



Larger than life - Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia?

*Grassroots vulnerability to Russian sharp power in the
Czech Republic*

Country Report

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FOREWORD

The present study takes a novel approach to the understanding of Russian soft and sharp power in the Czech Republic. Our analysis is part of a regional project, led by Political Capital Institute and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, which explores the vulnerability and resilience to everyday Russian hostile influence in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), focusing on the horizontal, online “grassroots” communication between citizens. An explicit aim of the research was to leave behind the “elitist,” top-down approach of analyses on hybrid warfare and investigate ordinary conversations taking place day-by-day between citizens by mapping 1.17 million spontaneous online conversations related to Russia in the Czech Republic and more than 3 million online messages in the three countries under revision (Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic). The regional comparative analysis, country reports and policy recommendations are available on Political Capital’s thematic website titled Russian sharp power in CEE¹.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Our data revealed that 65% of Czech grassroots communications reflect anti-Russian sentiments, a fact which is consistent with opinion polls showing that Russia is not a role model for the Czech population.
- The segments of passionate supporters of Russia remain quite fragmented (there is a pan-Slavic nostalgia associated with the Communist Party, and – in contrast – there are anti-Muslim activists with ties to right-wing radicals admiring Russian strength), and are positioned on the periphery of the public debate. This, however, does not mean that the Czech population is pro-Western.
- Feelings of geopolitical inferiority, social passivity and disinterest (indicated by the fact that only half of the population would actively support membership in the European Union in the case of a referendum) pose by far the greatest threat to securing the Czech Republic’s “place” in the West.
- **Czech resilience to Russian soft and sharp power can be explained by several factors:**
 - » Czech mainstream media (led by public television Czech News) occupies a strong position in the information space, and (with some rare exceptions) provides critical, but objective, coverage of Russia-related events.
 - » Even though the alternative media space, in which pro-Russian narratives are resonating, is not completely insignificant (see the example of the vibrant Facebook page of Sputnik CZ in chapter 2.2), in most cases it remains separated from the mainstream media.
 - » The Czech debate regarding Russian malign influence (namely disinformation) remains quite vivid, which limits the opportunities of pro-Russian actors to establish themselves in the public sphere. In contrast, it should be noted that this debate is at the same time likely to enlarge the segment of people who are “Scared of Russia,” which in some cases might complicate the rational debate and solution to the problem.
 - » The remembrance of the invasion by the Soviet army in 1968 remains an important part of Czech public consciousness, which prompts a significant part of the population to perceive Russia as the “Aggressor” of not only old times, but also in recent cases (such as the conflict in Ukraine).
 - » General knowledge about Russia is very low, the group of individuals shaping public opinion about Russia is quite small (56,100 unique users), and the public debate is limited to stereotypes that are in most cases rather unsympathetic (concerning Russian aggressiveness, and social, economic and cultural backwardness), which make it very difficult for Russian soft or sharp power tools to operate in the Czech context.

¹ https://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/index.php

- Given these findings, the threats posed by Russian propaganda in the Czech public space should not be overstated. Even more important than trying to tackle these narratives (that are in fact traditional for Czech society) is trying to come up with a rhetoric that will overcome the Czech feeling of inferiority, and engage more of the Czech society and the political elite with its partners in the West. The only shallow attachment to, and accidental entry into, this cultural sphere is the problem that should concern us the most.

CZECH-RUSSIAN POLITICAL RELATIONS

Relations between the Czech Republic and the Russian Federation after 1989 were influenced by ambitions to reorient the Czech Republic to the West. It was a turn away from negative reminiscence about the communist period (inevitably connected with the Soviet Union and the occupation in 1968) towards a perceived human-rights-oriented mind-set of foreign policy. For these reasons, Czech foreign policy in Eastern Europe was focused on the support of human rights movements and activists (for example, Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg supported the detained Pussy Riot activists in 2012)² or smaller states' foreign policy ambitions independent from the Kremlin in the neighbourhood of Russia (for example, in the form of the Eastern Partnership project).³ After 2013, when the government changed positions vis-à-vis Russia and started becoming increasingly pragmatic, it abandoned the human rights aspect and focused on economic issues. The bilateral relationship was influenced by the crisis in Ukraine and the general worsening of relations between the West and Russia. The Czech Republic, however, did not adopt any marked position in this regard, and remains rather passive, following the EU mainstream on supporting sanctions against Russia and Ukraine's territorial sovereignty after the Crimean annexation.⁴

The current minority coalition government (formed in 2018) of the populist movement ANO and the moderate-left wing Social Democratic Party, led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, continues to have a rather passive position and did not present any new strategies in its relations with Russia. Various official documents (such as the government manifesto) mention the geopolitical position of the country as part of the "West," and mention an obligation to organisations such as NATO or the EU.⁵ However, in reality, this position tends to be questioned from time to time through the rhetoric of some members of the governing parties (for example, the nationalist wing of the Social Democrats, who tend to be sympathetic towards Russia, in particular).⁶ The government majority in the Parliament depends on the support of the Czech Communist Party, which tends to be more pro-Russian and anti-NATO in its foreign policy and, on a number of occasions, has questioned the sanctions against Russia or criticised the Czech Republic's sympathetic position towards Ukraine. Communist party members, for example, claimed that the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tomáš Petříček, is *not acting in accordance with national interests* when he failed to raise the issue of war atrocities committed by supporters of Stepan Bandera during his visit to Ukraine.⁷ In this case – like in many others –,

2 "Prague's Week of freedom dominated by support for Pussy Riot", Radio Praha, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/pragues-week-of-freedom-dominated-by-support-for-pussy-riot>.

3 Lyudmyla Tysyachina, "Eastern Partnership", Association for International Affairs, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://www.amo.cz/en/agenda-for-czech-foreign-policy/eastern-partnership/>.

4 More detail about Czech foreign policy can be found in Vít Borčány and Vít Dostál (eds.), "Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy 2018", Association for International Affairs, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.amo.cz/en/agenda-for-czech-foreign-policy/agenda-for-czech-foreign-policy-2018/>.

5 "Policy Statement of the Government of the Czech Republic", Government of Czech Republic, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.vlada.cz/en/jednani-vlady/policy-statement-of-the-government-of-the-czech-republic-168237/>.

6 For example the Social Democratic MP Jaroslav Foldyna repeatedly meet with members of controversial Russian motorbike club "Night Wolves", when they were present in the region – see Robert Sattler, "Foldyna a Putinovi Noční vlci? Jeho osobní věc, ČSSD s tím nespojuje, říká Hamáček", Lidovky.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/foldyna-a-putinovi-nocni-vlci-jeho-osobni-vec-cssd-s-tim-nespojujte-rika-hamacek.A180505_110757_ln_domov_rsa

7 "Petříček pracuje v rozporu s národními zájmy, tvrdí KSČM. Jeho odvolání však nežádá", Aktuálně.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/petricek-jedna-v-rozporu-se-zajmy-ceska-kscm-mu-vycita-vyrok/r-1d07c162310a11e99182ac1f6b220ee8/>

the arguments used were similar to those raised by Russian propaganda. Members of the Communist Party also travelled to Crimea and other occupied territories of Ukraine in the past to legitimise the annexation.⁸

Another political party represented in the Parliament whose members occasionally express a pro-Russian position, and are involved in the spreading of disinformation (mainly connected with migration, which is a central topic of the party), is the right-wing extremist party SPD.⁹ SPD MP Jaroslav Holík travelled to the occupied territory of Crimea in 2017 at the invitation of the Russian political party A Just Russia.¹⁰

Czech President Miloš Zeman is also known to be sympathetic towards Russia, and has advocated several times for the lifting of sanctions against Russia and has echoed the official Russian stance on various occasions.¹¹ His closest advisors are suspected to have close ties with Russian entities, and this might influence the decisions made by the presidential office vis-à-vis the country.¹²

The influence, however, of the aforementioned pro-Russian political actors remains limited at the moment to symbolic and rhetorical gestures (such as visits to occupied Crimea). In reality, the Czech Republic appears to still be following the EU mainstream, and so, for example, expelled Russian diplomats after the attempted poisoning of Sergei Skripal, and did not adopt any initiatives aimed at lifting the sanctions against Russia at the EU level. A Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats was also established under the Ministry of the Interior, intended to tackle new challenges also related to hostile Russian activities.¹³ However, this may be connected not necessarily with clear policy objectives, but rather with a general passivity and disinterest among politicians when it comes to foreign policy.¹⁴

THE CZECH MEDIA LANDSCAPE AND GEOPOLITICAL ATTITUDES

The Czech media landscape has gone through important changes in the past few years, with the significant majority of the industry having been bought from foreign owners (such as the German publisher Bauer Media) by domestic entities (mostly connected with Czech billionaires).¹⁵ This has contributed to concerns that the media will be used as a tool for these entities to maintain their position and to pursue their own interests (as the Penta financial group's Marek Dospiva has admitted quite openly, comparing the ownership of the media to the *nuclear briefcase* that might allow him to defend himself in case he is *unjustly attacked*).¹⁶

These concerns have so far not been warranted, with the notable exception of the media company MAFRA (publishing dailies Mladá Fronta Dnes and Lidové noviny), bought in 2013 by the chair of the ANO party,

8 "Ukrajina protestuje proti nezákonnému vstupu dvou českých politiků na Krym. Komunistka Kohlíček vyzývá v porušení sankcí", iHNED.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://domaci.ihned.cz/c1-66117170-ukrajina-protestuje-proti-nezakonnemu-vstupu-dvou-ceskych-politiku-na-krym-komunistka-kohlíček-vyzývá-k-poruseni-sankci>

9 Pavel Havlíček, "Rusko v programech politických stran", Association for International Affairs, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://www.amo.cz/cs/rusko-a-ceske-volby-2017/rusko-ve-volebnich-programech-politickych-stran/>

10 Josef Kopecký, "Poslanec Okamurova hnutí slavil na Krymu obsazení území Ruskem", iDnes.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/poslanec-okamurova-hnuti-slavil-na-krymu-jeho-obsazeni-ruskem.A170328_125537_domaci_kop

11 "Milos Zeman: Anti-Russian sanctions are meaningless and bad for economy", Russkyi Mir, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/249846/>

12 For more detailed overview of pro-Russian actors in Czech republic see Ivana Smoleňová, Barbora Chrzová (eds.), "United We Stand, Divided We Fall: the Kremlin's Leverage in the Visegrad Countries", Prague Security Studies Institute, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://www.pssi.cz/russia-s-influence-activities-in-cee/kremlinleverage>

13 'Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats - Terorismus a Měkké Cíle', accessed 7 March 2019, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/centre-against-terrorism-and-hybrid-threats.aspx>.

14 See footnote 4

15 For more detail about Czech media landscape see Martin Sklenský, "Komu patří česká média? Zahraniční vlastníci se stahují, esa drží čeští miliardáři", Peak, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.peak.cz/patri-ceska-media-zahranicni-vlastnici-se-stahuji-esa-drzi-cesti-miliardari/11290/>, or "Infografika: Aktualizovaná mapa vlastníků médií", Mediaguru, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2016/03/infografika-aktualizovana-mapa-vlastniku-medii/>

16 Rober Malecký, "Penta má svůj „atomový kufrík“. Podívejte se, jaký byznys si chce pomoci médií ochránit", Hlídací Pes, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://hlidacipes.org/penta-a-jeji-byznys-po-zdravotnictvi-sazkach-a-real-estate-prichazeji-media/>

current Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. Since then, there have been several examples of him attempting to interfere with media content. Whether or not these were only anomalies or systemic efforts at influencing is difficult to determine, however.¹⁷ Still, the appearance of Mr. Babiš and other billionaires in traditional media houses has contributed to an increasing number of journalists starting their own new media projects, operating online (such as Echo24, Nový Deník, Reportér or Hlídací Pes), with a smaller but usually more ideologically defined audience. In this respect, they filled a similar gap in demand as the platforms spreading disinformation, described in the next chapter.

According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2018, television still remains an important source of information for Czech citizens. The prominent actor in this area is the public channel, Czech television news (CT), which provides independent coverage and is known for its quality journalism. Concerns remain, however, that politicians may at any time attempt to exert influence on CT. Two other privately owned television stations, Nova and Prima, also play an important role. Their approaches to reporting tend to be tabloid-like, and we have seen examples of ambitions to manipulate the news (particularly about migration) in a way that would capture the public's attention so as to increase viewership.¹⁸ Another noteworthy case is the fourth television station, TV Barrandov, which has been very supportive of President Zeman, and thus has provided space for some of his statements supporting Russia.¹⁹

The geopolitical stance of most of the media remains pro-Western and critical toward Russia.²⁰ Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider that Russia-related topics (such as most of the foreign policy issues) remain on the periphery of the interest of most journalists. Consequently, reporting remains limited to a small group of journalists, foreign correspondents and experts, who have a strong impact on the overall narrative about a particular topic.²¹ This lack of interest also increases the dependence on news produced by the state-owned Czech News Agency (CTK), which is willing to report on Russia-related events. This represents a significant challenge: should this institution cease operating according to the ethical standards of journalism, it would have a major impact on the perception of foreign events, including Russia-related events.

According to the study Globsec Trends 2018, the Czech population does not see itself as part of the East (with only 3% agreeing with this statement; the majority, 55%, claimed that the country belongs in between the West and the East).²² Another research study, completed by the International Republican Institute in 2017, shows that Czechs tend to believe that they have only very little in common with Russia (around 10% of participants stated that the Czech Republic has more in common with Russia than with the West in areas such as culture, values or living conditions, while around 40% did not have a strong opinion on the matter).²³ These numbers show that the Czech population does not feel any particular bond with Russia. Examining opinions on the Russian-speaking minority living in the Czech Republic, opinion polls from 2018 show that the public is divided into three segments, with positive, neutral and negative sentiments, all of which are

17 Jiří Pšenička, Martin Topek, "Tajná nahrávka naznačuje, že Babiš manipuluje s médii. O místo kvůli ní přišel už jeden redaktor", iHNED.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://domaci.ihned.cz/c1-65717170-nahravka-udajne-usvedcuje-babise-z-manipulace-s-medii-o-misto-kvuli-ni-prisel-uz-jeden-redaktor>

18 Robert Břešťan, "Nahrávka z klíčové porady TV Prima k uprchlíkům: „Vedení televize má názor a vy ho budete respektovat.“ Hlídací Pes, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://hlidacipes.org/nahravka-z-porady-zpravodajstvi-tv-prima/>

19 "Ruští špióni v Česku neexistují. Miloš Zeman označil kontrarozvědku za neschopnou", Sputnik CZ, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201812068642504-Zeman-oznacil-kontrarozvedku-za-neschopnou/>

20 See for example the analysis of coverage of Kerch incident in Lóránt Győri, Jonáš Syrovátka, "Kerch incident proves Ukraine & NATO 'prepare for war against Russia' – Russian propaganda in Czech & Hungarian media", Euromaidan Press, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/12/11/kerch-incident-proves-ukraine-nato-prepare-for-war-against-russia-russian-propaganda-in-czech-hungarian-media/>

21 The influence of journalists on Czech debate about Russia has not yet been analysed; as an illustration of strong influence, of this group might use the data from the project ChinfluenCE (<http://www.chinfluence.eu/czech-social-network-analysis/actors-influencing-czech-media-discourse-on-china/>), mapping the main actors creating the Czech discourse about China

22 "Globsec Trends 2018", Globsec, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>

23 "Public opinion in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia", International Republican Institute, Accessed 25 February 2019 https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/four_country_full_presentation_may_24_2017.pdf

represented approximately equally. These results show that there is no clear consensus as far as Russians being identified as an ethnic or a cultural group (unlike in the case of people from Middle Eastern countries, who are perceived negatively by the majority of the population) in Czech society.²⁴

Still, the ambiguous nature of Czech positions towards the West, illustrated in the research above, results in a negative perception of the EU. According to the 2018 Eurobarometer poll, only half of the Czech population would vote to remain in the EU in the case of referendum, and 24% percent of respondents would vote in favour of leaving. From this research, the Czech Republic emerges as one of the most Eurosceptic countries in the whole EU.²⁵ Even though it would be possible to find multiple causes for these findings, it may be argued that it is caused by a tradition of Euroscepticism among most of the political parties and actors (starting already in 2003 with President Václav Klaus), and more recently with an identification of the EU with the sole topic of migration. The connection between the EU and negative topics is not new, however, in the Czech political discourse. Before the problems related to migration arose, the EU was criticised for being too bureaucratic, adopting too many regulations and restrictions, or proving unable to handle the financial crisis of 2008. Since the very topic of the EU remains neglected in the public debate, the discussion (if it even occurs) usually remains confined to only the negative labels mentioned above.²⁶

Similarly to the media, the approach of Czech society towards Russia tends to be rather ambivalent, simply due to the lack of interest about the issue. It is thus possible to suggest that the public perception of Russia might have been influenced significantly by the change of official rhetoric or the tone of reporting on the part of the media; this has happened before, for example, in the case of the so-called migration crisis of 2015, when public debate began becoming polarised and securitised, even though there were almost no migrants present in the territory of the Czech Republic.²⁷

THE PRESENCE OF RUSSIAN SOFT AND SHARP POWER, DISINFORMATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

As was presented in the opinion polls above, only a limited segment of Czech society is receptive to (or even interested in) positive narratives about Russia, which makes it difficult to apply various soft-power tools. Russian entities, such the local embassy, cultural organisations or the Orthodox church, do not have significant influence on Czech public discourse. Among Czech pro-Russian NGO actors, Slavic cultural organisations stand out, promoting partnership with Russia based on shared cultural heritage. These organisations, such as the Bohemian-Moravian Pan-Slavic Congress, have ties to similar organisations in Russia, their members have travelled to Crimea in the past, and maintain close relations with members of the Communist Party.²⁸

Political and non-political actors sympathetic to Russia live in a symbiotic relationship with the Czech alternative media landscape, which is comprised of approximately eighty platforms (websites, Facebook pages and YouTube channels).²⁹ Even though, with the exception of Sputnik CZ, none of them have a proven

24 Milan Tuček, "Vztah české veřejnosti k národnostním skupinám žijícím v ČR – březen 2018", CVVM, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/cz/tiskove-zpravy/ostatni/vztahy-a-zivotni-postoje/4588-vztah-ceske-verejnosti-k-narodnostnim-skupinam-zijicim-v-cr-brezen-2018>

25 "Parlemeter 2018 – Taking up the challenge: From (silent) support to actual vote", European Parliament, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/en/be-heard/eurobarometer/parlemeter-2018-taking-up-the-challenge>

26 For more details see Mrián Koreň, "Analyst: Euroscepticism among Czechs will stay, even with new president", Euroactiv, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/interview/analyst-euroscepticism-among-czechs-will-stay-even-with-new-president/> or "EU je pro Čechy nepodstatné téma, spíš řeší, jaké si vezmou ponožky, říká sociolog", DTV, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://video.aktualne.cz/dtv/eu-je-pro-cechy-nepodstatne-tema-spis-resi-jake-si-vezmou-po/r~b024bc5c366911e98aa4ac1f6b220ee8/>

27 Tkaczyk Michal, Pospěch Pavel and Macek Jakub, "Analýza mediálního pokrytí uprchlické krize (výzkumná zpráva)", Masarykova univerzita, 2015, DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.1.4957.5764

28 For more detailed description see footnote 11

29 Katarín Klingová, "What Do We Know About Disinformation Websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia?", Globsec, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/news/what-do-we-know-about-disinformation-websites-in-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia/>

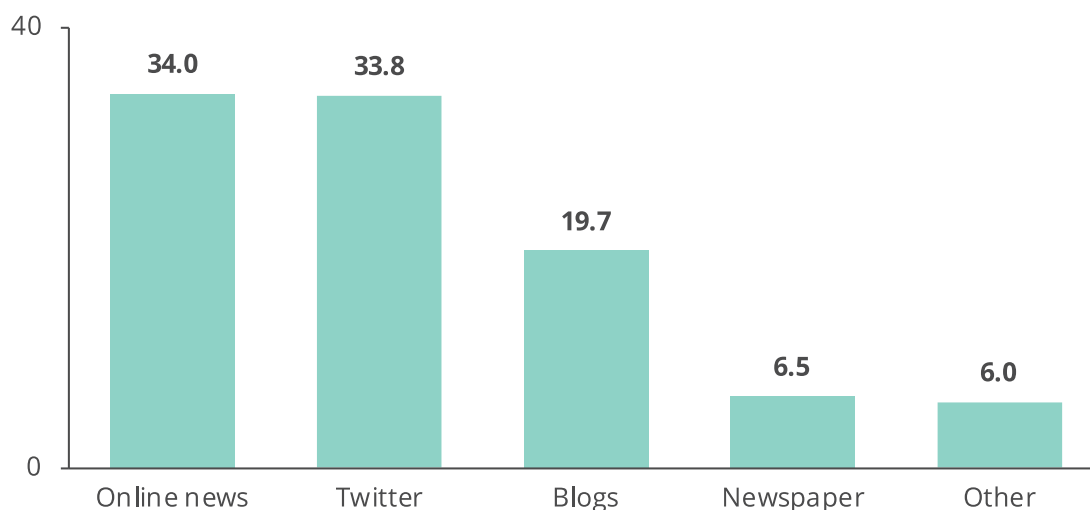
connection to Russian entities (as was also concluded by the Czech counter-intelligence agency BIS³⁰), most of them are involved in spreading pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives (often directly republished from Russian sources). Some of the most notorious narratives are related to migration and Islam – and how it is supposedly destroying European culture –, which is not surprising given the resonance of this topic in the public debate, which makes them a perfect topic of Russian “sharp power.”³¹ The data of the Reuters Digital News Report 2018 shows that only very few platforms known to be spreading disinformation were able to attract the public’s attention to any significant degrees (namely the website Parlamentní listy).

It is important to note, however, that manipulation connected with migration has been utilised (as in the above-mentioned case of TV Prima) by a number of actors in Czech society and politics to achieve their own objectives. For instance: the topic of migration was skilfully utilised by President Zeman during the presidential elections in 2018.³² Even though Czechs have quite a low level of trust in the media in general (31%), the most trustworthy source of information is the public television channel CT, according to the Reuters Digital News Report 2018. The Globsec Trends Survey 2018 also shows that Czechs remain rather immune to conspiracy theories, which resonated with only approximately 20% of respondents. These figures may explain why platforms spreading disinformation have only a limited reach in the Czech information space.

RUSSIA'S PERCEPTIONS AMONG CZECHS – PERCEPTIONS AND NARRATIVES

Among the countries examined, the Czech Republic seems to be the most anti-Russian. Based on the analysis of 1.17 million social media conversations within the past two years, it was found that 65% of the comments reflected anti-Russian sentiments, 17.5% of the discussions echoed neutral opinions, and 17.5% reflected pro-Russian expressions. Approximately 34% of messages were produced by online news outlets, 33.8% by Twitter and 19.7% by blogs.

Chart 1. Main sources of communication surveyed in the Czech Republic (%)



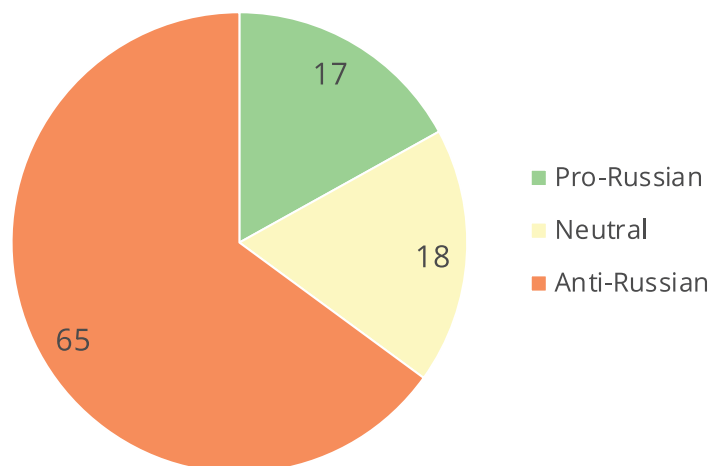
30 “Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2017”, Security Information Service, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.bis.cz/annual-reports/annual-report-of-the-security-information-service-for-2017-dd0940f8.html>

31 Compare with EU vs Disinfo/Disinformation Cases (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>)

32 Siegfried Morktkowitz, “How (the European) Trump won a second term”, Politico, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/milos-zeman-czech-republic-how-the-european-donald-trump-won-a-second-term/>

34% of conversations depicted Russia as an “Invisible Influencer,” a malicious force aiming to divide European countries through various hidden tools such as disinformation, control over energy resources or espionage.

Chart 2. Sentiment ratios of 1.17M public conversations (%)



The trend-line shows that the highest peaks in online conversation were related to the 50th anniversary commemoration of the Soviet occupation in 1968, and the expulsion of Russian diplomats after the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in April 2018.

Chart 3. Distribution of 1.17M Czech online conversations encompassing the term “Russia” between 20 November 2016 and 19 November 2018

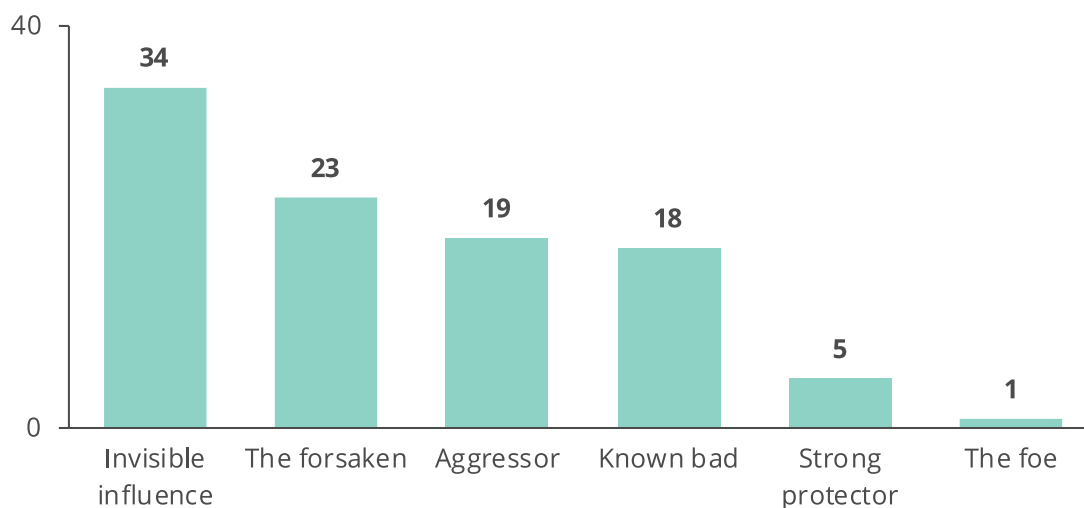


After examining perceptions of Russia in the Czech population in detail, it is possible to see that most of the conversations (34%) depicted the country as an “Invisible Influencer,” trying to covertly manipulate the political situation in the Czech Republic. This perception was manifested not only through particular examples of Russian ambitions to gain influence in the country (such as attempts by Rosatom to win the tender for the construction of the Dukovany nuclear power plant), but was also closely connected to Czech domestic politics and the criticisms of allied supporters (sometimes labelled agents) of Russia (mainly President Zeman). On the other hand, the least popular perception of Russia was “Foe” (1% of conversations), the narrative that clearly expressed a preference for the West over Russia. This finding is consistent with Czechs’ preference to not perceive themselves as a part of the West, and being instead more sceptical towards the EU, as was shown in the chapter 1.2. This is still the case, even though Czechs apparently feel threatened by Russia.

The perception of Russia as a “Strong Protector and Ally,” a strong and reliable partner, appeared in 5% of the conversations. Several variations of this position were found based on different arguments. Firstly, Russia was seen as an ally due to historical reasons; the typical narrative is that *only Russians helped the Czechs in*

the past when help was needed. The narrative portraying Russia as the protector of Slavic nations is deeply rooted in history, appearing already in the 19th century, at the very beginning of the formation of the Czech political nation.³³ Today, this “protection” is most often represented by the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Army in the Second World War. The Russian role in WWII is one of the most often cited arguments for the need to maintain good relations with the country, which is consistent with some current Russian propaganda. However, movements advocating for Slavic identity remain on the periphery of the Czech political discourse, and the renaissance of Czechs identifying with Slavic heritage is not likely. Similarly, the significance of the events of WWII is decreasing over time.

Chart 4. Positive and negative perceptions of Russia among Czechs (%)



The other variation of this perception saw Russia as a strong and independent country that has the legitimacy to carry out various activities in the international arena. So, for example, the Crimean annexation is seen as the fulfilment of the local population's wishes concerning independence. Similar logic was applied to the Russian domestic situation; *Putin's government is seen as truly representing its people*. Interestingly, there were also voices praising the Russian ability to deal with issues of migration effectively and to *tame* the local Muslim community, which was not the case in Western countries. These feelings are likely related to the anxiety connected with migration from Muslim countries, and the feeling that Western states and governments are unable to overcome this threat.³⁴ Moreover, pro-Russian views are also quite common among Czech anti-migration activists.³⁵

The perception of Russia as a “Known Bad,” a normal and well-functioning country that should not be demonised, appeared in 18% of conversations. One of the variations of this perception was focused on cultural issues, such as appreciation for Russian music or jokes. This may not, however, be positive, since this attitude was also expressed through the rather ironic statement that *Russia is not a country, it's a lifestyle*, which likely refers to ironic stories based on stereotypes about Russia and Russians (such as alcoholism or different Russian social norms).³⁶ Thus, on the one hand, this perception is connected with an admiration for Russian culture, which may be explained by cultural proximity and nostalgia towards Soviet times (especially among the older generation). But, on the other hand, there is also a rather ironic attitude towards

33 Václav Černý, *Vývoj a zločiny panslavismu*, Knihovna Václava Havla 2011

34 “Standard Eurobarometer 90”, European Commission, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/General/index>

35 Veronika Vichová, “Česká extremistická scéna ve službách Kremli”, Hlídací Pes, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://hlidacipes.org/ceska-extremisticka-scena-ve-sluzbach-kremli/>

36 As an example see the special section „Simply Russia“ on the website of TV Prima (the third most popular TV station in Czech Republic) – <https://www.iprima.cz/tema/proste-rusko>

present-day Russian culture, based on the mocking of negative stereotypes. Given that these stories are usually disseminated with the use of modern technologies, this is likely to hold true in the case of younger generations. A variation of this perception was focused on advocating for Russia, and claiming that *it is not as bad as it is portrayed by the West*. Respectively: that Western countries are no better than Russia, because they also have their own mechanisms of censorship, or interference in other nations' elections. This relativist approach corresponds clearly with the Czech population's low level of identification with the West, and the ambition to maintain their position between the two sides, as seen in the Globsec Trends opinion poll (see chapter 1.2). However, other voices stated that *Russia is not the Soviet Union*, and therefore the danger posed by the country should not be overstated, signalling a growing fatigue from the polarised Czech domestic political discourse in which attitudes towards Russia play an important role (as will be explained later). Overall, the perception of Russia as a "Known Bad" tends to be quite diverse, spanning from the older generations who adore Russian culture and rationalise its actions, to young people mocking certain aspects of Russian life.

The perception of Russia as the "Aggressor," a belligerent state directly threatening the Czech Republic, was present in 19% of conversations. To a certain extent, this position is in opposition to the narrative about Russia being the "Strong Protector and Ally." It, too, has strong historical roots, but approaches past events from a different perspective. For instance, it sees the arrival of the Soviet Army in Czechoslovakia in 1945 not as an act of liberation, but as the start of the other totalitarian regime. The key event for this perception, however, is the invasion of the Soviet army in 1968, which represents a serious trauma for the whole generation which experienced liberal reforms during the "Prague Spring." The fact that this issue remains a pressing one in the relationship between the Czech Republic and Russia may be illustrated by the very negative reactions to the documentary broadcast on Russian television portraying the invasion in 1968 as an intervention against a counterrevolution.³⁷ This narrative was actualised and put into the context of current events in Ukraine, which were often described as yet another example of Russian aggressiveness, similar to the invasion in 1968; it was often argued that the same events could also occur on Czech soil.³⁸ It is for this reason that Russian actions in Ukraine were seen unfavourably by more than 80% of respondents (especially in 2014, when this topic resonated most loudly in Czech public discourse).³⁹

The perception of Russia as the "Invisible Influencer," an entity aiming to achieve, or already achieving, a strong impact on Czech domestic events, appeared in 34% of conversations. This narrative was focused on practical examples of alleged Russian influence (such as the disinformation campaigns prior to presidential elections in 2018, when one of the candidates, Jiří Drahoš, also spoke about possible Russian interference).⁴⁰ This example shows that this perception also plays an important role in Czech domestic politics, especially in relation to President Zeman, who, according to his critics, behaves like a *Russian agent*.⁴¹ The perception of Russia as an "Invisible Influencer" is not only limited to the political debate, but also has an impact on all other spheres of interaction between the two states. For example, when the popular folk musician Jaromír Nohavík was awarded a state medal for his artistic work by the Russian president, he was criticised by some for collaborating with a hostile country.⁴² Some of these comments, however, were in fact bordering on conspiracy theories (such as the belief, which appeared in this research, according to which *the new Czech government led by Andrej Babiš was actually formed with Russia's blessing*), which might have caused the push-back

37 "Už zase šlo o přátelskou pomoc. Ruská televize obhajuje srpen 68", ČT 24, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/svet/1532318-uz-zase-slo-o-pratelickou-pomoc-ruska-televize-obhajuje-srpen-68>

38 For example see "Jan Zahradil: Aktivita na Krymu evokuje naši zkušenost s "bratrskou pomocí", ODS, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.ods.cz/clanek/6749-aktivita-na-krymu-evokuje-nasi-zkusenost-s-bratrskou-pomoci>

39 "Postoj české veřejnosti k dění na Ukrajině – květen 2014", CVVM, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/mezinarodni-vztahy/1749-postoj-ceske-verejnosti-k-deni-na-ukrajine-kveten-2014>

40 "Drahoš se obává vměšování Ruska do voleb. Sobotka ho ujistil, že zpravodajci hrozbu nepodceňují", Aktuálně.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/drahos-se-obava-ovlivnovani-voleb-upozornil-a-rusky-vliv-sob/r-9e6e038cd67b11e78d510cc47ab5f122/>

41 "Zeman? Agent Kremlu, který pomáhá ruské propagandě, tvrdí politici", Deník, Accessed 25 February 2019, https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/agent-kremlu-ktery-pomaha-ruske-propagande-kritizuji-zemana-politici-20180504.html

42 "Ocenění Nohavici od Putina budí rozpaky. Co by asi řekl Vysockij? tweetoval Dolejš", Novinky.cz, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://www.novinky.cz/kultura/488175-oceneni-nohavici-od-putina-budi-rozpaky-co-by-asi-rekl-vysockij-tweetoval-dolejs.html>

seen in the perception of the “Known Bad.” To sum up, the perception of Russia as an “Invisible Influencer” is not driven solely by Russian hostile acts against the Czech Republic, but also by a dissatisfaction on the part of society with the current political situation, and it is also used in a purely domestic political struggle.

The perception of Russia as “Forsaken,” a backward country with deep social problems, was reflected in 23% of conversations. This perception saw Russia as a poor, underdeveloped country inhabited by uncivilised people with a harsh and unjust political system. This observation has been present in Czech society already since the communist era, when the rest of the Eastern Bloc, and the Soviet Union in particular, were seen as countries less developed than Czechoslovakia. This perception is confirmed from time to time by various stories illustrating poor living conditions in Russia. For example, news items suggesting that a significant number of Russian schools do not have toilets attracted quite a bit of attention on social media.⁴³ Another important driver of this perception (especially related to alleged Russian cultural backwardness) is the recent history of the Czech spa town Karlovy Vary, notorious for its numerous Russian inhabitants (often with criminal backgrounds), whose presence has resulted in an unpleasant social climate in the whole city.⁴⁴ The image of Russia as “Forsaken” is definitely not new in the Czech debate, and it is only occasionally recycled with more current examples. The presence of this narrative is consistent with International Republican Institute polling, according to which the majority of Czechs do not believe that they have much in common with Russia (see chapter 1.2).

The perception of Russia as “The Foe,” the challenger of the West was present in 1% of conversations. This narrative shows that there is nothing to gain from partnership with Russia, and that a Western orientation is more beneficial for the Czech Republic. The minor presence of this narrative clearly shows that Czechs still do not see themselves as a part of Western Europe in practical terms as, for example, also evinced by low and shallow support for the EU.

PERCEPTION OF CHINA IN RUSSIA-RELATED CONVERSATIONS

Bakamo.Social also looked at statements regarding China in the grassroots communication about Russia. According to the views of average Czechs, both Russia and China can be considered negative international players due to their aggressive international behaviour, a shared ambition to change the current world order and similarly despotic and brutal communist historical paths. China was also perceived as a “Forsaken” country, although, one that is even more backwards than Russia in terms of its political system, low standard of living etc. Czechs were especially concerned about China’s presence in domestic politics, because its lobbying power may influence politicians’ agendas, most importantly President Zeman’s actions, steering them in adverse directions. Chinese political influence and Chinese ownership of Czech firms is perceived as a direct threat to Czech national security interests by asserting authoritarian or sharp power over the Czech public, the parliament or other democratic institutions. Thus, negative views on Russia tend to reinforce negative perceptions of China along the same economic, military or human rights issues, a fact which hints at the same grassroots societal resilience factors against any authoritarian influence in CEE.

43 The original article was published in the Slovak daily – Mirek Tóda, “Tisíce ruských dětí nemají v škole řádný záchod. Je to hanba, hněvá sa šéfka senátu”, Deník N, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://dennikn.sk/1349884/tisice-ruskych-deti-trpia-ich-skoly-nemaju-riadny-zachod-je-to-hanba-hneva-sa-sefka-senatu/>

44 Václav Čepelák, “Russians in Karlovy Vary from the Inhabitants’ Perspective”, Lidéměsta, Accessed 25 February 2019, <http://lidemesta.cz/archiv/cisla/12-2010-3/rusove-v-karlovyh-varech-ocima-mistnich-obyvatel.html?language=cs>

ANALYSIS OF CZECH FACEBOOK PAGES AND NARRATIVES

The analysis of the Czech Facebook environment is based on the top 20 Facebook pages of the most influential mainstream media outlets, and the top 20 most popular pro-Russian fringe Facebook pages or media listed in the table below.

Table 1. Top 20 mainstream media in the Czech Republic

Name	Characterisation	Number of followers on Facebook
AHA	Daily tabloid	196,125
Aktuálně	Online news portal	100,906
Armádní noviny	Online news portal	18,285
Blesk	Daily tabloid	118,830
Centrum	Online news portal	10,098
ČT 24	Public TV channel	324,211
Deník	Daily print newspaper	8,752
iDnes	Daily print newspaper	211,443
E15	Online news portal	45,037
Echo24	Weekly political magazine	56,470
G.cz	Online news portal	57,584
Hospodářské noviny	Daily print newspaper	97,332
Info	Online news portal	34,195
iRozhlas	Public radio station	30,259
Lidové noviny	Daily print newspaper	5,183
Novinky	Online news portal	137,830
Respekt	Weekly political magazine	108,190
Svobodné fórum	Online news portal	62,991
Týden	Weekly political magazine	25,605
Seznam Zprávy	Online news portal	87,445

Table 2. Top 20 disinformation media in the Czech Republic

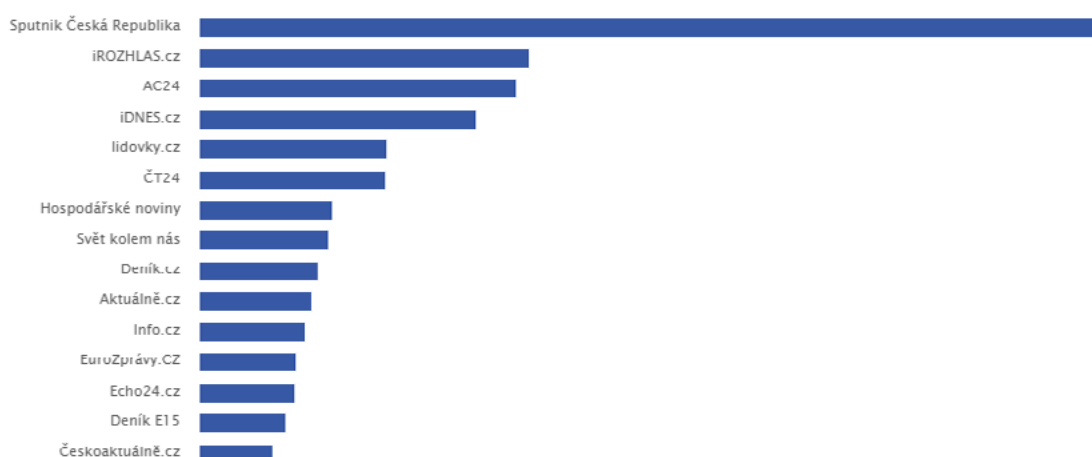
Name	Characterisation	Number of followers on Facebook
AC24	Conspiracy fringe site	85,399
Alternativní magazín	Conspiracy fringe site	30,683
Czech Free Press	Conspiracy fringe site	11,681
Časopis Šifra	Conspiracy print magazine	11,561

Name	Characterisation	Number of followers on Facebook
ČeskoAktuálně	Conspiracy fringe site	27,857
Český zpravodaj	Facebook site republishing content of conspiracy fringe sites	10,315
EuroZprávy	Online news portal with bi-ased coverage	60,943
Ne Bruselu	Far-right Facebook activist group	35,636
Nová bružoazie	Conspiracy Facebook site	4,363
Organizace proti multikulturnímu fanatismu	Far-right Facebook activist group	22,708
Parlamentní listy	Online news portal with bi-ased coverage	47,195
Pravý prostor	Right-wing fringe site	15,779
Protiproud	Conspiracy fringe site	18,622
Příznaky transformace	Conspiracy Facebook site	26,840
Středoevropan	Conspiracy Facebook site	1,505
Svět kolem nás	Conspiracy fringe site	19,061
Sputnik CZ	Russian state news portal	34,383
Svobodné noviny	Conspiracy fringe site	18,221
Zastavme zloděje	Conspiracy Facebook activist group	45,224
Zpravodajství bez cenzury	Conspiracy Facebook site	38,649

When analysing the opinions of Czech society, Facebook must not be overlooked, since this platform is visited by more than 5 million users, amounting to half of the population.⁴⁵ This fact is very well understood in Czech newsrooms and, during the past few years, almost every mainstream media outlet (including those that are state-owned) has launched its own Facebook page. The Facebook environment, however, also allows the expansion of fringe websites, and this platform remains the main multiplier of pro-Kremlin voices in the Czech information space. This can be illustrated by the activity of Sputnik CZ, which was the most active platform when it comes to Russia-related events. Considering the fact that this platform is one of the soft and sharp power instruments of the Russian state, and produces a significant amount of content (around 50 post per day), this fact is hardly surprising. The question remains how successful Sputnik is in the shaping of the Czech narrative about Russia, as the number of interactions on its Facebook page usually remains around 1000 per day.⁴⁶ The pro-Kremlin narrative is supported by other fringe websites, such as AC24, Svět kolem nás, EuroZprávy and ČeskoAktuálně, which are also shown on the graph below. However, mainstream media, which usually tends to be relatively critical towards Russia, clearly dominates in the debate.

45 "Facebook v ČR hlásí přes 5,2 milionů uživatelů", Newsfeed.cz, accessed 9 February 2019, <https://newsfeed.cz/facebook-v-cr-hlasi-pres-52-milionu-uzivatelu/>

46 Calculation for given period based on Zoomsphere data

Chart 5. Top Facebook sources disseminating Russia-related articles between 1 January and 19 November 2018⁴⁷

The graph below shows the volume of discussions about Russia on the chosen sample of Czech mainstream and fringe Facebook pages. It is possible to identify several peaks in the debate, four of which are described in detail. Surprisingly, the peaks of debate do not coincide with any important geopolitical events and are rather composites of more unrelated events. As shown already, the most important (although not necessarily the most influential) Facebook page in the debate about Russia is Sputnik CZ, which publishes a large number of articles daily describing Russia-related events. This, in fact, mirrors perceptions across entire Czech Facebook space as such, where the articles examined usually reflect a positive sentiment towards Russia, based on items published by Sputnik CZ. The events described in these stories remain unnoticed by outlets other than the pro-Russian fringe media actors; the event itself thus never receives more balanced coverage. The sample therefore contains, for instance, more news about the Il-20 incident or the alleged attack at the Hmeimim (or Khmeimim) airbase, advocating for the Russian point of view, because the media – other than Sputnik CZ (and consequently other fringe media outlets) – did not pay much (or any) attention to the event, allowing the Russian interpretation of it to prevail. When this was not the case, however (such as the case of travellers stuck in Irkutsk, described below), it was possible to see a clear distinction between the differing tones of the mainstream media and the pro-Kremlin outlets. Therefore, any analysis of the Czech Facebook space based on debate peaks must be performed with caution.

The first peak (29 articles) of articles on 7 September did not have any particular topic; it was rather the result of significant activity by Sputnik CZ. Some of the topics discussed were the German approval of Russia's actions in Syria⁴⁸, or alleged irregularities in the official version of the attempted assassination of Sergei Skripal.⁴⁹

The second peak of articles (28 articles), on 23 September, was predominantly related to the shooting down of the Il-20 Russian military plane in Syria. While mainstream media reported that the incident was caused by an error by Syrian army artillery,⁵⁰ fringe media (lead by Sputnik CZ) adopted a version of events

47 Top Facebook accounts disseminating articles containing the keyword "Russia" or "Rusko" in Czech among the 40 Facebook pages under revision.

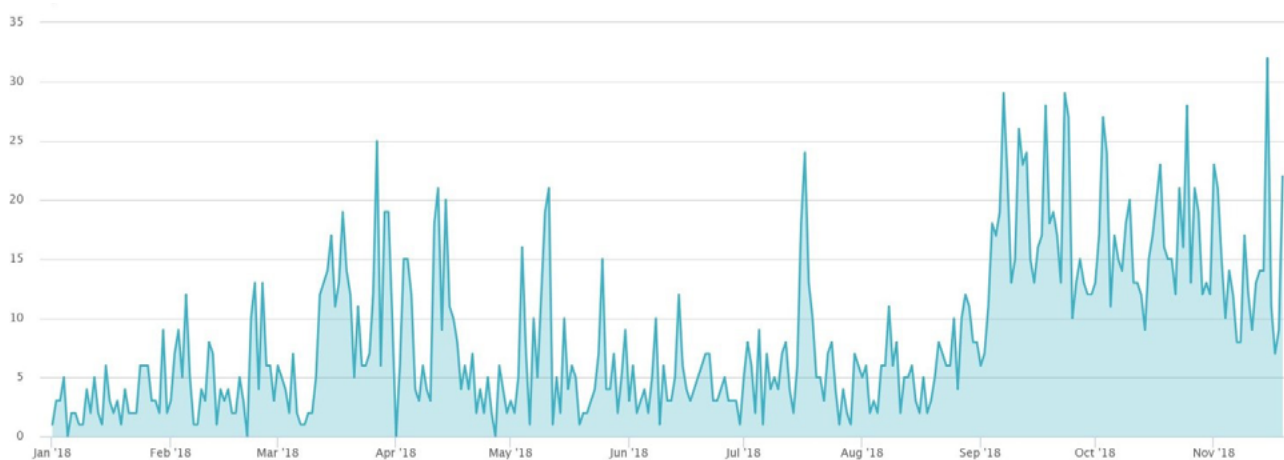
48 "Merkelová poprvé podpořila opatření Ruska v Sýrii, uvádí média", Sputnik CZ, Accessed 9 February 2019 (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/politika/201809078027989-merkelova-rusko-syrie/>)

49 "Dobrodružství v Anglii aneb Co bychom měli vědět o podezřelých v případě Skripalových", Sputnik CZ, Accessed 9 February 2019 (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/nazory/201809078024059-skripal-britanie-mayova-rusko/>)

50 "Zneužili horkou linku, aby nás zmátli. Ruské ministerstvo opět viní Izrael kvůli sestřelení výzvědného letadla", iRozhlas, Accessed 9 February 2019 (https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/rusko-izrael-sestreni-letounu-il-20-putin-horka-linka_1809231457_cen)

according to which Israeli air force fighters were responsible for the incident, because they were hiding behind the Russian plane.⁵¹

Chart 6. Number of Russia-related posts on the 40 Czech pages between 1 January and 19 November 2018⁵²



The third peak of articles (28 articles), on 25 October, was related to an incident at the Russian airbase Hmeimim, which was allegedly attacked by drones operated by the United States. This story was based on a statement made by the Russian Deputy Minister of Defence, Alexandr Fomin.⁵³ A similar argument was made by other fringe sources, who republished the content related to the incident from Sputnik CZ. This statement was not covered by any of the mainstream media.

The last peak (32 articles), on 15 November, was closely connected to the Czech political situation, since it was then that it was discovered that the son of Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš had allegedly been kidnapped and taken to the Crimea by associates of his father, in an effort to prevent him from testifying against Babiš in the investigation of the misuse of EU funds. The very fact that the son of the Czech Prime Minister was being held in Russian-occupied territory was seen by some as a threat to national security. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs unequivocally denied any involvement in the affair, and claimed that it was an act of provocation, forming a part of Czech domestic political intrigues.⁵⁴ Coincidentally, on the same day, it was reported that a plane was forced to land in Irkutsk due to technical problems, with passengers on board who were unprepared to spend several days in the city under wintry conditions. While the mainstream outlet iDnes reported on the mistreatment of the passengers by local authorities⁵⁵, Sputnik CZ (and other fringe media alike) claimed that encountering “true Russian winter” was a rather interesting experience for the travellers.⁵⁶

Each of the peaks fed into five basic perceptions expressed by Czechs. The perception of Russia as a “Strong protector and ally” was supported by 65%; “Known bad” supported by 11%. The key advocate of this view is Sputnik CZ, which not only produces a significant number of articles supporting this perception, but also influences the content of other fringe platforms. In the mainstream media, at the same time, the portrayal

51 “Ruské ministerstvo obrany: Izrael v případě Il-20 porušil dohody z roku 2015”, Sputnik CZ, Accessed 9 February 2019 (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201809238119576-rusko-izrael-il20-syrie/>)

52 Top Facebook accounts disseminating articles containing the keyword “Russia” or “Rusko” in Czech among the 40 Facebook pages under revision.

53 “USA koordinovaly útok dronů na Hmímím”, Sputnik CZ, Accessed 9 February 2019 (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201810258324683-utok-dron-hmimim-letoun/>)

54 “Rusko se rozlítlo: Zprávy o únosu Babišova syna jsou provokací, jako fake news”, EuroZprávy, Accessed 9 February 2019 (<https://eurozpravy.cz/zahranicni/evropa/240448-rusko-se-rozlilo-zpravy-o-unosu-babisova-syna-jsou-provakaci-jako-fake-news/>)

55 “Závada letadla Air France přikovala cestující na tři dny do mrazu na Sibiři”, iDnes, Accessed 9 February 2019 (https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/zahranicni/letadlo-sibir-air-france-irkutsk-cestujici-francie-cina-rusko.A181115_080248_zahranicni_remy)

56 “20 stupňů pod nulou a pravou ruskou zimu zažil i tým Louis Vuitton na cestě do Šanghaje”, Sputnik CZ, Accessed 9 February 2019 (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201811158474236-ruska-zima-tym-louis-vuitton-cesta-sanghaj/>)

of Russia as “Aggressor” (13%), “Invisible Influencer” (4%) and “Forsaken” (7%) is dominant. The results are significantly different from those presented in chapter 2.2, due to the fact that mainstream sources are underrepresented (as discussed above), showing that Russia has the ability and the ambition to enter into the Czech debate about Russia-related issues, and actively construct and propagate its own narrative of events. These narratives might not be very relevant while looking at the Czech information space at large, but they definitely resonate with some of the fringe platforms.

CRIMEA

There were 539 mentions of Crimea (“Krym” in Czech) in the relevant period. The most significant discussion of this topic was related not to the situation in the peninsula itself, but to Czech politics. As mentioned already, in mid-November it was discovered that the son of the Czech prime minister may have been held against his will in Crimea (see details above). The ensuing intensive debate (there were around 50 articles mentioning Crimea published over the course of several days) was related mainly to the case itself. The debate also appeared, however, in articles related to the security situation in the peninsula, arguing that the son of the prime minister being there may be a risk to Czech national security. Significant attention was also paid to the mass-shooting at the Polytechnic College in Kerch, which occurred in October 2018. While these two events were covered by most of the Czech media, for the rest of the year, Sputnik CZ was almost the only medium reporting about the situation in the peninsula (publishing 84 articles in total), along with the similarly fringe outlet AC24 (publishing 40 articles in total), which for the most part simply republished content from Sputnik.

1968

Interest in this topic reached its peak on the 50th anniversary of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact armies on 12 August (124 articles related to this issue published that day). As was already mentioned in the previous chapter, the commemoration of the 1968 invasion plays a key role in Czechs’ perceptions of present-day Russia and its portrayal of it as an “Aggressor.” The resonance of this perception may be illustrated by the fact that singer Lucie Bělá was booed at a concert commemorating the anniversary because of her previous performances at the concerts of the Alexandrov Ensemble.⁵⁷ Fringe media outlets did not pay significant attention to the topic of the 1968 invasion (most active, Sputnik CZ published 46 articles); if they did, they criticised that the anniversary was being used to denigrate Russia.

CZECH PUBLIC SEGMENTS ON RUSSIA

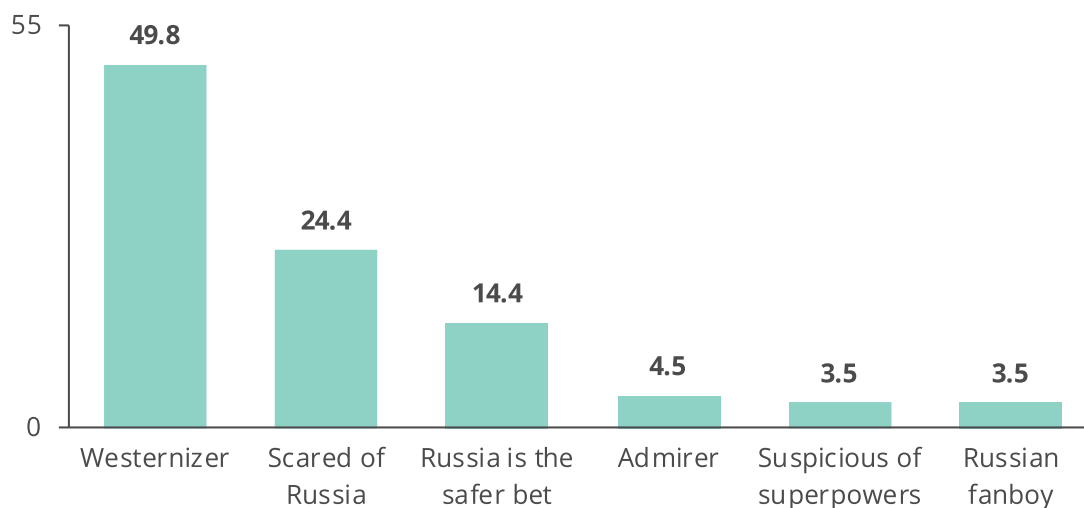
Based on the discussion analysis, six types of public or consumer groups were segmented as being vulnerable or resilient in their relations, opinions, or social construct to Russian or the Kremlin’s information warfare. As the results show, the part of Czech society which is sympathetic to Russia is quite small (around 10%). Equally, the part of the population suspicious about superpowers is almost negligible (a finding consistent with the Globsec Trends data presented in chapter 1.2). Those who see Russia negatively clearly prevail in Czech society (around 75%). A rather pragmatic group, seeing the advantages of maintaining good relations, is also present.

The group of “Russian fan boys” comprised of younger men, admiring the masculine and tough image of Russian society, is only marginal (around 3.5%). While these men usually perceive Russia as a “Strong Protector and Ally,” it is likely that they also view migration and Islam critically (as discussed in chapter 2.2), so

57 “Lucii Bílou na Václaváku vypískali! Od Alexandrovců přeběhla k výročí okupace”, Blesk, Accessed 9 February 2019, <https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/celebrity-ceske-celebrity/560516/lucii-bilou-na-vaclavaku-vypiskali-od-alexandrovcu-prebehla-k-vyroci-okupace.html>

they are likely to be connected with extremist movements. However, these movements have failed to make political use of the agenda related to migration (that was taken up by populist politicians across the entire spectrum), and so they remain on the fringes of the debate.

Chart 7. Distribution of Czech public segments on Russia (%)



The group of “Admirers” is also quite small (4.5%); in the Czech context, its members likely belong to older generations feeling nostalgic about the communist era, and who are accustomed to good relations with the Soviet Union. As far as perceptions are concerned, this group tends to see Russia as a “Strong Protector and Ally” – mainly in that they also harbour anti-German sentiments (related to WWII events) – or as a “Known Bad,” tending to focus on non-political issues such as a shared Slavic identity. Politically, this group is likely to be connected with the more conservative wing of the Czech Communist Party.

The more significant number of people who are rather sympathetic to Russia (approximately 14%) tend to hold a rather pragmatic position and argue that it is important to maintain good bilateral relations due to geopolitical and economic reasons. They perceive Russia as a “Known bad” in the sense that Russia is not as bad as it is made out to be, and so it is possible to maintain normal relations with the country. The profile of this group is difficult to define; its existence, however, is not surprising in light of the data seen in the opinion polls presented in chapter 1.2, which show that a significant percentage of the Czech population wishes to remain in between the West and the East.

Roughly half of the population falls into the segment of “Westernisers”: people who see themselves as belonging to the West, and who have no sympathy towards Russia (again, findings are consistent with International Republican Institute opinion polls). Russia is perceived by this group not only as an “Aggressor” or “Invisible Influencer,” but also as “Forsaken” – an entity that is only destructive, and cannot offer anything positive to the Czech Republic. Judging from the size of this segment, this opinion might be called the mainstream in the Czech discourse. However, it should be pointed out that this group is diverse, and only a small portion of it (as the marginal presence of the “Foe” perception presented in chapter 2.1) truly feel a bond with the West in practical terms (for example, in the need to come up with a common strategy vis-à-vis Russia).

The second most significant group are those who are primarily “Scared of Russia” (around 25%). Their feelings are likely to be strengthened by the memory of the Soviet invasion in 1968 and also by the quite extensive public discussion about threats (real or perceived) related to Russian interference in Czech politics. Russia is therefore seen by this group as an “Aggressor” or “Invisible Influencer.” It is, however, important to note that this does not automatically result in an allegiance to the West, because it may also be connected with feelings of insecurity and inferiority (discussed in the next chapter).

DRIVERS OF PRO-RUSSIAN ATTITUDES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The themes underlying the majority of comments and perceptions about Russia were also related to the topics resonating in other debates about Czech society or foreign policy. In the analysis, it was possible to trace the strong feelings or (social) psychological drivers of geopolitical orientations related to insecurity and inferiority. Therefore, this is not only a debate about Russia, but it is also closely connected to a debate about the Czech Republic (and, in fact, about Central Europe in general) and its position in the world.

The feeling of insecurity in Czech society is linked not only to present-day aggressive Russian policy towards its neighbours and the vivid debate about malicious, covert actions focused on Western societies, the existence of which the majority of population very much seems to believe in (as the notable presence of the “Invisible Influencer” portrayal clearly shows) – likely also due to extensive coverage of these issues in the Czech media. There is also a strong historical reminiscence, especially related to the 1968 invasion, which plays an important role in the debate. The year 1968 remains an important symbol that has often been actualised in connection with present-day Russian aggressive behaviour. Another layer of the feeling of insecurity may also be connected to mistrust in Western countries, which may not appear to be truly reliable partners should a serious geopolitical struggle occur. In this respect, Czech society continues to suffer from the so-called “Munich syndrome,” related to the treaty of 1938, when Czechoslovakia was abandoned by its Western allies. The low level of trust results in an ambition to stay somewhere in between the West and the East, and to try to maintain good relations with both sides. This was clearly visible in the marginal presence of the “Foe” narrative (chapter 2.1), and was also shown by Globsec Trends and International Republican Institute polling (chapter 1.2). The key challenge is, then, not to explain to the Czech population that Russia is the threat, but to ensure that they are a strong part of a Western community that would offer security in the case of problems.

The feeling of inferiority vis-à-vis Russia is closely related to Russia’s perceived strength and the inherent dangers resulting from it. As has been noted before, this inferiority complex may also be enhanced by the significant attention paid to Russian (real or perceived) manipulation. This feeling also plays a role in relations with Western countries, since Czechs are generally disappointed in domestic developments (especially in economic terms: it was expected that the country will soon catch up to Germany) after the fall of Communism, which then have implications for opinions about the geopolitical orientation of the country. Dissatisfaction with the Czech political situation – in the year 2009, only 10% of respondents were satisfied with the political situation, a result primarily reflecting a high level of corruption – is in first place.⁵⁸ After the parliamentary elections of 2010, Czech mainstream political parties began to weaken and, due to other factors (such as the so-called migration crisis), the political scene became more accessible to actors (mainly right-wing populists) who questioned the pro-Western orientation of the country. Another important factor contributing to the revision of the pro-Western position of Czech foreign policy was the economic crisis of 2008, after which (at least rhetorically) reorientation toward non-Western markets started. This business calculus may be partially explained by the position “Russia is a safe bet,” which may also be connected to the ambition to secure the Czech position on the local market. However, the feeling of inferiority is also manifested in the resignation of the Czech population in the debate about the country’s foreign policy, with many concluding that the stronger players (such as Russia or the West) decide the country’s future anyway.⁵⁹ Therefore, another challenge is to demonstrate to Czech society that it may achieve its political priorities by playing an active role in Western institutions (such as the EU or NATO), which could help create the ideological bond that is clearly missing today.

58 Daniel Kunštát, Důvěra ústavním institucím a spokojenost s politickou situací v říjnu 2010, CVVM, Accessed 25 February 2019, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/tiskove-zpravy/politicke/institute-a-politici/464-dvra-ustavnim-institucim-a-spokojenost-s-politickou-situaci-v-ijnu-2010>

59 More about this perception for example in Jan Tesař, Mnichovský komplex: Jeho příčiny a důsledky, Prostor 2014

The tables below summarise the most influential platforms according to the analysis. It is possible to see (mainly from the number of engagements per post) that the most influential drivers of the Czech debate about Russia were mainstream media (such as Czech television news, *Hospodářské noviny* or *iDnes*) and their Twitter accounts, which are rather critical towards Russia.⁶⁰ The exception is the news website *Parlamentní listy*, which is part of the alternative media landscape and so is more likely to spread pro-Russian narratives (see chapter 1.3). Even though this website writes about Russia more often than other platforms in the news category, it produces a smaller number of engagements per post; it is thus possible to conclude that its impact is smaller than that of the mainstream media. The other actors of the alternative media scene (such as *Pravý prostor*, *Aeronet* or *Nová Republika*) publish content related to Russia very often, but their levels of engagement (and so the number of their readers) remains low. An interesting figure shaping Czech discourse is Alexandr Mitrofanov, a journalist of Russian origin living in the Czech Republic, who is rather critical about the current state of affairs in Russia.

Table 3. The list of top media sources of grassroots communication in the Czech Republic

Name of platform	Number of posts	Engagement	Engagement per post
Forum.chronomag	533	10	9.2
Modelforum	360	10	0
Motorkari	47	11	0.1
Forum.root	300	10	0.2
Offroadforum	338	37	0.1

Name of platform	Number of posts	Engagement	Engagement per post
ČT24	533	4.9K	9.2
Hospodářské noviny	267	983	3.7
Alexandr Mitrofanov	495	11.9K	24.1
Aktuálně	395	1.9K	4.9
iDNES	141	182	1.3

60 See footnote 19

Name of platform	Number of posts	Engagement	Engagement per post
Parlamentní listy	5.6K	397.9K	71.3
Zprávy iDNES	947	158.6K	167.5
Česká televize	2.5K	133.9K	53.2
Novinky	1.4K	131.9K	92.6
Seznam Zprávy	343	126.7K	369.3
Pravý prostor	9.7K	157.5K	16.2
Nová Republika	8.4K	26.3K	3.1
Aeronet	1.8K	3.6K	2
Hlídací Pes	557	2.3K	4.2
Vlastenecké noviny	726	1.1K	1.5