**Finally, the text seeks to concentrate on the similarities, rather than the differences, of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, acknowledging that public perceptions of Russia in each country vary and, therefore, so might the effectiveness of the campaign.**

The pro-Russian discourse has already entered Czech and Slovak mainstream media. In 2013, campaign Juvenile Justice (Juvenilná Justícia) was described as a “Multinational system that brutally

steals and unjustifiably takes children away from normal and healthy families. Using physical violence, the state social authority abducts children from their homes or kindergartens” (Stop Auto-Genocide n.d.). The campaign started with a 32-minute long YouTube video that accused France, Germany and Nordic countries of “the most brutal tyranny in human history” (Youtube 2012). The video, later posted on Slovak portal Stopautogenocide.sk, appeared to be of Russian origin, using the Cyrillic alphabet and referring to Russian sources.

The case, coupled with a petition against the aforementioned fabricated child abuse, soon spread throughout other websites and finally reached the mainstream media in May 2013, when the Slovak TV station Markíza reported on the story.

A year later, a similar campaign appeared in the Czech Republic soon after protests against current President Milos Zeman, a strong supporter of Czech-Russian relations, took place in Prague and other Czech cities. In the days following the public unrest, provoked by a number of Zeman’s controversial activities in the months preceding the event, Czech pro-Russian websites were quick to provide an explanation by accusing the American embassy in Prague with organizing the demonstrations.

The story, or in many cases just the idea of Embassy’s involvement, was reposted by some more respected media, and later prompted the respective Foreign Ministries to actually inquire about the Embassy’s involvement. Both the Embassy and the protest’s organizer, Martin Prikryl, had to repeatedly refute these false claims.

The media assault, however, goes beyond the Internet. Czech Television (CT), a public television broadcaster in the Czech Republic, recently warned about an increased number of complaints regarding their foreign news coverage. “The pressure is enormous. I don’t think the pressure on domestic coverage is different from what we are used to. This new phenomenon is placing pressure on our foreign affairs department,” Michal Kubal, head of CT’s foreign news editorial department, observed in April 2015, “It appears that somebody is purposefully trying to search for errors made by CT that fall in line with Russian propaganda – You don’t have to trust the Kremlin, just don’t trust anybody” (Břešťan, 2015a).

## SUMMARY

### SUMMARY FINDINGS

- In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the pro-Russian disinformation campaign originates from **multiple sources**: numerous pro-Russian websites, informal groups and communities on social media, several printed periodicals, radio broadcasts, and non-governmental organizations. Their pro-Kremlin messages are **amplified through extensive social media activity**, and through the **organization of public events and gatherings**.
- **Common characteristics** of the pro-Kremlin media and websites in CR and SR are as follows:
  - They claim no allegiance to Kremlin;
  - Send very similar messages and use similar arguments;
  - Are strongly anti-Western, most frequently targeting the United States, Ukraine and the West in general;
  - To lesser extent, are Pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin;
  - Heavily use conspiracy theories, combining facts and half-truths;
  - Have negative undertones, usually depicting moral, economic, political and social degradation and predicting a bleak future, including the collapse or clash of civilizations;
  - Frequently use loaded language and emotionally charged words, stories and pictures;
  - Are interconnected and supported by various public personalities that give the campaign both credibility and public visibility.
  - The advent of the pro-Kremlin media and organizations in these two countries predates 2014, as many were founded in 2013 or earlier, but their rhetoric and activities hardened and intensified with the crises in Ukraine.
- **Their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures remain, in most cases, unknown.** To date, all efforts by investigative journalists or activists have only resulted in finding dubious links and facts, but no direct proof of Russian involvement.
- **The lack of transparency is one of their strongest assets**, as any accusation of ulterior motives is depicted as an attempt to suppress 'alternative opinions' and any challenger is branded 'America's propaganda puppet.'
- **The most important role** of these new pro-Kremlin media, and especially their social media channels, is that they facilitate vivid platforms where like-minded criticism and discontent can be shared and, to the Kremlin's benefit, spread and amplified.
- **The goal of the pro-Russian campaign is to shift public opinion against its own democratic institutions** and foreshadow a world where the United States intends to overrun the globe, every West-leaning politician is corrupt, all media outlets not of their persuasion are biased and the future is bleak, hopeless and full of conflict. In such a world, Russia emerges as both the savior and moral authority, the guarantor of political stability and peace.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Mapping the impact on public opinion:** To properly assess the effect, if any, of the pro-Russian campaigns in both countries, it is necessary to study changes of sentiment, through conducting regular opinion polls, surveys and studies directed at sectors and democratic institutions that are most frequently targeted by these disinformation assaults.
- **Deconstruction and exposure of the pro-Russian campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia:** To properly understand and publicly expose the system, more effort should be invested in researching various aspects of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, especially uncovering its structures, personalities and backgrounds.
- **Education:** Initiatives that seek to expose propaganda techniques, such as a new school textbook by Slovak NGO Human Right Institute, should be supported. In addition, a public campaign showing how the disinformation campaign and propaganda operate, should be introduced. Additionally, proper methods and channels need to be developed to deliver such information to the broader public.
- **Rebutting and explaining frequently used arguments:** Arguments that are frequently appearing, such as "The West also uses propaganda," or "The World is collapsing" should be quickly rebutted and publically explained.
- **Providing Information Security the status of an academic science:** Czech and Slovak, and European notwithstanding, institutions of higher education, think tanks and government facilities should develop analytical capabilities and support the research of methods that information, the Internet, and propaganda can be used to achieve foreign policy goals.

## DEFINING THE “PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN”

The Russian information warfare theory directly derives from *spetspropaganda*, first taught as a subject at the Russian Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1942. It was removed from the curriculum in 1990s and later reinstated in 2000 (Darczewska 2014, 9-10). Pomerantzev and Weiss (2014, 6) refer to Russia’s assault on media and its disinformation activities as the *weaponization of information*, conducted alongside the *weaponization of money and culture*.

As this paper discusses, rather than openly promoting Russia’s cause, pro-Russian disinformation activities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia aim to weaken its opponents. Therefore, the term ‘propaganda’ is not frequently used in this text, however, other authors might use ‘Russian propaganda’ to refer to the similar type of activities.

In addition, the term ‘pro-Russian’, rather than a ‘Russian disinformation campaign’ is used, as

the latter could imply direct involvement from the Russian Federation. With the exception of the recently launched Czech branch of Sputnik News, the majority of pro-Russian disinformation activities in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are conducted by sources with no direct organizational or financial links to the Kremlin. To date, only informal relations with Russian Embassies or Russian business elites are publicly known.<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, the term ‘information war’ implies involvement by two sides in a conflict. Therefore, the term ‘disinformation campaign’ will be used hereafter and describes a set of activities that abuse information flows to confuse citizens and shift public opinion in the direction of predetermined policy objectives.

<sup>1</sup> Such as May 2014 Facebook picture of Mr. Rostas, founder of Zem & Vek Magazine, with the Russian Ambassador to Slovakia, Pavel Kuznetsov; or links of Jan Čarnogurský, founder of the Slovak-Russian Association, to Russian businessmen through the Pan-European University in Bratislava.

## PRO-RUSSIAN NETWORK: NEW MEDIA, WEBSITES, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND ORGANIZATIONS

In Europe, Russia's approach to the manipulation of media and information is on a country-by-country basis, creating separate strategies for different regions and countries, while taking advantage of local infighting and weaknesses. As Nimmo (2015) pointed out, the Russian propaganda network is sophisticated, utilizing a network of officials, journalists, sympathetic commentators, and Internet trolls to deliver its messages. It is also built on the lack of transparency, where the public is unaware that various spokespeople, in fact, work for the Kremlin (Knezevic, 2014).

Such is the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where pro-Russian disinformation messages originate from multiple sources that are often supported by, and interconnected through, pro-Russian public personalities.<sup>2</sup> The frequent and most visible disseminators of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign include: numerous pro-Russian websites; informal groups and communities on social media; several printed periodicals; radio broadcasts; and non-governmental organizations.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the aforementioned media sources amplify their discourses through extensive social media activity and the organization of public events

and gatherings. Examples include, a protest that was recently initiated by the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, public discussions regularly organized by Zem & Vek magazine<sup>4</sup> and anti-NATO demonstrations supported by Slovak-Russian Association.

Discussions regarding the pro-Russian disinformation campaign accelerated in February 2015, when Slovak activist Juraj Smetana published a 'List of 42 websites that intentionally or unintentionally help to spread Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic and Slovakia' (Šnidl, 2015). Since February, the list has grown and continues to grow as more and more like-minded websites are being discovered.

Over last two years, a number of print periodicals began appearing. These included: the Czech magazine Vědomí, founded by the website AC24.cz (that also appeared on the aforementioned list) in 2014; Slovak Zem & Vek which began publishing in 2013 (*further information regarding these periodicals appear in Appendix 1*), and radios like Slovak Slobodný Vysielač (translated as "Free Transmitter") that was founded in January 2013. While spreading information to the benefit of Russia, their articles are frequently based on conspiracy theories and a mixture of facts, half-truth and outright lies.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Radka Zemanová-Kopecká is a founder of the new pro-Russian NGO Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, which organized a public discussion in the Czech parliament and a demonstration at Prague Castle. In addition, Ms. Zemanová-Kopecká writes articles for Czech pro-Russian websites, Russian-language platforms, is active on social media and contributes to online discussions in response to articles. Another example is the former Prime Minister of Slovakia, Ján Čarnogurský, director of the Slovak-Russian Society, who is frequently cited and interviewed by pro-Russian media outlets, such as the print Slovak magazine Zem & Vek and Czech Vědomí. In addition, he writes articles for various websites and has spoken at pro-Russian public discussions.

<sup>3</sup> Often these groups have ties (through project cooperation and joint events) to Russian Embassies or Russian Centers of Science and Culture, local branches of the Federal Agency for CIS, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation, established by Russian government in 2008

<sup>4</sup> According to their website and Facebook page, Zem & Vek organized more than 40 public events since 2013.

## SIMILARITY OF ARGUMENTS USED BY PRO-RUSSIAN MEDIA

According to Russian activist Elena Gluško (Teraz 2014), Russia's information war entered a new era in 2013, when new types of media, that claim no allegiance to Russia, were introduced to Russia's information war toolbox. In each country, different types of such media outlets are being invented and their content is created and selected locally. Therefore, it can be presumed that pro-Kremlin media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia will be somewhat different from other like-minded European media.

To determine narratives used in Czech Republic and Slovakia and compare the level of similarity between the arguments used by various disseminators of the pro-Russian campaigns, four different media outlets were chosen for analysis, three of which claim no connection or direct link to Russia, but appeared on the Smatana's list of pro-Kremlin websites from February 2015. First, a discussion of Zem & Vek, held on May 20, 2015 in the Slovak town of Žilina, second, the Czech-language news portal Aeronet, and third, the May print issue

of Czech magazine Vědomí (*For further information regarding these media outlets, please see Appendix 1*).

To compare new alternative media with no formal links to Kremlin with Kremlin-controlled media, the Czech branch of international media outlet Sputnik News, funded by the government of the Russian Federation in 2014, was included in the reference group.

Eight categories, selected due to the high frequency in which they appear in pro-Russian campaign, were monitored. The messages were either direct statement, such as in the case of the discussion organized by Zem & Vek, or written opinion, cited or through a person interviewed.

The following table includes arguments and claims of the following: 1) three speakers at the Zem & Vek Discussion; 2) extracted from articles pertaining to the foreign section of Aeronet's website (posted in April and May 2015); 3) comments made in the May 2015 print issue of magazine Vědomí; 4) excerpts from the Czech Sputnik News website's sections "Politics" and "Czech Republic" (posted in May 2015).



| TOPIC   | ZEM & VEK DISCUSSION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | PORTAL AERONET                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | PRINT MAGAZINE VĚDOMÍ                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | CZECH SPUTNIK NEWS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| USA     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• U.S. plans to seize control of the entire world</li> <li>• It is in the U.S. interest to paralyze the world -&gt; it has started parallel conflicts</li> <li>• It wants to seize all important and fertile regions (including Ukraine),</li> <li>• All colored revolutions were USA initiatives and plans</li> <li>• It has military bases everywhere</li> <li>• It spies on the whole world</li> <li>• Bombarded fellow Slavic country in '99</li> <li>• It installed its companies in Europe through the Marshall plan</li> <li>• Its foreign policy is under the control of Israel</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• U.S. Is responsible for terrorism</li> <li>• Spoiled revolutions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya</li> <li>• Trains and support Nazis in the Ukraine</li> <li>• Destabilized Ukraine to seize fertile Ukrainian regions</li> <li>• Wants to remove current government</li> <li>• Its wealth is built on genocide (Native American Indians) and two world wars</li> <li>• Its global financial system is collapsing</li> <li>• Is in preliminary phase of starting conflict with Russia</li> <li>• Is supplying deadly weapons to Ukraine</li> <li>• USA (and the US dollar) are in decline -- trying to prevent the decline by waging wars</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alliances with Vietnam and Cambodia -&gt; efforts to maintain power in Asia</li> <li>• With rise of China -&gt; no more USA dictating to Asia</li> <li>• White House has been plotting for decades -&gt; initiated many conflicts to prevent a Europe-Russia alliance</li> <li>• US Foreign Policy – occupation, creation of puppet regimes</li> <li>• Controls Europe, Asia, New Zealand, Australia, Africa (only BRICS and Iran were able to maintain sovereignty)</li> <li>• Tries to create totalitarian global order</li> <li>• Is constantly sowing the seeds of conflict -&gt; controlling global order</li> <li>• Is trying to dictate the world --has imperial intentions</li> <li>• Hybrid warfare was invented by the USA and is now used in all parts of the world (Russia is only responding)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High possibility of armed conflict between USA and China (WWIII)</li> <li>• Is behind all color revolutions (and is plotting many more in Asia)</li> <li>• Asian financial crises was an American initiative to control regimes in Asia – it provoked to gain control</li> <li>• Cooperation with Russia is continuing</li> <li>• Negative tendencies in non-proliferation of nuclear weapons – USA's fault</li> <li>• Is dissatisfied with China's rise in Asia -&gt; US preparing retaliatory measures</li> <li>• Its global hegemony is coming to an end</li> <li>• Its expansion to Asia is destabilizing the region: Korean peninsula and deteriorating China-Japan relationship</li> <li>• Iraq intervention might be responsible for IS</li> </ul> |
| NATO    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is controlled by economic interests of a small group of people</li> <li>• Wants to build new military base in Slovakia -&gt; Slovakia will be the center of offensive against Russia</li> <li>• Military Bases are an alien power</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is provoking Russia at its borders -&gt; will be followed by an invasion</li> <li>• Is ignoring facts (that there was no invasion in Ukraine) -&gt; initiating conflict in eastern Ukraine</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Its problem is that American secret services are superior to other services.</li> <li>• Joining NATO decreased Slovakia's defense capacity: reforms after joining NATO -&gt; now unable to defend its borders</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NATO needs to adopt structural changes in the future</li> <li>• Expansion to East (plus color revolution) -&gt; decrease Europe's influence and security structure</li> <li>• Is unjustly accusing Russia of breaching Minsk agreement</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| EU      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is no freedom and democracy in EU</li> <li>• Election are only illusory -&gt; people cannot control anything</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is in the midst of self-destruction</li> <li>• One of the largest collapses of all times</li> <li>• Cooperated with USA on creation of wars</li> <li>• Is threatened by conflict in the Ukraine - needs to leave it</li> <li>• EU leaders are under US control</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will be drawn in periods of conflicts and peace</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eastern partnership is a failure</li> <li>• France triggered war in Libya (resulted in failure)</li> <li>• Morally responsible for deaths of migrants in Mediterranean Sea (unethical asylum policies)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Ukraine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is not known who started Maidan</li> <li>• Fascist are in power</li> <li>• Poroshenko and Yatsenyuk are foreign agents</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No proof of Russian soldiers in Ukraine</li> <li>• Poroshenko and Yatsenyuk are US puppets</li> <li>• Yatsenyuk (under US influence and command) breached Minsk agreement first</li> <li>• Yanukovych was legitimate president</li> <li>• Is ruled by fascists and supporters of Bandera</li> <li>• Is being radicalized</li> <li>• Minsk agreements were adhered to by rebels (Kiev is breaching them)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There was no Russia's invasion</li> <li>• If USA does not succeed to win over Russia in Ukraine through NATO, it will deploy nuclear weapons in 2017</li> <li>• Cases of Kiev, Crimea and Donbas are part of West's effort to dominate the world (same goes for Balkan, Syria, Libya, Middle East).</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is about to go bankrupt</li> <li>• Does not want to pay back loans from Russia</li> <li>• Wants to clean itself from communist history (by banning Soviet propaganda posters etc.)</li> <li>• Is not democratic: support of followers of Bandera, fascists and criminals</li> <li>• Is unable to repay its debt, is almost bankrupt (is CR ready to accept such a country in Europe?)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

| TOPIC            | ZEM & VEK DISCUSSION                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | PORTAL AERONET                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | PRINT MAGAZINE VĚDOMÍ                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | CZECH SPUTNIK NEWS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Media            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are venal and corrupt</li> <li>• Controlled by financial elites</li> <li>• They lie -&gt; we cannot trust them</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alternative media are being silenced</li> <li>• Czech media is biased</li> <li>• Opinion poll agencies are biased</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainstream media silent about certain facts (victims of terrorism)</li> <li>• Media in US are using propaganda on its citizens</li> <li>• Are puppets of politicians</li> <li>• Mass media are heavily using propaganda and manipulation</li> <li>• Are creating virtual reality</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Its coverage of crises in Ukraine is only marginal and bias</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Politicians      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are dishonest</li> <li>• Are controlled by political marketing</li> <li>• Only gather their own wealth</li> <li>• President Kiska is only a puppet</li> </ul>                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use democracy to steal</li> <li>• Controlled by corporations</li> <li>• Only interest is money</li> <li>• Will force citizens into military service in Ukraine</li> <li>• Are leading Czechs to a conflict</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political elites in CEE (Havel, Walesa, Landsbergise) were bought by Americans in the '90s</li> <li>• Are manipulating public opinion</li> <li>• Everything they say is untrustworthy</li> <li>• People should not trust their sweet talk about a "better world," "morale" or "public welfare"</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (does not attack politicians, however, room is often given to representatives of Communist Party of Moravia and Bohemia, such as Vojtěch Filip or Jiri Dolejši, or Pro-Kremlin views of president Zeman often appear)</li> </ul>                                                                                                     |
| Russia           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is not perfect</li> <li>• It has solely its interests in mind</li> <li>• IS started less conflicts than the USA -&gt; is less aggressive and more peaceful</li> <li>• It also has capitalism, but more patriotic (in contrast with globalized capitalism of the West)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will be attacked by USA</li> <li>• Is not threatening any state in Europe</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is being transparent about its interest – needs neutral Ukraine (unlike USA, who sow the seeds of conflict to stay in power)</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is being ignored on G8 platform – sign of Russian weakness</li> <li>• Is concerned about the presence of destabilizing external powers in Macedonia</li> <li>• Is open to deepen business ties with CR</li> </ul>                                                                                                                    |
| Future prospects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future lies in Russia &amp; China</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank</li> <li>• Global Center is moving from USA to China</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rising China</li> <li>• Only Russia and China can bring an end to American terror</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New global cold wars are coming (due to conflict in Ukraine and deterioration of USA-Russia relationship)</li> <li>• Clash of civilizations, spread of extremism, nationalism, international terrorism</li> <li>• Deepened Czech-Russian cooperation</li> </ul>                                                                      |
| Other            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We (Slovaks) do not live in peace and democracy</li> <li>• World is lying to us</li> <li>• Socio-economic situation in West is in the worst condition since 1945</li> <li>• West is morally empty and is about to collapse</li> <li>• NGOs are foreign agents</li> </ul>         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy does not work</li> <li>• Czech national culture is being destroyed</li> <li>• TTIP will lead to the legitimization of homosexual families, pedophilia and the destruction of churches and faith</li> <li>• Western system is bad</li> <li>• Basic right to have different opinion is now being violated</li> <li>• Czech support fascists - security situation in CR is deteriorating</li> <li>• Czech security services are serving private entities</li> <li>• Czech Republic has many internal enemies (in the name of democracy)</li> <li>• CR is participating in the genocide in Donbas</li> <li>• Citizens need to say NO to war with Russia</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Democracy has developed more sophisticated forms of manipulation (in contrast with authoritarian regimes)</li> <li>• Nazi-like repression ended the moment Soviet troops entered the Protectorate of Moravia and Bohemia</li> <li>• Economic pressure and color revolutions are used to advance Western interests</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Illegal immigration from North Africa is a problem – influx of terrorists into CR and Europe</li> <li>• Iran is the only country that is helping to fight IS</li> <li>• West supported IS in the beginning</li> <li>• Western politicians and human rights activists are biased (in connection with situation in Ukraine)</li> </ul> |

Table 1: Similarity of Arguments Used by Four Media

## COMMON CLAIMS AND ARGUMENTS USED BY MONITORED MEDIA OUTLETS

The table above demonstrates that the three media outlets and one discussion cited used very similar arguments on the eight selected categories. number of narratives appeared repeatedly in all four cases:

### THE UNITED STATES:

- Wants to dominate the world, and aims to control every nation;
- Is constantly initiating and sowing the seeds of conflict globally, and is behind all color revolutions;
- Is in decline, and its global hegemony is collapsing;
- All interventions (e.g. Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya) were a failure; the USA is therefore responsible for global terrorism.

### NATO AND THE EU:

- Are instigators of aggression;
- Are alien powers and are disadvantageous to the Czech and Slovak Republics;
- Are about to collapse.

### UKRAINE:

- Is not democratic, but ruled by fascists and Bandera's followers;
- Its government and president are US puppets.

### MEDIA AND POLITICIANS:

- Are manipulative and biased;
- Are controlled by business elites;
- Are using propaganda to manipulate public opinion.

### RUSSIA:

- Is not perfect, however, is less aggressive than the West;
- Is only responding to Western aggression.

### THE FUTURE:

- Will be full of conflicts;
- Lies in the alliance of China and Russia, which will bring an end to American terror.

In all four cases, the arguments and narratives employed by the authors were similar, if not identical. That said, pro-Russian platforms with no links to the Kremlin were more straightforward in delivering their anti-western messages, directly stating their opinions and accusations. Organization such as Czech Sputnik News, however, used a more informative and descriptive journalistic style, often citing experts or official sources. Making their messages appear more sensational and urgent, the pro-Russian platforms with no direct links to Russia were often utilizing conspiracy theories, and more frequently used provocative language and emotionally charged words and pictures.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

Common characteristics of the pro-Kremlin media and websites in CR and SR are as follows:

- They claim no allegiance to Kremlin;
- Are strongly anti-Western, most frequently targeting the United States, Ukraine and West in general;
- To lesser extent, are Pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin;
- Heavily use conspiracy theories, and combine facts and half-truths;
- Send and use very similar messaging and arguments;
- Have negative undertones, usually depicting moral, economic, political and social degradation and predicting a bleak future of collapse and civilization clashes;
- Frequently using loaded language and emotionally charged words, stories and pictures;
- Are interconnected and supported by various public personalities that give campaign both credibility and public visibility.

The majority of the common characteristics found in the four monitored media, apply to similar pro-Kremlin websites and social media that have emerged in CR and SR in recent months and years. The history of many predate 2014, as many were founded in 2013 or before, however, their rhetoric and activities were hardened and intensified by the crises in Ukraine. This suggest that pro-Kremlin media and websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia were many years in making, which correspondent with Gluško's claim that such types of media were introduced to Russia's information warfare around 2013 (Teraz 2014).

Yet, the new pro-Russian platforms are also characterised by a high level of opaqueness – their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures are, in most cases, unknown. To date, all efforts by investigative journalists or activists have only resulted in finding ominous links and facts, however, no direct proof of Russia's involvement. This

lack of transparency is one of their strongest assets, as any accusation of ulterior motives is depicted as an attempt to suppress 'alternative opinions' and any challenger is branded 'America's propaganda puppet.' Until they lose this opacity, thus losing their credibility, their messages will appear relevant for their followers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The most important role of new pro-Kremlin media, and especially their social media channels, is that they facilitate vivid platforms where similar criticism and discontent can be shared and, to Russia's benefit, spread and amplified. Their success is built on an already existing and growing public distrust towards Czech and Slovak mainstream media and politicians, plagued by corruption scandals, oligarchs, and public figures often blinded by their own arrogance. Until the crises of incredulity is addressed by the institutions themselves, such platforms of criticism and discontent will remain alluring.

Finally, the goal of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign is to shift public opinion against the West and its own institutions, the goal in line with Russia's "Divide and Conquer" strategy that the Kremlin pursues all around the Europe. Pro-Russian media and platforms are creating a fictitious world where the United States intends to overrun the globe, every politician is corrupt, all media not of their persuasion is biased and the future is bleak, hopeless and full of conflicts. In such world, Russia emerges as both the savior and moral authority, the guarantor of political stability and peace. If the campaign were to succeed, as Smatana warned, it could facilitate the installation of anti-Western politicians in power and undermine EU unity (Šnidl 2015).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Mapping the impact on public opinion

The pro-Russian disinformation campaigns are likely to intensify in the near future through new websites and projects. For example a children's magazine recently announced by pro-Kremlin and the conspiracy magazine Zem&Vek is being introduced shortly. To properly assess the effect, if any, of pro-Russian campaigns in both countries, it is necessary to study changes of sentiment, through conducting regular opinion polls, surveys and studies of sectors and democratic institutions that are most frequently targeted by such campaigns.

### Deconstruction and exposure of the pro-Russian campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia

This paper has offered an overview of frequently used pro-Russian media outlets and tactics as well as the similarity of arguments used by seemingly unrelated sources. To properly understand and publicly expose the system, more effort should be invested in researching various aspects of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In particular, the following areas should be addressed:

- How many "alternative media sources" exist in each country that support the pro-Russian disinformation campaign and are more scheduled to appear?
- What are their origins (e.g. registered addresses, web domains etc.)? There are numerous investigations by journalists, for example from magazines Respekt, Echo24 or Hlídací Pes that have already revealed and exposed the origins of some pro-Russian websites. Such efforts could be reinforced, supported and centralized, e.g. revelations could be shared on one platform.
- Who are the key personalities and organizations supporting the pro-Russian campaign in each country?
- Are there any possible ulterior motives that could discredit trustworthiness of these personalities, such as business interests or ties to security services? If yes, such motives or circumstances should be publicly exposed.

- What are the connections and cooperative venues among various sources? What are the favored tactics to amplify the effects of the campaign (e.g. reposting identical articles, referring to non-existent sources or events, social media activity, trolling)?
- Little is known about trolling in mainstream Czech and Slovak media. Are there an increased number of pro-Russian comments in online discussions? Are there similar comments and arguments used in such discussions? Are they originating from frequently appearing false names or non-existing entities?

### Education and public awareness

Smith's experiment (1974, 2) highlighted the importance of education and critical thinking in resisting propaganda. She studied two groups of elementary school pupils; the first group was taught basic propaganda techniques in a four-week course, while the second group did not take part in this course. Following the course, the test results showed that the first group, when exposed to propaganda, was more likely to recognize and differentiate between propaganda and fact.

In Slovakia, the first such initiative to expose propaganda techniques, a new textbook entitled "Trust, But Verify" (Dôveruj ale Preveruj), was recently published by a Slovak NGO Human Rights Institute (HRI 2015). The publication explains how to spot and resist media manipulation, propaganda and conspiracy theories. A similar teaching tool, aimed at increasing pupil's critical thinking toward media manipulation, could assist teachers in the Czech Republic as well.

In a similar manner, Pomerantzev and Weiss (2015, 7) suggested conducting a public information campaign that would show how disinformation works and teach the public to be aware and more skeptical of propaganda messaging. Many of the pro-Russian arguments and messages are often accompanied by loaded language and emotionally charged words, symbols and pictures,<sup>5</sup> which are basic propaganda techniques. Explaining these

<sup>5</sup> e.g. in the Juvenile Justice campaign, where pictures of suffering children frequently appeared.

techniques, their purpose, and their effects could be part of a public education campaign.

In addition, proper methods and channels should be developed to deliver such information to the wider public, using, for example, new media techniques and easily understandable language. Roundtables, articles and high-quality publications will spark discussion among intellectuals, but may not reach the desired, most vulnerable audiences.

### **Rebutting and explaining frequently used arguments**

“The West also uses propaganda,” “The World is collapsing” or “You cannot trust the media, it’s all corrupt and biased,” were among the most commonly used arguments by pro-Russian media. Such claims should be rebutted and explained to the public. In addition, warnings of upcoming global collapse and a deteriorating situation make the overall picture of the world, created by Czech and Slovak pro-Kremlin media platforms, look bleak and hopeless. Therefore, perhaps a campaign highlighting positive trends and achievements would properly address this destructive narrative.

### **Giving Information Security the status of an academic science**

Darczewska remarked that the subject of information warfare has been given the status of an academic science in Russia (Darczewska 2014, 9). Information security, network wars, strategic communication and related disciplines are now included in the curriculum of all education facilities under Russian ministries, such as the Federal Security Service (FSB) Academy or the Academy of the Russian Internal Affairs Ministry. Diplomats and information experts are also trained at the Moscow State Institute of International Affairs (MGIMO) or the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. In addition, major research institutes and think tanks now have centers or research groups that study various aspects of information security.

Similarly, Czech and Slovak institutions of higher education, think tanks and government facilities should develop an understanding and the analytical capabilities and funding to thoroughly research the methods by which disinformation, the abuse of the internet and propaganda assault can be used to advance foreign policy aims.



## APPENDIX 1: FOUR MONITORED PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA.

### Zem & Vek Discussion

The Zem & Vek Discussion was part of the “Zem & Vek Tour – Talk Shows with Readers,” a series of events regularly organized by the Slovak conspiracy magazine Zem & Vek. Since March 2014, the magazine has organized thirteen such events, all held in smaller Slovak cities. Aside from the Zem & Vek Tour, the magazine organizes “The World Behind the Curtain” series of events, where invited speakers discuss selected topics in the Slovak capital of Bratislava. Since September 2013, 18 such events were held, the most recently invited host being the former Slovak Prime Minister Jan Čarnogurský. In addition, the Prometheus award is annually given by the magazine to public personalities for their “great devotion towards the welfare of all.” Occasional debates, lectures and book signings by Tibor Eliot Rostas, the magazine’s founder, are also held.

The Slovak periodical Zem & Vek (translated as Earth and Ages) was founded in May 2013. The 138-page print magazine has since published and distributed approximately 20,000 to 30,000 copies monthly. According to the Zem & Vek official website, over 7,200 people have subscribed to the magazine. In addition, the magazine runs the website “www.zemavek.sk” (with an average reader count of 2,000–7,000 people per article) where all previous issues are free to download. The magazine also runs various social networking profiles, on Facebook (with over 21,000 followers), Twitter and Google+, as well as a YouTube channel (Zem & Vek 2015).

The periodical is known as a conspiracy magazine and is now considered to be part of the pro-Russian propaganda in Slovakia, mainly for their frequent assaults on the West and defence of Russia. Since its website appeared on the list of pro-Russian websites, published by the Slovak activist Juraj Smatana in February 2015, there has been much discussion about the magazine, especially in connection with multiple Zem & Vek event cancellations by libraries and universities in Slovakia. The magazine also sparked controversy when popular Slovak presenter Adela Banášová publicly supported the magazine and appeared on the February 2015 edition’s back cover, provoking numerous critical responses. According to Rostas’s statements during the public discussion in Žilina, the magazine aims to expand in the future and plans to establish a new magazine for children in September 2015.

The event in Žilina was in the format of a three-hour lecture by three speakers: Tibor Eliot Rostas,

founder of Zem & Vek, Ľubomír Huďo, editor-in-chief of the foreign section of Zem & Vek, and Marián Benka, the foreign section’s editor, and was followed by a short Q&A session as well as Rostas’s autograph signing. In addition, a small vender with Rostas’s books and brand items (logoed T-shirts and caps) were available at the event. Approximately 60 participants attended the public discussion.

### Aeronet

Aeronet is Czech-language website that was originally founded by aviation enthusiasts in 2001. Owners of the domain have since changed several times and the website underwent its last transformation in May 2014, when the first pro-Kremlin articles began to appear on it. Aeronet contains many anti-US, anti-NATO and pro-Russian articles and is now considered to be one of the leading online voices of pro-Putin propaganda in the Czech Republic. With few exceptions,<sup>6</sup> most of Aeronet’s authors publish articles anonymously or use pseudonyms.

According to its website, the domain is owned by American European News, B.V., a company based in Dutch city of Eindhoven (Aeronet 2015). In February 2015, the Czech magazine Respekt (Kundra 2015) conducted an investigation and found no such company or its representatives at the address provided in Eindhoven.

### Magazine Vědomí

Magazine Vědomí is a new Czech journal distributed in both the Czech and Slovak Republics, and has been published by the company AC24 s.r.o since February 2014. AC24 s.r.o. has also operated a popular news website of the same name (AC24.cz) since 2011. According to their website, AC24 was established to provide an alternative to the “Czech media scene which is yielding to the propaganda of power circles, mental laziness and a simplified depiction of the world... a world that is going through a revolution at all levels” (AC24 2015). The website produces around 5 articles a day and runs active platforms on Facebook (over 67,000 likes), Twitter, Google+ and YouTube. Aside from work with AC24, the 26-year old founder Ondřej Geršl writes articles for other pro-Russian websites, appearing for example on the platform

<sup>6</sup> For example: contributions made by Petr Cvalik, a member of the Communist Party of Moravia and Bohemia

Freeglobe, and occasionally gives interviews and participates in discussions.

However, according to Geršl's statement from April 2014, only 4 people were participating in the administration of the website, himself and 3 external workers (Rostecký 2014). The magazine Vědomí is available only in print, its website is soon to be released and its Facebook page has over 4,200 likes.

### **Czech Sputnik News**

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Czech Sputnik News is an international media platform launched by the Russian Government in November 2014, which has now expanded to 34 countries and is available in 30 languages. The Czech branch was registered on November 17, 2014 and the first Czech-language articles were published in March 2015. It produces around 12 articles a day, written by both open and anonymous authors. In addition, it has profiles on Facebook (12,000 likes) and Twitter (SputnikNews 2015).



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