KREMLIN WATCHERS

POLICY BRIEF WITHIN KREMLIN WATCHERS PROJECT

WARSAW INSTITUTE   INFOSECURITY.SK

AUGUST 2023

KREMLIN WATCHERS MOVEMENT

Kremlin Watchers Movement is a project which has been running for 3 years now within the effort to fight Russian malign influence and disinformation in Europe. Gathered authors, junior analysts are producing content about Russian malign influence and disinformation on social media, informing not only expert society but also the wider population about the latest events in this field.

Slovak authors: Katarína Drevená, Peter Dubóczi, Štefan Ižák
Czech authors: Adam Kratschmer, Natálie Vaidišová
Polish authors: Filip Bryjka, Mikolaj Rogalewicz, Liliana Śmiech

INTRODUCTION

Russia continues to fight for the hearts and minds of Westerners. At the very least, it is trying to create information chaos that undermines social cohesion and influences public opinion on Russian geopolitics. Naturally, the key subject is the war in Ukraine, which affects Czechia, Slovakia and Poland deeply. Among other things, the narratives mapped in this policy brief aim to undermine reliable partnerships and support for Ukraine from these countries. Therefore, it is important to know the patterns used by Kremlin propaganda in order to build resilience and common awareness of this malign behaviour. Sharing good but also bad practices is crucial – the policy brief therefore includes a mapping of this field in terms of the legal fight against disinformation, the role of civil society, and media literacy and strategic communication. The authors also offer a list of recommendations focusing on these areas at the end of the policy brief.

KREMLIN WATCHERS

KEY FINDINGS

- Many of Russia's propaganda narratives attack refugees fleeing war. They are presented as criminals or ingrates, and in all the information spaces under observation, they have been presented as a threat to the economic well-being of the domestic population. Objectification is experienced by both genders – men are presented as criminals, women sometimes as victims of sexual violence, or accused of wanting to "steal" European men. Cultural and linguistic differences are often manipulatively pointed out.

- All of the countries surveyed have been heavily dependent on Russian energy in the past. The strategic vulnerability and situation were exploited by similar narratives in all states to build fear and insecurity in the population about the energy crisis following a full-scale Russian invasion. Similarly, in efforts to build societal fatigue from the conflict, the rhetoric also touched on the issue of sanctions, which were said to be more damaging to European states than to Russia.

- A key effort of Russian propaganda in all states has been to discredit and demonise Ukraine or Ukrainian political elites and the ordinary population. The mainstay has been the narrative of so-called Ukrainian „fascism", in which Russia is presented as an eternal anti-Nazi fighter. However, the glorification of Russia also took place outside the remnants of Soviet propaganda, focusing on praising Russia's military "achievements" and, conversely, blaming the West (e.g. the alleged presence of biological laboratories in Ukraine).

- The accusations against the West have mainly consisted of false claims that it is rejecting peace negotiations and deliberately prolonging the war (e.g. for political or economic interests). There were also narratives about the possible dragging of partners supporting Ukraine into the war. This rhetoric has also been applied against various national politicians who, in their support of Ukraine, are allegedly oblivious to the needs of the ordinary population or are turned into agents of Western interests.

- The Czech Republic is experiencing a significant increase in disinformation narratives, particularly targeting Ukrainian immigrants, which is fostering societal division and xenophobia.

- To safeguard its energy security, the Czech Republic is advised to diversify its energy sources and reduce reliance on Russian fuel in light of public concerns about potential sudden cut-offs of resources from Russia.

- The government is encouraged to initiate public campaigns to debunk myths surrounding Ukrainian immigrants and to promote their positive contributions as war refugees, aiding their integration into Czech society.

- Enhancing media literacy through education and public campaigns is a key strategy, along with advocating for responsible journalism that promotes accurate and nuanced conflict coverage.

- The Czech Republic is facing a complex challenge of balancing its national interests with broader Western interests amidst the ongoing Ukraine crisis, with public sentiment leaning towards strong alliances

but also showing concern over economic implications, such as sanctions against Russia.

- In order to limit the harmful impact of Russian disinformation and propaganda activities, the Polish authorities are taking institutional and legal measures that increase the state's situational awareness and make it more difficult for disinformers to operate freely. Legislative work on a

law criminalising disinformation for the benefit of foreign intelligence is intended to enable Poland to hold so-called agents of influence criminally liable.

- To increase the social resilience of Poles to disinformation, the authorities are conducting information campaigns and cooperating with initiatives from the non-governmental sector (NGOs).

MAJOR DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA NARRATIVES

This chapter presents the most dominant narratives of disinformation ecosystems and Russian propaganda in each country. The individual cases and sub-narratives are organized into five categories of so-called metanarratives that have spread in some form across the Central European region. Whether the narratives operate at the foreign or domestic level, the similarities in rhetoric and dissemination point to the presence of a certain systematic framework in the dissemination of Russian propaganda, which is mainly adopted by local actors – dubious websites, alternative media and in some cases, politicians.

WARSAW INSTITUTE   INFOSECURITY.SK   ObserwatorzyKremla

GENDER AND IMMIGRANTS

SLOVAKIA

The attack on Ukraine was immediately followed by the refugee flow, especially to the neighbouring countries, including Slovakia. According to the opinion polls, while the Visegrád Group member states generally support Ukrainian refugees, in Slovakia, people no longer express such positive attitudes despite the initial wave of solidarity and understanding. This is the result of a worsening economic situation and a long-lasting pro-Russian disinformation campaign, with one of the topics being the refugees and the alleged threat they represent.

Among the main aims of the disinformation narratives about refugees, the vast majority of whom are women and children, is to spread fear, strengthen uncertainty, create polarization and weaken the support to Ukraine. At first, the disinformation actors started to spread fabricated assumptions that since Slovakia relaxed its border regime, nobody is inquiring who is entering the country, which is allegedly taken advantage of by the refugees from, e.g. African and Arab countries. The Police Force refuted these claims by regularly publishing the number of persons and their nationalities who crossed the Slovak-Ukrainian borders.

The disinformation actors then switched their attention directly to Ukrainians as an alleged threat to Slovak national security. They suggested that people fleeing from Ukraine are active in organised crime. "Among the refugees, however, there are also many of the greatest criminals, prisoners and murderers, who Zelensky has released on amnesty to go and fight," argued Inenoviny.sk, the Slovak disinformation page on Facebook. Furthermore, other disinformation actors claimed that since the police are not checking the luggage of Ukrainian refugees, it is "an ideal opportunity for various criminal groups to smuggle in more than just

money, gold, drugs and God knows what else". This was further elaborated with the baseless arguments that Ukrainians would soon start shipping weapons and buying up land on a large scale in Slovakia. To achieve their goals, the Ukrainians were accused of soon using tactics such as blackmailing and kidnapping without any scruples, which is allegedly typical to them. "They are literally cutthroats," argues the disinformation Facebook page with thousands of interactions.

Finally, among the most widespread manipulative narratives was portraying Ukrainian refugees as a threat to the economic well-being of Slovaks. They were depicted as "the speculators"

and "economic migrants" or often argued that people are fleeing "from the areas where there is no fighting at all". The disinformation actors described Ukrainian refugees as wealthy people in expensive cars and branded clothes and shoes who allegedly do not need help. They also tried to depict them as ungrateful and eyeless people using the Slovak system for their own enrichment. An inherent part of the tactics of the disinformation actors to undermine support for Ukraine and its people was to emphasize that the Slovak government is helping these Ukrainian refugees, and at the same time, it does not care about Slovak citizens.

CZECHIA

If we are referring to the Czech Republic, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the role of information warfare, disinformation, and propaganda has grown exponentially. As the war in Ukraine has escalated, so too has the spread of disinformation narratives, particularly in countries like the Czech Republic. Uniquely, these narratives often intersect with themes of gender and immigration, generating a specific and potent strand of disinformation. Understanding this intersection is crucial to countering false narratives and promoting balanced perspectives.

This narrative is often propagated by pro-Russian actors intending to fuel societal division and undermine social harmony. The narrative commonly portrays Ukrainian men as violent, threatening, and potential risks to Czech society, while Ukrainian women are objectified and sexualized. Simultaneously, the narrative around immigrants — specifically, Ukrainian immigrants — is one of fear and suspicion. Ukrainians in the Czech Republic are often portrayed as either economic migrants seeking to exploit the Czech welfare system or as dangerous, potential

criminals intending to disrupt Czech society. This narrative plays into broader anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia prevalent in parts of the Czech Republic and other European countries.

The conflict in Ukraine provides a fertile ground for these disinformation narratives. The depiction of Ukrainian men as aggressive and violent has been linked to their participation in the conflict, despite the fact that many have been forcibly conscripted. The narrative reduces Ukrainian men to one-dimensional figures of aggression, ignoring their victimhood and the suffering they endure due to the war.

Similarly, Ukrainian women are often depicted as victims or sexual objects within the context of the war. For many, it is difficult to find work, affordable housing or a school for their children in the Czech Republic. They also complain about the lack of recognition of their education or the language barrier due to the lack of Czech language courses. This narrative both objectifies Ukrainian women and minimizes their significant contributions to the Ukrainian resistance and survival amidst the conflict.

Two recent surveys shed light on the Czech public's shifting attitudes toward the conflict in Ukraine and its impact on immigration. A study by the Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění (CVVM) found a decreasing interest among the Czech public in the Ukraine conflict, with support for the government's aid measures to Ukraine also dwindling. The survey reveals that 57% of the public is currently interested in the Ukraine situation, a 21-percentage point decrease since the spring of the same year. Agreement with the government's support measures for Ukraine has dropped to 42%, while disagreement has risen to 52%, marking a 16-percentage point decrease in support and a 17-percentage point increase in dissent since spring. Attitudes towards accepting Ukrainian refugees have also shifted, with a 14-percentage point increase in opposition (now at 27%) and only 44% expressing interest in the refugees' plight, a 22-percentage point decrease since spring.

Contrastingly, a survey by the STEM agency found that more than half (54%) of Czechs still support Ukrainian refugees, a slight increase in recent months. Although support remains robust, apprehension about potential negative impacts on the economy and public services is prevalent. Also, less than 60% of people disagree with supplying weapons to Ukraine. Hence, while the overall empathy for Ukraine remains intact, there are emerging concerns about the potential implications, signaling a need for nuanced policy measures that address the multifaceted nature of the conflict's impact. As the Czech Republic grapples with these shifts in public sentiment, it's vital for policymakers to strike a balance between humanitarian support for Ukrainian refugees and addressing domestic concerns.

The disinformation narratives surrounding gender and immigrants have significant consequences for Czech society. They contribute to the marginalization and stigmatization of Ukrainian immigrants, undermining social cohesion and fueling xenophobia. This can create divisions within communities and can hinder the integration of Ukrainians into Czech society.

Moreover, these narratives can influence policy decisions. If policymakers are swayed by disinformation, they may implement policies that reflect these false narratives, such as restrictive immigration policies or discriminatory practices.

POLAND

Russia conducts regular disinformation activities targeting women. Kremlin politicians and the media attack female journalists, activists, politicians and other women involved in public discourse in order to reinforce sexist and misogynist narratives aimed at undermining women's credibility and participation in public life and the political process. Often, the victims of Russian disinformation are women holding senior positions in the EU or EU Member States. Such actions are exemplified by comments on Telegram by Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, who stated that the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen does not understand economics and is used to looking at purely medical subjects. He called her an „auntie" and a „gynaecologist who pretends to be the head of the EU", adding that „there is no cure for stupidity and incompetence". He also referred to the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia, saying that von der Leyen is happy to calculate Russia's losses due to the new wave of sanctions, but does not count EU's companies' losses.

The above example of Medvedev's statement

is sexist and refers to the EC Chairwoman's medical education and the fact that she previously worked as a gynaecologist. In addition, the former Russian president insults her by calling her „stupid and incompetent", which fits in with Russian disinformation narratives that women are less intelligent and less qualified to participate in public life than men. In his post, Medvedev additionally manipulates von der Leyen's words, as she did not actually say that Russia's negotiations with Ukraine should not be conducted on an equal footing. She said that peace negotiations cannot be conducted without Kyiv's participation: „Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine". Disinformation against women has been used by Russia for years, and there are many examples of similar statements. The head of the European Commission is very often the victim of sexist and untrue statements, but Russia has also conducted disinformation activities against Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, among others. It is worth noting that Russian disinformation regarding women is not a new phenomenon, and even before that, large-scale disinformation campaigns were conducted by Russia against, for instance, Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro, who identified and reported on pro-Kremlin trolls long before they became common knowledge. Russian propagandists revealed her medical history and home address, as well as a video mocking her as a ‚Bond girl'. They also claimed, unsubstantiated, that she was a prostitute and a drug dealer. Svitlana Zalishchuk, a young Ukrainian parliamentarian whose face was superimposed on pornographic images, was also a victim of Russian disinformation.

At the same time, since the beginning of the war, Russian propaganda centres have been spreading false information regarding Ukrainian refugees and children. Russian disinformation appearing in Poland is aimed at discrediting Ukrainians and creating resentment between the Polish and Ukrainian people. Russia thus seeks to undermine Poland's assistance to Ukraine. Various narratives are used to this end. Since the beginning of the war, Ukrainian refugees have been portrayed as aggressive and dangerous to Polish society. A clear example of this type of disinformation was the reports that the murder in Nowy Swiat in Warsaw was carried out by Ukrainians. The murder was, in fact, carried out by Poles and was shocking enough to be covered by media all over Poland. The situation was exploited by Russian propagandists, who spread false information about it on social media. In addition, frequent examples of disinformation targeting refugees were spread by social media posts showing footage of violence and aggression and captioned that they were carried out by Ukrainians. In reality, much of this footage did not depict Ukrainians. Russian propaganda centres additionally spread the narrative that Ukrainians get everything for free in Poland while Poles have to work for it. The aim of this message was to stir up resentment among Poles towards Ukrainians.

Since the beginning of the war, Russian disinformation in Poland has also targeted children. Russians attempt to whitewash their actions in eastern Ukraine, including the deportation of children, while simultaneously accusing the West of kidnapping Ukrainian children and separating them from their mothers. It is worth emphasizing in this context that Russian forces have been committing crimes against the civilian population, including children, since the beginning of the war. According to Ukrainian government data, over 460 children have been killed, and more than 900 have been injured as a result of the war. Additionally, since the start of the Russian aggression, over 16,000 children have been deported to Russia. Russian sources promote illegal adoptions of unlawfully removed Ukrainian children by disseminating videos dedicated to adoptions.

SANCTIONS AND ENERGY CRISIS
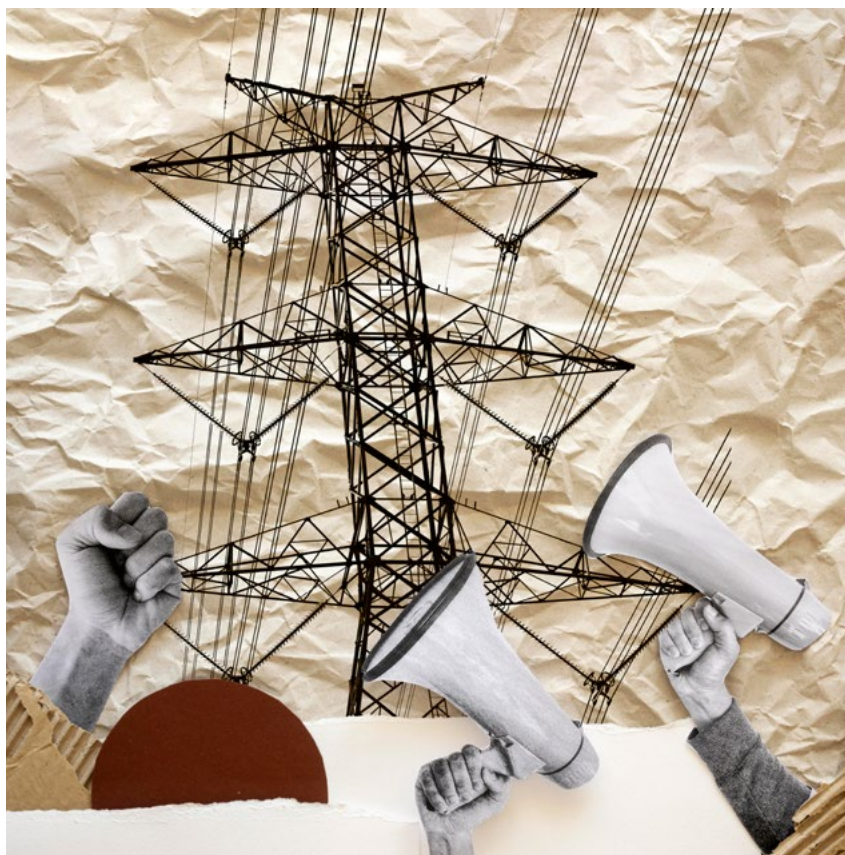
SLOVAKIA

The energy crisis has been among Slovakia's most prevalent disinformation topics since the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine. The malign actors claimed that if people do not want their country to collapse economically and people do not want to be starving and freezing, the sanctions against Russia must be lifted. During the last months, the disinformation actors oversimplified the debate and stirred strong emotions by strengthening fear and creating panic. Their main aim is to underline the joint actions of the European Union, weaken the support to Ukraine, and question the intentions of Slovak partners and allies.

The pro-Kremlin actors tried convincing their followers that Slovakia could not get gas elsewhere than Russia. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, they often falsely emphasi- zed that the sanctions negatively affect Slovak citizens. According to them, "the whole social system is collapsing" in our country, and we are heading towards "poverty, rising prices, inflation, and economic recession". They argued that behind all these hardships are the sanctions. The economic measures against Russia were portrayed as "self-defeating", and malicious actors stressed that they were "liquidating Slovak families and companies". They frequently depicted catastrophic scenarios, such as "the economy will collapse and people in Europe, especially Slovakia, will literally be struggling to survive".

Furthermore, the disinformation actors tried to convince their audience that sanctions against Russia are failing. They argued that economic measures against Moscow only make it stronger

while European countries are weakening. The fact that sanctions were expected to have long-term rather than short-term effects and that, according to experts, they can already be seen in the Russian economy is overlooked by these malicious actors. In addition, another frequently used disinformation narrative was that sanctions were dictated to the EU by the USA, who are profiting from them. The EU leaders allegedly sacrifice their citizens because they blindly obey the United States to please them.

They argued that the sanctions are the main reason for the high prices of energy and other commodities. This rhetoric is highly manipulative. It omits the basis for the imposition of sanctions and the fact that the Kremlin was withholding energy supplies to Europe even before the invasion, which caused high prices. Furthermore, it is essential to note that Moscow often uses natural resources as a political tool to blackmail other states. Therefore, it is impro-

bable that the lifting of sanctions would have a significant effect on energy prices.

Finally, it is important to recall that sanctions would not have been imposed on Russia if it had not decided to aggressively attack Ukraine. Moscow is waging an illegal and unprovoked war that has already cost tens of thousands of innocent lives. In addition, the Kremlin is attacking critical infrastructure and civilian, cultural and religious sites. One example is the disaster at the Kakhovka dam, which is most likely the Kremlin's fault, as it has occupied the place. In early June, the dam collapsed, leading to a humanitarian and ecological disaster after 18 billion cubic metres of water spilt out. Moscow immediately blamed Kyiv for the incident, which Slovak disinformation actors directly or indirectly joined. The latter claimed that it „doesn't even look like a Russian attack by mistake" and was a false flag operation, for which they provided no evidence.

CZECHIA

Energy security represents a notably delicate subject within Czech-Russian interactions, as the Czech Republic still holds a certain degree of reliance on Russia. Moreover, still in 2017, the Russian nuclear power entity, Rosatom, holds an exclusive role as the supplier of fuel for the Temelin nuclear facility. Therefore, the public's concerns about a sudden cut-off of resources from Russia are understandable. Last September, crowds took to the streets to protest against rising fuel and energy prices. Some even called for an end to aid to Ukraine and called for talks with Russia. From the very beginning of the war, Russia has been playing a game to divide Ukraine from the Western world. It is keen to introduce the narrative that it is the Western countries that are suffering more from sanctions than Russia itself.

Hence, Russia strategically employs a tactic that involves the extension of conflicts, aiming

to induce a state of weariness among Western nations in relation to persistent turmoil and warfare. This calculated approach hinges on the notion that prolonged conflicts can gradually erode the resolve of Western countries, prompting them to consider relinquishing their positions due to the exhaustion that comes with protracted periods of confrontation. By capitalizing on the psychological and emotional toll that continuous conflicts exert on nations, Russia endeavors to create a scenario in which Western countries might eventually opt for disengagement simply to escape the seemingly unending cycle of strife. This strategy capitalizes on the assumption that a state of fatigue and exasperation could lead to a reevaluation of priorities, potentially resulting in a willingness to compromise or concede, thereby advancing Russia's own strategic objectives.

POLAND

The conflict initiated by Russia against Ukraine has led to a multifaceted battle of information by supporters of the Moscow government. Among the focal points of this information, warfare has been the energy industry. Securing the energy supply stands as a crucial component of a nation's overall security framework. The dissemination of false information regarding energy and security represents an outcome of Russia's assault on Ukraine. Primarily orchestrated by Russia, the dissemination of misleading information has been aimed at the Polish populace. The objective is to instill apprehension and unease within society, thereby undermining the sense of security in Poland and other European nations. In its campaign of information warfare, Russia additionally enlists individuals who hold reco-

gnition and esteem among specific segments of society. One such actor turned out to be Greenpeace, which published an analysis proving that Poland will definitely run out of gas in the winter of 2022. This type of analysis, which has no reality in the facts, was only meant to introduce ferment among readers. Also, since the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, information began to appear on Polish social media that petrol stations would soon run out of fuel. Of course, this was one of the subsequent information attacks. Large Polish companies (PKN Orlen, PERN, Lotos) responded to the attacks with an information campaign assuring that there would be no fuel shortage supported by real data and facts.

DISCREDITING UKRAINE AND THE WEST VS. GLORIFYING RUSSIA

SLOVAKIA

Pro-Kremlin actors were trying to discredit Ukraine through various arguments. One of the most widespread was that Ukraine is ruled by fascists who discriminate and even commit genocide against the Russian-speaking population of eastern Ukraine. Slovak internet radio Slobodný vysielač shared the opinion of Smer – SSD deputy Ľuboš Blaha about Ukrainian „fascism" and corruption. Blaha claimed, „Fascism is rampant in Ukraine. Just like in World War II. Even today, Bandera is celebrated, and minorities are oppressed there. Zelensky's regime is totally corrupted, they can't even hide it anymore."

Especially in the first months of the full-scale invasion, pro-Kremlin actors were disseminating manipulative narratives without any proof about dangerous biolabs sponsored by the US. Deputy Tomáš Taraba (Život – NS) referred to former US congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard. She published a video with claims that the US is funding 25 to 30 biolaboratories with dangerous pathogens in Ukraine. Their escape should mean a threat to humanity.

At the same time, in the information space, there were efforts to portray the West as a collective of states that purposely and artificially prolong the war in Ukraine for financial gains. Pro-Kremlin actors in Slovakia have long tried to convince their audience that Western states benefit from the conflict and therefore reject peace negotiations. The West allegedly „exploits (Ukraine) for its own geopolitical ends". At the same time, some actors are spreading claims that third parties are benefiting from the war in Ukraine. Robert Fico, the chairman of one of the strongest political parties, SMER – SSD, has claimed that „Western arms companies" are behind the reluctance to stop the war in Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is said to please NATO and the US because „Slavs will continue to die in a fratricidal war, and the profits of Western (mainly American) arms companies will continue to grow". According to the disinformation actors, the conflict benefits not only Western states but also the „European and American arms industry" and individual „sell-out politicians".

On the one hand, we could observe attempts to discredit Ukraine and the West, and on the other hand, glorification of Russia. A great example of glorification is offered by the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Bratislava, which is extremely active in Slovakia.. The Embassy published a video from occupied Mariupol while citing people who thanked Russian President Putin for visiting and building the „new houses". In another post, the Embassy claimed that these flats were built after the liberation of Mariupol. The Embassy tried to portray Putin as a liberator who is rescuing people while completely ignoring the fact that most of the Russian-occupied city was destroyed due to shelling by Russian military forces. Part of the glorification of Russia is also creating the image of Vladimir Putin as a strong and influential world leader. The visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping was used as proof that Russia and China are establishing new world hegemony instead of the US.

CZECHIA

Since the very beginning of the Russian war in Ukraine, the Czech disinformation scene increased the amount of narratives demonizing Ukraine and relativizing Russian culpability in the war. The common way of such activity, which has been present in pro-Kremlin narrative since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, is a discreditation of Ukraine through false accusation

from "nacism, fascism" and similar terminology borrowed from World War 2. Ukraine is then being put into an opposite to Russia, which is portrayed as a "strong, united state" and Putin as a "strong leader".

Pro-kremlin websites in the Czech environment have been presenting the full-scale invasion as a "necessary reaction" to an alleged genocide of a Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine or as a "proxy-war" between NATO and the West. Disinformation activists and websites (První zprávy, CZ24 News, Pravdive.eu) have been seeking to relativize the severity of the conflict by labeling the Ukrainian army as "amateur", "full of Nazis" and claim that they act under the supervision of "American secret services".

The accusations of "nazism" are never further explained, and both terms "nazi" or "fascist" are used interchangeably. Through manipulative or false claims, the disinformators are looking for a "justification" or a "prove" of these accusations. For example, in April 2023, a false video was disseminated among Czech pro-kremlin groups, allegedly proving "nazism" in Ukraine. In February, the pro-Kremlin narrative was also reflected in mainstream media, when iDnes

suggested a correlation between the Ukrainian army and a former Nazi unit, "Edelweiss". Meanwhile, Ukraine is portrayed by the pro-Kremlin scene as the culprit, Russia is being glorified, using the same narrative that Putin presents in his speeches. In April 2023, he stated that Russian troops are doing a "brave, smart and effective" job in Ukraine. Such statements are consequently being reproduced by the pro-kremlin web pages in the Czech Republic. Russia is described as the "brave one", meanwhile, the Ukrainian army is allegedly "out of breath", demotivated or weak. A notable source of inspiration for the Czech disinformation scene is also the patriotic turn promoted by Putin, which leads to him being glorified as a "strong leader" and fallen Russian soldiers as "heroes who fell for the Motherland". This blind adoration of Putin is noticeable among some of the participants at demonstrations organized by Jindřich Rajchl and his PRO party. For example, at the March demonstration "Czechia against poverty", one of the participants shouted "Putin will show you!" or "Putin is the only statesman having it together, and he would make order in this country (...)!"

POLAND

The demonization of Ukraine has been a consistent element of Russian disinformation, repeated for many years. After Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022, disinformation on this topic in Poland intensified, and more and more false information about Ukraine started to emerge, portraying it as a Nazi state in Russian narratives. At the same time, narratives that whitewash and justify Russian actions are regularly disseminated. One frequently repeated narrative is that on February 24, 2022, Russia initiated a special military operation to protect the population of Donbas, which had been persecuted and murdered for the past 8 years by the regime in Kyiv. According to Russia, Ukraine

is shelling the civilian population of Donbas, the parts of Zaporizhia controlled by Russia, and the Kherson region, as well as carrying out terrorist bomb attacks on civilians all the way to Moscow and St. Petersburg. In Russian narratives, the attacks are initiated by the CIA and MI6, as well as by Islamic fighters who are released from Western prisons if they agree to coordinate such acts of terror. Russian propagandists also accuse Ukraine of using biological weapons, claiming that a group of Russian fighters was exposed to poisonous substances in the Zaporizhia region, and the Institute of Military Medical Research and Testing in St. Petersburg determined that the wounded had been exposed to the

action of the nerve agent, botulinum toxin type B. Allegedly, the biological weapons are being handed over to Ukrainians by the USA. Narratives about American biological laboratories in Ukraine are also widely disseminated. In addition to demonizing Ukraine, Russian propagandists often portray Russia as the victim and shift the blame for the war onto the West. Various narratives are used to support this claim, such as the assertion that the West, together with Ukraine, planned to attack Russia and that Russian actions were necessary. NATO's actions are often portrayed as aggressive towards Russia. This was the case with the inclusion of Finland in NATO, for example. Furthermore, Russia frequently accuses the West of interfering in its internal affairs.

Accusing Ukraine of fascism is one of the most common Russian disinformation narratives, relentlessly repeated since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. After the full-scale aggression in 2022, Russia intensified the dissemination of such narratives. Russia aims to discredit Ukraine and justify its actions. Narratives about fascism in Ukraine are often combined with accusations that Ukraine has committed crimes in Donbas and has been bombing peace-loving people, schools, hospitals, and civilian objects. Narratives about fascism in Ukraine also refer to World War II and the Third Reich. On Victory Day, Russian propaganda outlets reported that 78 years after Russia's victory over the Third Reich, the Nazis are returning stronger than ever, and their ideology has revived in Ukraine, now resurfacing with a different face but the same intentions: to destroy Russia at any cost. Not only Ukraine but also Western countries are accused of fascism, as exemplified by the statement of the Russian Foreign Minister, Lavrov, who claimed that NATO's eastward expansion has the same goal as Hitler's policy.

FALSE CALLS FOR PEACE AND NARRATIVES ABOUT SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

WARSAW INSTITUTE · INFOSECURITY.SK · ObserwatorzyKremla

SLOVAKIA

Slovak military aid to Ukraine is the object of massive critique from pro-Kremlin actors. They claim that Slovakia is becoming part of the war, a possible target of Russian revenge and it is prolonging the war. They ignore the fact that military aid is helping Ukrainians to defend their land and people against the Russian army, and it is keeping Russians far from Slovak borders.

A highly discussed topic in the Slovak public discourse was handing over 13 fighter jets MiG-29 to Ukraine in March 2023. Blaha claimed, „Slovakia is threatened with direct entry into the war, mobilization, declaration of martial law and cancellation of elections… When to take to the streets, if not now… Slovakia is heading for the biggest disaster since World War II."

Blaha uses a very dangerous strategy. Without evidence, he talks about cancelling elections, which are a key element of any democracy, and spreads fear among people about the declaration of mobilization and martial law. He tries to mobilize voters possible by appealing to emotions, which can be easily manipulated.

Deputy Milan Uhrík (Republika) declared that the donation of these fighters would mean the „definitive disarmament of the Slovak armed forces". In the video, he also threatened that handing over the MiGs would „draw Slovakia into the war". The problem with this argumentation is that Slovakia stopped using the jets in September 2022, so the donation cannot mean the disarmament of Slovakia.

Slovak pro-Kremlin actors have reacted in a similar way to any military aid to Ukraine from the West. When Germany, for example, decided to donate tanks to Ukraine, disinformation actors began to exploit historical distortions and create parallels with the Second World War. At the same time, they claimed that "those few tanks will do nothing but make the whole conflict bigger internationally", thereby creating fear of military aid to the invaded state. Another and most recent example is the criticism of the US for its decision to supply Kyiv with controversial cluster munitions. Disinformation actors have tried to convince that these supplies prove that „the US has never cared about people's lives". They stress that cluster munitions are dangerous for civilians and label them banned. However, they fail to mention that the US, Russia and Ukraine have not signed the Convention on Cluster Munitions, which prohibits using or stockpiling these weapons. At the same time, they like to forget to add that Russia is using not only cluster bombs in Ukraine but also even more lethal weapons and is purposefully endangering the lives of the Ukrainian civilian population.

Another way of rejecting the military aid to Ukraine and expressing support for Russia was the organization of so-called „peace protests", which, in fact, were just festivals of pro-Kremlin propagandist cliches about the Ukrainian fascists, alleged Western aggression against Russia and right of Russia to invade Ukraine. Pro-Kremlin Facebook pages openly supported the protests. An example is Armáda Ruskej Federácie, which shared a video from the Bratislava march with the comment that „Slovaks still have sense". However, some politicians also expressed their support by participating in the marches. Erik Kaliňák, a member of the Smer – SSD, published a video from one of the protests and addressed the call for peace not to Putin but to Slovak President Zuzana Čaputová, then Prime Minister Eduard Heger and Minister of Defence Jaroslav Naď.

CZECHIA

The prevailing disinformation narrative in the Czech environment seeks to blame the US and NATO for both starting the war and the continuation of the conflict. Recently, Czech disinformation scene (led by the head of PRO Party, Jindřich Rajch) came up with a new strategy, presenting itself as a promoter of a "peaceful reconciliation to the conflict".

This approach is rooted in a January initiative called Peace and Justice, published by Matěj Stropnický, former chair of the Green Party and later advisor to Czech Labor and Social Affairs Minister Jana Maláčová (ČSSD). The text of the appeal contains 10 points of the initiative's premises and 5 actual demands, however, there are a number of manipulative and false statements or repetitive Russian propaganda narratives. The text of the petition relativizes Russia's culpability and suggests that Russia may have had a reason for its aggression, repeats the argument of the "Western arms lobby", and seeks to outline a "just peace" between the two sides and holding both sides responsible for the conflict, while purposely neglecting the Russian responsibility for the conflict.

The initiatives has given a new approach to pro-kremlin narrative disseminators, such as extremists' parties members (SPD, KSČM) or pro-kremlin activists (Ladislav Vrabel, Jan Kavan, Jindřich Rajchl). Consequently, in March 2023, Rajchl managed to gather thousands of people on Václavské náměstí, joining his demonstration "Czechia against the poverty". Participants and speakers not only demonstrated against the current government but proclaimed the alleged need for Czechia to stay "neutral" and later demanded to take off the Ukrainian flag currently present at the National Museum. Further demonstrations followed, including a May demonstration called "Together for peace and freedom".

POLAND

Russian narratives attempt to portray Russia as a peace-loving state taking action against Ukraine because it feels threatened and needs to defend itself. Before 2022, Russia spread narratives claiming that Ukraine was violating the Minsk Agreements and that Russia wanted to negotiate. In reality, Russia was the one violating these agreements and escalating the conflict, launching an unprovoked full-scale aggression in 2022. After the outbreak of the war, Russia presents itself as a country that wants to achieve a peaceful resolution to the conflict, which is allegedly blocked by the West.

Russian narratives also often focus on criticism of Western military aid to Ukraine. Russia accuses the West of escalating the conflict and tries to influence through disinformation the reduction of military aid to Ukraine. This aid is often portrayed in a negative light, as illegal. Among other things, there have been narratives that Western countries are transferring nuclear and chemical weapons to Ukraine.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS ACT IN THE INTERESTS OF THE WEST

SLOVAKIA

The Russian war in Ukraine became a great opportunity for Slovak opposition politicians to criticize the government and its support for Ukraine. A crucial narrative to discredit government is a conspiracy theory that the Slovak government serves the Western countries and that the West uses Slovakia in its war against Russia. Governmental politicians are called „puppets" of the West. They allegedly carry out all the orders they receive from outside the borders. Pro- -Kremlin actors warn against the alleged loss of sovereignty in foreign matters and create the impression that Slovaks do not really matter to governmental politicians.

In one of his posts, deputy Robert Fico (head of Smer – SSD party) attacked the dismissed Prime Minister Heger for his pro-Ukrainian stance and for his decision to provide the country with military aid. Fico stated, „Heger is only playing for Brussels and Washington because he failed miserably in front of the nation. Mr Heger has become a symbol of an arbitrary nodder who has made Slovakia a political slave of foreign interests." In another post, although less specifically, Fico claimed, „I want a sovereign Slovakia led by politicians who have the trust of the nation and not the trust of Brussels or Washington. The nation and not foreign powers through the media or non-governmental organisations must decide who should lead Slovakia."

MP Milan Mazurek (Republika) declared that Slovak politicians „shamelessly serve foreign

interests, betray the nation and violate the Constitution. They will sacrifice Slovakia for praise in Washington." He deliberately used expressive formulations that are typical of Slovakia's far-right parties to create a feeling of mistrust in the state administration. At the same time, such rhetoric is intended to exaggerate the consequences of the discussed topic, which was the delivery of MiG-29 fighters to Ukraine at that time.

Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, who visited Slovakia in July, is also said to be an agent of US interests. Disinformation actors claimed that he had come to „beg" for more funds to wage war maintained at the expense of helping Slovaks. The disinformation website Bádateľ, for example, responded to Zelensky's visit by saying that citizens should „lock the gates, herd the chickens into the coop and hold on to their wallets". Pro-Kremlin actors further claimed that the Ukrainian president's meeting with Slovak top officials was purposely planned ahead of the NATO summit in Vilnius, where the future possible accession of Ukraine to the Alliance was to be discussed. Such claims aim to undermine public support for Ukraine's accession to NATO and define itself against the state leaders who consider such a development essential.

Closely linked to this are attempts to undermine public confidence in Western structures and to call into question the credibility of NATO and our allies. This was evident, for example, during and after the NATO summit in Vilnius mentioned above. The event was accompanied by narratives that Ukraine would never become part of the Alliance and that, if it did, a global conflict would supposedly break out. According to pro-Kremlin actors, Ukraine's entry into NATO would threaten security and peace. Anyone who supports Western structures and Ukraine's entry into them is allegedly going against Slovakia's interests. These narratives starkly contradict the fact that Western structures and their members have shown themselves to be trustworthy partners, even during the aggression in Ukraine, who are concerned that the illegal Russian occupiers be expelled from the invaded state.

CZECHIA

Historically, the Czech Republic, like many Central and Eastern European countries, has balanced its national interests with the broader interests of the West, particularly those of the European Union and NATO. This is not only a result of its geopolitical position but also its historical trajectory, which saw the country transitioning from Soviet influence to embrace Western liberal democracy post-1989.

The Ukraine conflict has brought these complexities to the fore. As the war escalates, the Czech Republic, like other European nations, is faced with the conundrum of acting in line with broader Western interests, particularly those of the EU and NATO or prioritizing its unique national interests.

A narrative has emerged that suggests national governments, including that of the Czech Republic, are prioritizing Western interests over their own in the context of the Ukraine war. This narrative is fueled by several factors, including the Czech Republic's stance on sanctions against Russia, its support for Ukraine, and its broader commitment to Western democratic values and institutions.

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has had a considerable impact on the Czech Republic's perspective, particularly regarding alliances and international security. According to a survey by the STEM agency, public support for NATO membership is currently at 78%, the highest level since 1994. Amid rising insecurity in Central Europe due to the Ukraine crisis, this figure signals a strengthened belief in the relevance and

necessity of NATO. The perception of Russia as the primary aggressor in the conflict reinforces this viewpoint, with three-quarters of the population assigning blame to Russia.

On the European Union front, the sense of threat brought on by the conflict has also enhanced the country's EU support, which has grown from 46% to 54%. There is almost universal backing (85%) for the establishment of common EU defense forces, reflecting a growing consensus on the need for a united, cooperative approach to security within the European community. Also, 84% of the population supports joint procurement of oil and gas, indicating an appreciation of the benefits of collaboration on shared concerns within the EU.

Sanctions against Russia, for instance, have had economic implications for the Czech Republic. Russia has been a significant trading partner, and sanctions have affected sectors like energy and manufacturing. Critics argue that by supporting sanctions, the Czech government is sacrificing its economic interests for the sake of a broader Western geopolitical strategy.

However, it is crucial to note that these narratives oversimplify a complex reality. National interests and Western interests are not always mutually exclusive. Upholding democratic values, maintaining regional stability, and standing against ag-gressive actions are in line with both the Czech Republic's and the West's interests. The notion that support for Ukraine or sanctions against Russia are solely „Western" interests is, in many ways, a false dichotomy.

Moreover, the Czech Republic, like other democratic nations, operates within a framework of international cooperation. Actions are based not only on immediate national interests but also on long-term goals of peace, stability, and democratic advancement. In this context, supporting Ukraine and aligning with Western interests can also be viewed as long-term investments in regional stability and the rule-based international order.

For example, improved relations between the Czech Republic and the US have resulted in the signing of a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) that may facilitate the eventual stay of U.S. troops in the Czech Republic. The Pentagon chief said the U.S.-Czech strategic partnership has never been stronger. In the course of his interaction with Minister Černochová, he expressed gratitude towards the Czech Republic for its manifold contributions, including its steadfast support for Ukraine. Moreover, he acknowledged and commended the nation's dedication to providing necessary assistance to Kyiv for the duration it requires.

POLAND

Russian propaganda outlets regularly disseminate false information regarding the involvement of the West in the war in Ukraine. According to Russia, both the European Union and Ukraine are completely dependent on the USA, and all actions are initiated by Washington. Russian narratives often include reports that the United States insists on increasing its already massive military spending to flood the Kyiv regime with weapons. They also claim that the US shifts the responsibility for accommodating refugees onto EU countries, making them dependent on gas supplies from the USA and pursuing openly protectionist policies aimed at turning G7 partners into industrial and resource colonies in advanced technology sectors. According to Russian narratives, prolonging the conflict is beneficial for the United States and the Ukrainian ruling elite because they profit from this conflict, and if Ukraine collapses, the incomes of many people will cease. Narratives about the complete dependence of European countries and Ukraine on the USA have been propagated for a long time and have appeared before, for example, prior to

the Russian aggression in 2022 in relation to the explosions on Nord Stream 1 and Nord Stream II, which were portrayed as attacks by European countries at the behest of the USA.

NATIONAL GOOD AND BAD PRACTICES

LEGAL HANDLING OF DISINFORMATION

SLOVAKIA

Good practice: Promising signs

Slovakia does not have legislation that explicitly and directly affects the spread of disinformation and propaganda. However, it has laws that touch on this issue and define the limits of freedom of speech and, thus, the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda.

In 2022, a new Media Services Act was passed, which gave the Council for Media Services, the national media regulator, new powers to regulate online platforms. People who are unsuccessful with their complaints about illegal content to the online platforms themselves can now turn to the Council. The Council can initiate proceedings and possibly fine the platform. Illegal content includes, for example, extremist material, content that fulfils the elements of the offence of defamation of a nation, race or belief or the offence of incitement to national, racial or ethnic hatred, etc.

In addition, the Slovak legal system has a criminal law that defines criminal offences. Action can be taken against them. Thus, Slovakia knows, for example, the offence of spreading

WARSAW INSTITUTE   INFOSECURITY.SK   ObserwatorzyKremla

an alarmist message or threatening or defamation. Extremist crimes include, for example, the crimes of supporting and promoting groups aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms, producing extremist materials, disseminating extremist materials, storing extremist materials, defaming a nation, race and belief, or inciting national, racial and ethnic hatred.

We can observe some positive cases when the law was applied. For example, in 2019, the court convicted Milan Mazurek (Republika party), the Member of Parliament, of defaming a nation, race and belief. He was disseminating racist ideas about Roma people on Frontinus radio. Mazurek lost his parliamentary mandate and had to pay a fine of 10,000 euro.

Mazurek's former party colleague, Marián Kotleba (chairman of Kotlebovci – ĽSNS), was also convicted of extremist crime. The court convicted him of showing sympathy for a movement aimed at suppressing fundamental rights and freedoms. Kotleba was originally sentenced to an unconditional four-year and four months sentence by the Specialized Criminal Court, but the Highest Court changed the verdict to a six-month suspended sentence. On the anniversary of the founding of the Slovak state, which collaborated with Hitler, he handed out charity checks with the neo-Nazi symbol 1488.

The court also intervened in the case of Ľuboš Blaha, who systematically published and disseminated theories about President Zuzana Čaputová being "an American agent". The court ordered Blaha that he never used any evidence for such a claim and he unlawfully interfered with the President's rights and, therefore, he is obliged to refrain from further verbal attacks and dissemination of false information.

Bad practice: Legal gaps are still wide

As mentioned, Slovakia has legislation to prevent the dissemination of certain types of problematic content or hate speech. However, the problem often arises in implementing and applying laws to individual cases. There are several examples

of controversial decisions issued by courts. For example, Bohuš Garbár, who carried out espionage in Slovakia for the benefit of Russia, which has been waging a hybrid war against Slovakia since at least 2014, received only a suspended sentence and a 15,000 euro fine from the court. Garbár confessed and cooperated with the investigators, which was the reason for the limited length of his sentence. The decision came in February 2023, one year into the start of full-scale aggression in Ukraine.

Stanislav Mizík, an MP for Kotlebovci – ĽSNS, has completely avoided any punishment from the court, which was criticized by many experts and civil society organisations. On Kotlebovci – ĽSNS Facebook profile, an anti-Semitic status signed by him appeared in 2017, but the court failed to prove that he really wrote the post. Mizík defended himself before the court in a bizarre way, saying that he did not know how to use a computer.

The ambivalence of the legislation implementation in Slovakia is also evidenced in the case of the motion to dissolve the ĽSNS party. The court rejected the motion on the grounds that the risk was not sufficiently imminent because the party did not have enough MPs in parliament to pass laws on its own that could threaten democracy. However, in 2005 the Supreme Court abolished the extra-parliamentary extremist party Slovenská pospolitosť – národná strana (Slovak togetherness – national party) because its statutes, programme and activities on the territory of the Slovak Republic violated the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, constitutional laws, laws and international treaties. A significant part of its members later joined the ĽSNS party, which is able to function without any restrictions, although the ideological continuity with the abolished party is clear.

Freedom of expression is clearly defined by law and applies to the online environment without any restrictions or exceptions. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022, however, the State blocked four allegedly disinformation websites

based on a hastily adopted amendment to the Act on Cybersecurity. Although effective defence against disinformation and hybrid threats is undoubtedly essential in terms of the content itself, the classification of blocked websites as disinformation and/or propaganda websites, the procedure adopted by the State was, according to the experts, very problematic.

CZECHIA

In recent times, disinformation has become a prominent concern in the Czech Republic. Proposals for a new law to impose penalties for the spread of disinformation were set into motion. However, as reported by Aktuálně.cz, there is growing scepticism about whether this legislation will even come into fruition, with indications suggesting that the coalition might not forward it to the Chamber of Deputies for review. A significant milestone in terms of disinformation was the blocking of disinformation websites by the administrator of the Czech web domain CZ.NIC during Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Together with the CZ.NIC association, some websites are also blocked by Internet access providers, following a list of two dozen sites compiled by the Military Intelligence. The military intelligence officers have not published the criteria by which they have selected the specific websites to be blocked, and there is no law that gives them or other state authorities such authority.

A major argument against the proposed legislation is that there are alternative methods to combat disinformation rather than creating a specialized law. Existing laws could be harnessed more effectively. For instance, laws that penalize the spread of false alarms or incite violence against groups of people. Equally important is the emphasis on education, teaching students how to critically assess information, discerning truth from falsehood. The draft of the legislation, currently under di-scussion by ministry experts, originated from the Ministry of Interior. Based on the expert's feedback, the ministry will decide whether to present the legislation to the government. Notably, the proposal has ignited fierce debates. Opposition politicians have raised concerns, fearing potential misuse of the law to suppress freedom of speech or mute opposition voices. A significant challenge highlighted by Petr Koubský, editor of Deník N, is the definition of disinformation. Koubský stresses that drafting a precise and effective law that addresses the primary concerns of disinformation without being exploitable is complex. The crux of the matter revolves around a clear definition of what disinformation is and how the law will recognize and penalize its intentional spread.

The challenge isn't limited to the definition of disinformation but extends to determining intent – discerning between those who deliberately spread false information and those who unknowingly disseminate unverified information. The consensus among critics seems to be that there are already sufficient laws in place. Most of the problematic disinformation can be categorized under existing criminal laws, which have societal consensus on certain freedom of speech restrictions. The emphasis should perhaps be on the effective application of these existing laws rather than the creation of new ones.

POLAND

As of 2014 Poland is one of the key targets of Russian disinformation efforts. In 2015-2019, a total of 28 foreigners were expelled by the Polish Internal Security Agency (ABW) for hybrid activities against Polish national interests. In the years that followed, 45 Russian diplomats were expelled, and dozens of people linked to Russian or Belarusian intelligence services (often using journalist cover) involved in gathering information and spreading disinformation in Poland were declared persona non grata.

The Polish parliament also intends to introduce a law making it possible to punish with imprisonment (with a minimum of 8 years) the dissemination of false or manipulated information if it is committed by a person acting on behalf of a foreign intelligence service and the purpose of the disinformation is to cause serious disruption to the system or economy of Poland, another country or an international organization. The amendment to the Criminal Code in the area of espionage is intended to enable Polish counterintelligence services and prosecutors to combat so-called „agents of influence" whose activity is not to steal state secrets but to exert a harmful influence on public debate.

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Polish government has taken a number of measures aimed at reducing the harmful impact of Russian disinformation. As early as February 24, 2022, the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT) adopted a resolution to remove Russian propaganda channels such as RT (Russia Today), RT Documentary, RTR Planeta, Soyuz TV, Russiya 24 from the register of television broadcasts. In practice, this made it impossible for Russia to distribute manipulated images of the war in Ukraine via the aforementioned programs on cable networks, satellites and internet platforms. The basis for the decision was a provision in the Broadcasting Law (1992) giving the KRRiT the right to strike a program from the register if, within a 12-month period, it had at least twice posted content that promoted actions that were contrary to the Polish law or raison d'état, and attitudes and views contrary to morality and social good, and which, among other things, posted content inciting to commit a terrorist crime or threatening the security and defense of the state".

Following Poland's decision, the European Union (EU), in early March 2022, decided to impose sanctions on RT and Sputnik, and leading Kremlin propagandists. In June, sanctions were extended to further Russian television programs (Rossiya RTR/RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24/Russia 24, TV Center International), which may not be distributed throughout the EU by cable, IPTV, satellite, via the internet or mobile applications. Meanwhile, the KRRiT expanded the scope of the sanctions to Belarusian state television program, while the Polish Internal Security Agency (ABW) has already gone a step further and blocked access to more than a dozen Russian propaganda channels (e.g. Lenta, RIA, Sputnik, Ruptly) and pro-Russian media outlets in Poland (e.g. Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny, Myśl Polska, Wici Polskie, Wolne Media, wRealu24, Xportal) spreading Russian disinformation. The decision was made on the basis of Article 180(1) of the Telecommunications Law (2004), which clearly states that a telecommunications entrepreneur is obliged to immediately block telecommunications connections or information transmissions at the request of authorized entities if such connections may threaten defense, state security and public security and order, or to enable such blocking by these entities.

ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY
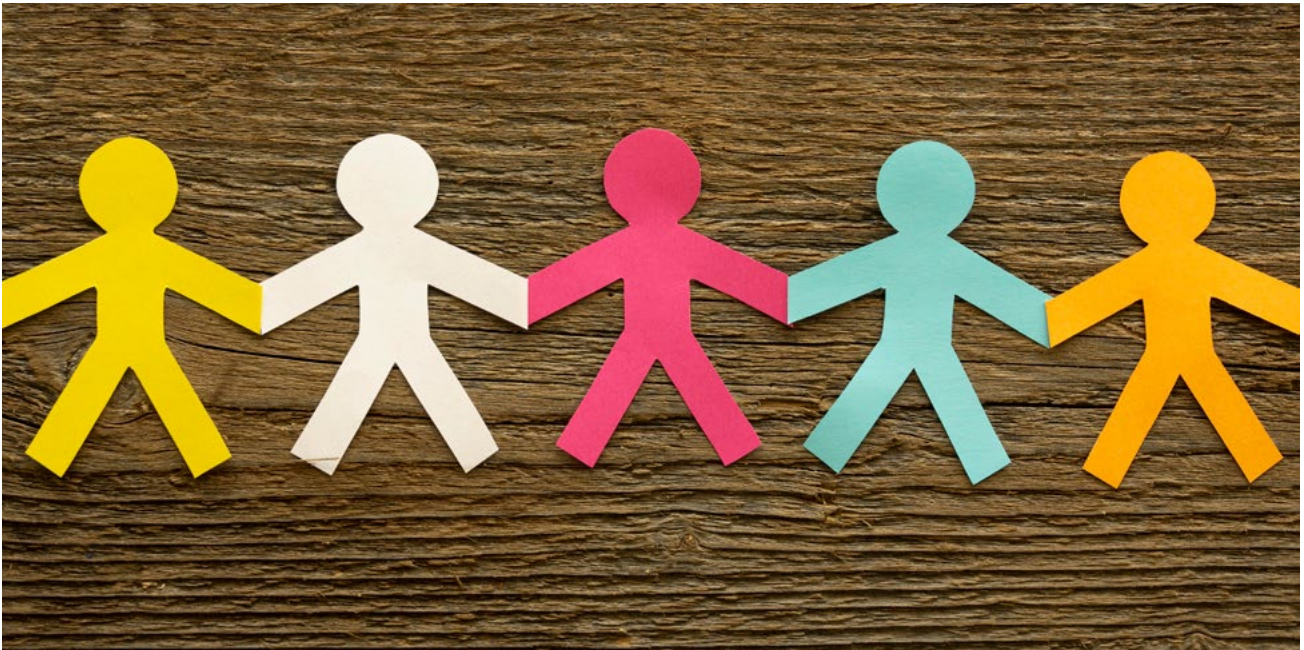
SLOVAKIA

Good practice: United for Ukraine on multiple levels

In the context of countering disinformation and hybrid threats, Slovakia is characterised by a strong and resilient civil sector underbelly. Before 2020, it largely replaced the state in defending interests and patching vulnerabilities in several areas. In particular, it is specific that smart individuals and experts from the civil sector now also form the personnel base for institutions oriented towards countering disinformation or supporting Ukraine. Therefore, the possibility of cooperation between the state and the civil sector, which takes place both on a formal and systematised level and on the basis of the exchange of information, experience and know-how, can be considered a great advantage at the moment.

The NGO sector has long been active in the fight against disinformation since 2014, mobilising especially during the infodemic and transferring its activities to the topic of the war in Ukraine. The experience of the pandemic period in par-

ticular, but also the continued diversity of associations, initiatives and individuals involved in the fight against anti-Ukrainian disinformation, has helped in the relative effectiveness of this communication.

It is worth mentioning, for example, the activity of Vladimír Šnídl, a journalist at Denník N, who, with his own initiative Krotíme Hoaxy (Taming Hoaxes), has long been fighting against pro-Russian narratives. He has also been involved in the fight against disinformation against, among many other topics, Ukrainian refugees. In addition, together with other long-running initiatives such as Infosecurity.sk, Sebavedomé Slovensko (Self-Confident Slovakia) or Mladí proti fašizmu (Youth Against Fascism), they have focused on countering narratives about Ukrainian fascism or other attempts by Kremlin propaganda to legitimize Russian aggression in Ukraine. Another important part of the civil sector is the Konšpirátori.sk project, which, through its database of disinformation and problematic actors, alerts advertisers to the funding

of these undesirable activities. It is also worth mentioning Gerulata Technologies, which is active in the fight against disinformation, especially through its analytical and monitoring capacities.Majority cohesion and a wave of solidarity in support of Ukraine were also evident at other levels in the offline space. There was direct help at the border, assistance and integration or education of refugees, but also specific projects that came together through citizens' help and empathetic support in different areas – for example in food aid, accommodation of refugees, but also support through the purchase of armaments or weapon systems for the defending Ukrainian soldiers.

It is certainly worth mentioning the Kto Pomôže Ukrajine project (Who Will Help Ukraine), which covers several initiatives involved in helping Ukrainians in their homeland, but also in refugee situations in Slovakia. The platform builds a strong network of individuals and organisations ready to help the citizens of Ukraine and connects them directly to the needs of people in distress. More than 40 organisations and 1,000 volunteers have been involved in helping Ukrainians with food, integration or accommodation. So far, companies, public administrations, non-profit organizations and foundations have collectively contributed more than €2.3 million through the initiative to help people fleeing Ukraine.

The state is also trying to help in making such projects accessible and active on the basis of civil society or local governments. Thanks to the published calls, local governments and NGOs that provide and coordinate humanitarian and integration activities for refugees from Ukraine can apply for a financial contribution to support Ukrainian children and adults arriving in Slovakia. All activities aimed at assisting and supporting children and adults arriving from Ukraine to the territory of Slovakia are financially supported by national projects until the end of 2023.

Bad practice: Not everyone stands behind Ukraine

Despite the relatively high level of social and civil mobilization in support of Ukraine, not every organisation or civil association can be described as a healthy and reliable partner in supporting the victim of Russian aggression. There are also actors in the Slovak information space who are actively involved in spreading anti-Ukrainian sentiments, which go hand in hand with their long-term involvement in spreading Russian influence, for example, in cooperation with the Russian Embassy in Slovakia.

At first glance, the ordinary Slovak civic association BRAT za BRATA (Brother for Brother) unites bikers involved in the care of the memorials of fallen soldiers of the Red Army. At the same time, through social networks, they intensively disseminate content from the Russian Embassy and the Slovak version of the pro-Russian disinformation portal NewsFront. They were also very active in the implementation of the Russian information/influence operation regarding the cemetery in Ladomirova.

The association essentially took the place of the Night Wolves, from whose Slovak branch they practically split off. Since 2021, they have been organising the Freedom Ride, a motorcycle event that bears the hallmarks of the European Night Wolves ride. They maintain close relations with Russian Embassy officials, and even after the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, they traveled to both Russia and Belarus. The findings of the Investigative Centre of Ján Kuciak suggest that the Russian Embassy and this Slovak civic association act in a coordinated manner on social networks. According to experts, BRAT za BRATA social media profile also functions as a tool of Russian soft power, which aims to change public attitudes in favour of Russia and its interests. Shortly after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the bikers from BRAT za BRATA also set up a public

channel on Telegram (Pravda zvíťazí - Truth Will Prevail), which systematically amplifies the impact of the Russian Embassy's posts, as well as the Slovak version of the pro-Kremlin disinformation site NewsFront.

Activities of BRAT za BRATA are, therefore, an exemplary example of how the Russian machinery can also use civil associations in democratic states to spread its influence and propaganda. In this case, the aim is to influence public opinion and build positive sentiments towards Russia precisely on the basis of commemorative actions in offline space and communication on social networks. One of Slovakia's fundamental vulnerabilities is being exploited – positive perceptions of a shared historical experience with the Soviet Union or Russia itself.

CZECHIA

Good practice: Czech Civil Society: A Beacon of Solidarity for Ukraine

Amid the political debates about the level of government assistance to Ukraine, the actions of the Czech civil society have emerged as a beacon of compassion and solidarity. Citizens from diverse walks of life have proactively mobilized to provide a wide range of support to displaced Ukrainians. Donations have poured in from across the country, people have volunteered their time and skills, and numerous businesses have extended job opportunities to those seeking refuge.

The unifying factor in these varied efforts is the involvement of non-profit organizations. These groups have taken on crucial roles in collecting, coordinating, and delivering the aid. In collaboration with international aid agencies, they have effectively funneled the generosity of the Czech public into tangible assistance for those in need. This level of organization underscores the strength and resilience of Czech civil society, demonstrating how well-coordinated efforts can make a significant impact in times of crisis.

In total, Czechs donated around CZK 4.25 billion in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The largest amount was sent to People in Need - almost CZK 2 billion. The Ukrainian Embassy received 1.3 billion from donors.

This collective action of Czech civil society—individuals, organizations, and businesses alike—underscores an inspiring narrative of human compassion. These initiatives, both big and small, create a powerful ripple effect of goodwill, delivering hope and much-needed relief to those affected by the war in Ukraine. This testament to human resilience and solidarity sends a clear message that, in the face of adversity, empathy and unity are the most potent tools we possess.

Bad practice: Government Prioritizes Aid to Ukraine Over Its Own Citizens: A Miscommunication Fiasco

Czech citizens are increasingly voicing their grievances against the government, believing that it is prioritizing aid to Ukrainian refugees over its own citizens. A majority of Czechs in a survey conducted by the STEM/MARK Agency maintains this view, demonstrating the perceived imbalance in government support. This view is held mainly by women, individuals without a high school degree, and those of lower living standards, along with voters of ANO, SPD, and non-parliamentary parties.

Despite these beliefs, the actual financial figures paint a different picture. Between March and October, the government earmarked over 19 billion CZK for Ukrainian refugees. Comparatively, Czech households received considerably more, with 486 billion CZK dedicated to pensions, 8 billion CZK to unemployment support, and 95 billion CZK to other social benefits.

However, the distribution of a one-time grant of 5000 CZK to incoming refugees and Czech families alike sparked controversy. Critics argued

that the blanket distribution was ill-advised as it also went to families, not in need.

Experts trace the prevailing belief of excessive aid to Ukraine to the government's failure in communication. They stress the necessity of conveying that the government is, indeed, putting its citizens first. If underprivileged Czechs were better informed, according to analyst Štěpán Křeček, they would be less resentful of the assistance given to refugees. This mishap underscores the significance of effective communication in preventing misperceptions and ensuring public trust.

POLAND

DisinfoDigest project is a leading counter-disinformation project in Poland led by the NGO "Info Ops Foundation". The project cooperates with Governmental Center for Security (RCB) and is co-financed by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The outcomes of their investigations are published to public audiences in Polish, English, German, French and Spanish. In the upcoming time DisinfoDigest is going to commence the project called «Szaffaf / Szaffafiat» (transparency) which aim is to build resilience to disinformation in the so-called Global South countries. Other counter-disinformation and fact-checking initiatives in Poland are, e.g. Demagog, Panoptykon Foundation, OKO.Press, AntyFake, "FakeHunter" project launched by the Polish Press Agency (PAP).

MEDIA LITERACY
AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

SLOVAKIA

Good practice: Reaction outweighs prevention

After years of ignoring the problem of hybrid threats and disinformation, Slovakia got a wake-up call in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic. The infodemic kick-started processes that focused on gradually building strategic communication in the institutional framework but also on the presence of content and activities in the offline and online space.

The activity of the Police of the Slovak Republic, which in 2018 established a Facebook page dedicated to combating disinformation – Hoaxy a podvody - Polícia SR (Hoaxes and Frauds - Police of the Slovak Republic) – is quite specific. On the page, the police are continuously engaged in a rapid response to the currently spreading disinformation narratives. In many cases, it plays a first responder role and, thanks to its high viewership, it can be considered one of the most important actors, especially in the reactionary level of the fight against disinformation. At the same time, it continuously points out the harmfulness of pro-Russian disinformation narratives and manipulation techniques in the Slovak information environment, clearly communicating the importance of democratic pillars and Western-oriented foreign policy in Slovakia, especially with regard to limiting the spread of alarmist messages and disinformation narratives aimed at deepening fear and polarisation in Slovak society. The importance of the communication channel has been demonstrated during several Russian information operations, in 2022, in connection with the Ladomírova cemetery and, more recently, in connection with alarmist messages about the spread of radiation from Ukraine. It continuously reports Russian war crimes in Ukraine.

An important actor is the Department of Strategic Communication of the Security Council of the Slovak Republic (operating under the Government Office of the Slovak Republic), which is continuously involved in communication with the public through information and educational activities. It focuses primarily on gradually building public perception of the importance of and a positive public attitude towards Western structures while striving to build a healthy national identity. In addition to actively and transparently providing access to information on social topics, it is also involved in public education activities, especially towards the younger generation, for example, through its current series of lectures and workshops on critical thinking, which it organises in cooperation with the non-governmental sector and schools. The activities of the Department are dominated by the efforts to build Slovak national identity, which is inherent in the presence of democracy, the values intertwined with Western civilisation and the need for Slovakia's membership in Western structures. An important part of it is also the recovery of Slovakia's failure to come to terms with its own history, especially by highlighting the deeds and activities of prominent Slovaks. For example, in a very meaningful way, the Department aims to explain Slovakia's role during World War II, tying attention to positive moments, such as Operation Anthropoid, when Czechoslovakia was able to stand on the side of the good. In this sense, the Department also tries to limit the vulnerability of the Slovak population to Russian propaganda, which often targets a distorted view of the historical experience with the Soviet Union or the presence of Pan-Slavism sentiments.

However, we should not forget about the activities of individual ministries, especially the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs or the Ministry of Defence, which underline the importance of the participation of state institutions in active public opinion formation, also thanks to cohesion across the institutional framework. In these cases, it is, of course, a matter of continuous explanation of decisions and foreign policy

anchoring of the Slovak Republic, especially important is the communication of support for Ukraine and raising awareness of the need to strengthen Slovakia's defence capabilities at a time when its neighbour is facing unprecedented aggression from Russia.

Bad practice: Progress, but insufficient

Despite the progress in the institutionalisation of strategic communication as one of the fundamental tools in the fight against disinformation, designed state authorities are limited in their ability to communicate and are at a disadvantage vis-à-vis disinformation actors, who, especially in the online space, are able to generate more attention and thus destabilise public opinion.

The implementation of the fight against disinformation in state structures came with a vision of systematisation and coordination of capacities or mechanisms. It envisaged replacing the model of skilful individuals doing their best on their own. Today, the right people are in the right places (especially thanks to the high mobility of experts between the civil and state sectors), but there is still a lack of a properly set-up system to make the noble work of experts and staff in the newly created bodies more efficient. In particular, there is a lack of procedural cover and mandate, insufficient funding, and the sustainability of the continuity of strategic communication efforts is also questionable in the context of the upcoming elections. With the hope of making these settings more effective, however, comes the Concept of Strategic Communication adopted in 2023.

The latest results of the Globsec Trends survey are proof that the strategic communication of the state is not ideally set up. Up to 51% of Slovaks blame the war in Ukraine on the West or Ukraine. Sanctions are supported by only 38% of the population, on the contrary, up to 69% perceive military support for Ukraine as a way to become a target of Russia. Support for Slovakia-'s NATO membership has also dropped critically – from 72% in 2022 to 58% in 2023. Only 54% of the population perceives Russia as a threat, and up to 50% perceive the US as a threat. What the data shows in its complexity is that despite the efforts of strategic communicators (and other components of the fight against disinformation and propaganda) and due to the ineffectiveness of some activities, the topics of Russian geopolitics are not only polarizing, but they are also a space for influencing public opinion, in particular by making Slovakia one of the most vulnerable actors in the CEE region in the battle for the hearts and minds of the people. It is still true that information chaos is easier to be established than the conviction of the importance of the project of democracy and the Western community.

Media literacy and critical thinking have long been a thorn in the side of Slovak education. The weakness lies mainly in the inability to innovate and rigidity in adopting reforms, which leads to insufficient reflection on the challenges of the 21st century. Not only the aspect of media literacy or lifelong learning is insufficiently grasped, but also civic education or history, whose inflexible curricula do not offer sufficient space for building civic and democratic values and may also be a source for the increase in the willingness to believe in disinformation, or the rise of radicalism and extremism. From this point of view, a number of civic initiatives and activists who substitute for the state are to be commended. For example, Zmudri.sk, which, through educational materials, is involved in educating not only young people but also teachers by providing information and training. Alternatively, it can be one-off activities such as the Kira comic book, which communicates current and critical issues, such as the war in Ukraine, in an attractive way to the young generation.

CZECHIA

Good practice: Successful Integration of Media Literacy in School Curriculum in the Czech Republic

In an age increasingly dominated by digital information and the continuous spread of disinformation, particularly concerning the war in Ukraine, the importance of media literacy has never been clearer. A commendable approach to this challenge in the Czech Republic has been the successful integration of media literacy into the school curriculum, enabling students to critically engage with and discern the credibility of different sources of information.

This initiative, led by educational authorities in collaboration with several NGOs, has seen the integration of media literacy as a cross-curricular subject in primary and secondary schools. Students are taught to identify fake news, understand the purpose of disinformation, and critically assess the credibility of information sources. They learn about the ongoing Ukraine conflict as a real-world case study, helping them understand the stakes and implications of information warfare in current geopolitical contexts.

Such initiatives are helping to build a generation of media-literate citizens who are better equipped to navigate the digital landscape and resist disinformation. They are not just passive consumers of information but active, discerning participants in the digital world. By embedding media literacy in the curriculum, the Czech Republic has taken a proactive stance towards safeguarding its society against the rising tide of disinformation, exemplified by the narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine. This approach serves as a best practice model for other countries grappling with similar issues.

Bad practice: The Need for More Widespread Public Awareness Campaigns on Media Literacy in the Czech Republic

The increasingly nuanced nature of the information warfare surrounding the Ukrainian conflict has spotlighted the crucial role of media literacy in society. However, one considerable challenge that continues to undermine the effectiveness of media literacy efforts in the Czech Republic is the lack of widespread public awareness campaigns. Despite the significant strides in educational sectors and the growth of fact-checking platforms, a notable gap persists in the broader public's understanding of the tactics and dangers of disinformation, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine.

In this context, while some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academic institutions have spearheaded campaigns to raise awareness about disinformation, these initiatives have often failed to penetrate the larger public sphere effectively. For example, while media literacy is integrated into some schools' curricula, the crucial knowledge and skills associated with discerning factual information from propaganda have yet to be disseminated consistently across various demographic groups. This lack of widespread outreach is problematic, particularly given the persistent disinformation narratives surrounding the Ukraine conflict.

Consequently, this shortfall in broad public awareness campaigns is a missed opportunity for bolstering societal resilience against disinformation. The specific context of the war in Ukraine, with its complexities and international implications, provides a compelling case study for such initiatives. To truly combat the scourge of disinformation, it's essential that media literacy education transcends the classroom, fact-checking remains not only the remit of dedicated platforms, and that awareness about the manipulative power of disinformation becomes ingrained in the Czech Republic's collective consciousness.

POLAND

The leading role in combating Russian disinformation in the Polish national security system is played by the Government Plenipotentiary for Security of the Information Space of the Republic of Poland. The office was established by a special decree on August 11, 2022, and the function is being performed by the Spokesperson for the Minister of the Coordinator of Special Services, who reports on activities undertaken by Polish intelligence and counterintelligence services. A special government website publishes analyses of disinformation campaigns targeting Poland. Supporting role plays Government Security Center (RCB) informing citizens through social media about identified narrative lines promoted by Russia in the Polish information space, and computer science institute NASK conducting project #WłączWeryfikację debunking fake news. Some ministries (e.g., ministry of foreign affairs) have established special departments responsible for strategic communications. However, there is no overarching institution with the authority to coordinate the activities of the entire state administration in the early detection and counteraction of foreign disinformation operations. There is also a lack of greater cooperation between the state and analytical institutions, academia and the non-governmental sector (NGOs).

RECOMMENDATIONS

SLOVAKIA

The war in Ukraine is becoming one of the key issues in the election campaign ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections. It owes this mainly to its mobilising potential. In this sense, the topic of the war in Ukraine is the stage through which the conflict between pro-Western and pro-Russian sentiments is communicated. In terms of strategic communication, the key remains the sharing of messages in support of Ukraine and, thus, in support of Slovakia's firm membership as a reliable partner in Western structures.

Strategic communication should not focus only on the values at the heart of the subject. It is also important to point out the practical impact of the Western anchoring of Slovakia's foreign policy. In this sense, Slovakia, in its role as a reliable partner of the West and supporter of Ukraine, should be presented as an investment representing the national interest. At the same time, there is a lot of room for cooperation with the mainstream media, which today, alongside politicians, are the only actors who can shape, not just amplify, the topics. In this way, it is also possible to avoid the high personalisation of politics, which can be toxic in the run-up to elections.

Ensuring the continuity of already established processes in the fight against disinformation and other hybrid threats seems to be crucial. This is related not only to the complex topic of Slovakia's trajectory but also to mitigating the

vulnerabilities that arise from the lack of systematic coverage of the ongoing efforts in the fight against disinformation. These are reflected not only in the political but also in the procedural and financial sustainability of the new bodies and their activities. Mitigating society-wide vulnerabilities is also related to building resilience and healthy rhetoric regarding the role of the media and the NGO sector, which today face increasing pressure and hostility from disinformation actors (especially politicians).

In the long term, education is a key tool for mitigating threats arising from the information and influence operations of third parties, especially Russia. The reform of education in terms of emphasis on building democratic values, a commitment to citizenship, knowledge of history, especially of the 20th and 21st centuries, coupled with a focus on media literacy and critical thinking, is now essential. At the same time, this opens space for cooperation with non-governmental actors who have been working on the topic for a long time and could be instrumental in sharing awareness of the issue, expertise and good and bad practices.

CZECHIA

Amid the ongoing Ukraine crisis, the Czech Republic confronts a surge in disinformation narratives, particularly those centered on Ukrainian immigrants. These narratives, steeped in societal division and xenophobia, require swift action to foster balanced perspectives.

To secure energy independence and guard against potential manipulation, the Czech Republic should diversify its energy sources and lessen its reliance on Russian fuel. In light of Russia's tactics to extend conflicts and drain Western states, the Czech Republic must exercise caution in negotiations with Russia,

avoiding short-term solutions that compromise long-term stability and security. Additionally, public communication about these strategies is crucial to maintain internal cohesion.

The government should initiate public campaigns to debunk myths, spotlighting the positive contributions of Ukrainians as war refugees. Policymakers and media must uphold reliable, unbiased information, shedding stereotypes and highlighting Ukrainian resilience. To aid integration, the Czech government should recognize Ukrainian immigrants' qualifications and provide language courses. Policymakers must also stay attuned to

public sentiment, striving to balance humanitarian support with domestic concerns.

To address widespread disinformation about the Ukraine conflict in the Czech Republic, media literacy needs to be enhanced through school curriculums and public campaigns, empowering individuals to critically assess information and recognize disinformation tactics. Responsible journalism, promoting accurate and nuanced conflict coverage while debunking false claims and avoiding terminology misuse, should be encouraged. These steps aim to counter harmful narratives and cultivate a well-informed public.

To counter the disinformation in the Czech Republic that blames the US and NATO for the Ukraine conflict, strategic steps are needed. Media literacy initiatives should help distinguish between peace advocacy and false narratives that misassign blame or ignore aggressor responsibility. Responsible journalism should prioritize facts, multiple perspectives, and challenging distortions in public discourse. Public discussions that encourage understanding and critical thinking should be promoted. Through these steps, narratives will be critically assessed, enabling informed individual judgments on consumed information.

Balancing national and Western interests is crucial for the Czech Republic amidst the ongoing Ukraine crisis. Public sentiment leans towards strong alliances, with notable support for NATO and EU membership. However, economic implications, such as sanctions against Russia, have generated criticism. These concerns often oversimplify the complex interplay between national and broader interests. For instance, supporting Ukraine isn't solely a „Western" interest, but a long-term investment in regional stability. Similarly, agreements like the U.S.-Czech Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) attest to the importance of international partnerships. Thus, the Czech Republic must judiciously balance national interests with its international commitments while navigating the Ukraine crisis.

POLAND

To improve the state's effectiveness in countering disinformation, we recommend creating an institution responsible for coordinating efforts to combat disinformation and conducting active strategic communication on behalf of the state. This institution should be established under the Council of Ministers and should be superior to the organizational units responsible for strategic communication in the various ministries.

In doing so, the intelligence services should become more involved in informing the public about the hostile activities of Russia and Belarus in the information space, e.g. by delivering preemptive information about the threat (pre-bunking).

State structures should also make greater use of the support of the analytical community, academia and the non-governmental sector through the establishment of permanent cooperation formats to more effectively monitor hostile disinformation activities. The result will be improved situational awareness and early detection of disinformation campaigns directed against Poland.

To increase the effectiveness of the reconnaissance and analytical activities of these structures, the state should create a special system for early notification of citizens about ongoing hybrid activities (e.g., in the form of a mobile application).

As the most vulnerable group to the impact of disinformation are those who use social media, we recommend that media literacy classes (including the use of social media) and critical thinking be introduced into curricula at all levels of education in Poland.

KREMLIN WATCHERS

f ObserwatorzyKremla

WARSAW INSTITUTE **INFOSECURITY.SK**