



# *The Pro-Russian* **DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN** *in the Czech Republic and Slovakia*

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*Types of media spreading pro-Russian propaganda, their characteristics and frequently used narratives*

————— By **Ivana Smoleňová**, Prague Security Studies Institute —————

“Today, nobody questions the fact that Putin has waged an information propaganda war in our country,” says Juraj Smatana, a Slovak political and anti-corruption activist, referring to a new phenomenon — a pro-Kremlin propaganda campaign in the Czech and Slovak languages spread by media. Although both countries have relatively small Russian minorities and only a handful of Russian-language media outlets, the pro-Russia disinformation campaigns appear to be spreading.

In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, pro-Russian disinformation campaigns originate from multiple sources. Their pro-Kremlin messages are amplified through extensive social media activity, and the organization of public events and gatherings. These disinformation activities feature frequently used narratives and show high-level similarity of arguments and messages.

The goal of the pro-Russian campaign is to shift public opinion against democratic institutions and depict a world in which the United States intends to exert global

leadership, every Western-leaning politician is corrupt, media outlets not of their persuasion are biased, and the future is bleak, hopeless and full of conflict. In this world, Russia emerges as both the savior and moral authority, the guarantor of political stability and peace.

Despite the similarities and strong rhetoric, pro-Russian sources have no formal links to Russia. Their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures remain unknown in most cases. To date, efforts by investigative journalists and activists have found no direct proof of Russian involvement.

The lack of transparency is one of their strongest assets, as any accusation of ulterior motives is depicted as an attempt to suppress “alternative opinions” and any challenger is branded “America’s propaganda puppet.” The most important role of new pro-Kremlin media, and especially their social media channels, is that they facilitate vivid platforms where like-minded criticism and discontent can be shared, spread and amplified.

## SECRET RUSSIAN CAMPAIGN

In Europe, Russia approaches the manipulation of media and information on a country-by-country basis, creating separate strategies for different regions and countries, while taking advantage of local infighting and weaknesses. As Ben Nimmo pointed out in a paper for the Central European Policy Institute, the Russian propaganda network is sophisticated, utilizing a network of officials, journalists, sympathetic commentators and Internet trolls to deliver its messages. It is also built on the lack of transparency, where the public is unaware that various spokespeople, in fact, work for the Kremlin, Peter Pomerantsev explained in an interview with Radio Free Europe.

Such is the case in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where pro-Russian disinformation messages originate from multiple sources that are often supported by, and interconnected through, pro-Russian public personalities. For example, Radka Zemanová-Kopeczká is a founder of the pro-Russian nongovernmental organization Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, which organized a public discussion in the Czech parliament and a demonstration at Prague Castle. In addition, Zemanová-Kopeczká writes articles for Czech pro-Russian websites, Russian-language platforms, is active on social media and contributes to online discussions in response to articles. Another example is the former Slovakian Prime Minister Ján Čarnogurský, director of the Slovak-Russian Society, who is frequently cited and interviewed by pro-Russian media outlets, such as the Slovak magazine *Zem & Vek* and Czech magazine *Vědomí*. In addition, he writes articles for various websites and has spoken at pro-Russian public discussions.

The frequent and most visible disseminators of the pro-Russian disinformation campaign include numerous pro-Russian websites, informal groups and communities on social media, several printed periodicals, radio broadcasts and nongovernmental organizations. In addition, these media sources amplify their discourses through extensive social media activity and the organization of public events and gatherings. Examples include a protest that was recently initiated by the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, public discussions regularly organized by *Zem & Vek* magazine and anti-NATO demonstrations supported by the Slovak-Russian Association.

Discussions regarding the pro-Russian disinformation campaign accelerated in February 2015 when Juraj Smatana published his “List of 42 websites that intentionally or unintentionally help to spread Russian propaganda in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.” The list continues to grow as more and more like-minded websites are discovered.

Over the last two years, a number of questionable print periodicals began appearing. These included: *Vědomí*, founded by the website AC24.cz (that also appeared on the aforementioned list) in 2014; *Zem & Vek*, which began publishing in 2013; and radio stations such as Slovak Slobodný Vysielač (Free Transmitter), founded in January 2013. While spreading information benefiting Russia, their articles are frequently based on conspiracy theories and a mixture of facts, half-truths and outright lies.

## DIFFERENT COUNTRIES, DIFFERENT PROPAGANDA

According to Russian activist Elena Glushko, the information war entered a new era in 2013, when new types of media — claiming no allegiance to Russia — were added to Russia’s information war toolbox. In each country, different types of media outlets are being invented with content created locally. Therefore, it can be presumed that pro-Kremlin media in the Czech Republic and Slovakia will be somewhat different from pro-Kremlin media in other European countries.

Four Czech and Slovak media outlets (three of which claim no connection or direct link to Russia, but appeared on Smatana’s list) were analyzed to



# ..... Common ..... CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA & WEBSITES .....

*Claim no allegiance to the Kremlin*

*Send very similar messages and use similar arguments*

*Are strongly anti-Western, most frequently targeting the U.S., Ukraine and the West in general*

*To a lesser extent, are pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin*

*Heavily use conspiracy theories, combining facts and half-truths*

*Have negative undertones, usually depicting moral, economic, political and social degradation, and predict a bleak future, including the collapse or clash of civilizations*

*Frequently use loaded language and emotionally charged words, stories and pictures*

*Are interconnected and supported by various public personalities that give the campaign credibility and public visibility*

*Predate 2014, but their rhetoric and activities hardened and intensified with the crises in Ukraine*

determine narratives and compare the similarity between arguments used by various disseminators of pro-Russian messages. The May 2015 issues of *Žem & Věk* and *Vědomí*, and April and May 2015 postings to the Czech-language news portal Aeronet were evaluated. To compare these media with no formal links to the Kremlin with Kremlin-controlled media, the reference group included May 2015 Web postings to the Czech branch of international media outlet Sputnik News, founded by the government of the Russian Federation in 2014.

In all four cases, the arguments and narratives employed by the authors were similar, if not identical, though outlets with no links to the Kremlin were more straightforward in delivering their anti-Western messages, and often use conspiracy theories, provocative language and emotionally charged words and pictures. Czech Sputnik News, however, used a more informative and descriptive journalistic style, often citing experts or official sources.

The analysis found these common themes:

## THE UNITED STATES

- Wants to dominate the world and aims to control every nation
- Is constantly sowing the seeds of conflict globally and is behind all “color” revolutions
- Is in decline, and its global hegemony is collapsing
- Failed at its interventions (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya), making the U.S. responsible for global terrorism

## NATO & THE EU

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

## UKRAINE

- Is not democratic, but ruled by fascists and Bandera’s followers
- Has a government and president that are U.S. puppets

## MEDIA & POLITICIANS

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

## RUSSIA

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

## THE FUTURE

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

Most of these common characteristics apply to similar pro-Kremlin websites and social media that have recently emerged in the region. Yet, the new pro-Russian platforms are also characterized by a high level of opacity — their motives, origins and organizational and financial structures are, in most cases, unknown.

The most important role of new pro-Kremlin media — especially the social media channels — is to facilitate platforms where similar criticism and discontent can be shared and, to Russia’s benefit, spread and amplified. Their success is built on existing and growing public distrust toward Czech and Slovak mainstream media and politicians, plagued by corruption scandals, oligarchs and arrogant public figures.

Finally, the goal of pro-Russian disinformation is to shift public opinion against the West and Western institutions, in line with the “divide and conquer” strategy that the Kremlin pursues throughout Europe, creating a fictitious world in which the U.S. intends to overrun the globe and Russia emerges as a savior and guarantor of stability and peace.

## PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

Russian information warfare theory derives directly from *spetspropaganda*, or special propaganda, first taught as a subject at the Russian Military Institute of Foreign Languages in 1942. It was removed from the curriculum in the 1990s and reinstated in 2000. In a 2014 report for the Institute of Modern Russia, Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss refer to Russia’s assault on media and its disinformation activities as the weaponization of information, conducted alongside the weaponization of money and culture.

The pro-Russian discourse has already entered Czech and Slovak mainstream media. Its appearance correlates with the Ukrainian crises; however, many outlets were founded before 2014, suggesting that the system might have been years in the making.

In 2013, the *Juvenilná Justícia*, or Juvenile Justice campaign, an effort to protect children from violence, was described by the Slovak pro-Russian website Stop Auto-Genocide as a “multinational system that brutally steals and unjustifiably takes children away from normal and healthy families. Using physical violence, the state social authority abducts children from their homes or kindergartens.”

The campaign started with a 32-minute-long YouTube video that accused France, Germany and Nordic countries of “the most brutal tyranny in human history.” The video appeared to be of Russian origin, using the Cyrillic alphabet and referring to Russian sources. The story, coupled with a petition against this fabricated child abuse, soon spread to other websites and finally reached the mainstream media in May 2013 when the Slovak TV station Markíza reported on it.

A year later, protests in Prague and elsewhere against



Flags fly in front of the headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Prague, Czech Republic. The U.S.-funded station provides an alternative news source to government-controlled media in many countries. THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Czech President Milos Zeman, a strong supporter of Czech-Russian relations, resulted in a similar campaign. Pro-Russian Czech websites falsely accused the U.S. Embassy in Prague of organizing the demonstrations. The story was then picked up

by some more respected media, which prompted the respective foreign ministries to actually inquire about the embassy's involvement. Both the U.S. Embassy and the protest's organizer, Martin Prikryl, repeatedly refuted these false claims.

The media assault goes beyond the Internet. Czech Television (CT), a public television broadcaster, recently warned about an increased number of complaints regarding its foreign news coverage. "This new phenomenon is placing pressure on our foreign affairs department," Michal Kubal, head of CT's foreign news editorial department, observed in April 2015. "It appears that somebody is purposefully trying to search for errors made by CT that fall in line with Russian propaganda — you don't have to trust the Kremlin, just don't trust anybody."

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are some things that European countries can do to weaken Russian propaganda efforts:

- Map the impact on public opinion. To properly assess the effect of pro-Russian campaigns, it is necessary to study changes of sentiment through regular opinion polls, surveys and studies directed

at sectors and democratic institutions that are most frequently targeted.

- Deconstruct and expose the pro-Russian campaign. To properly understand and publicly expose the system, more effort should be invested in researching its various aspects, especially uncovering its structures, personalities and backgrounds.
- Educate civilians. Initiatives that seek to expose propaganda techniques, such as a new school textbook by the Slovak nongovernmental organization Human Right Institute, should be supported. In addition, a public campaign should be introduced showing how disinformation and propaganda operate, and how methods to deliver such information to the broader public can be developed.
- Rebut and explain frequently used arguments. Complaints such as "the West also uses propaganda" or "the world is collapsing" should be quickly rebutted and discredited.
- Give "information security" the status of an academic science. Czech, Slovak and other European institutions of higher education, think tanks and government facilities should develop analytical capabilities and support research on how information, the Internet and propaganda can be used to achieve foreign policy goals. □

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