

Summary of an Expert Roundtable

Russian Influence in Central Europe

On February 27th, in cooperation with the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) organized a closed-door roundtable in Bratislava, Slovakia, to discuss the Kremlin's influence tools that are either active or can be potentially employed across Visegrad countries in an effort to cultivate a climate of distrust towards key institutions and undermine vital relations between allies.

In **Slovakia**, it has been highlighted that Kremlin narratives are supported by a number of actors from various sectors, which altogether can generate a noticeable mobilization potential. In the sphere of disinformation media, portal Hlavnespravdy.sk has been singled out due to its ability to accumulate the highest number of readers in a fairly short period of time. Other disinformation outlets, such as the magazine Zem a Vek or portal Panobcan.sk, have been on the rise as well. Adding to this, in the non-governmental sphere, Slovak-Russian society, headed by a former Prime Minister Jan Carnogursky, is the most visible pro-Russian voice in Slovakia. In addition, there is strong concern over the growing phenomenon of paramilitary groups. Members of the largest group, Slovak Conscripts (Slovenski branci), managed to open regional branches in most regions of Slovakia, and some of their members have also joined separatists in eastern Ukraine.

It is crucial to mention that **Poland** is notably different from other Visegrad countries. It directly shares borders with the Kaliningrad oblast, a strategic Russian enclave that previously served as an important military outpost. The society is also confronted with a higher anti-Russian sentiment when compared to other countries in Central Europe. Moreover, after Poland embarked upon a path of democratic transition in 1989, political consensus quickly emerged that the country will need to integrate with the West, and take a cautious approach towards relations with Russia. On a number of occasions over the last couple of years the authorities in Warsaw attempted to improve its relations with Russia, however, since the period 2013–2014 when Russian assertiveness began to grow, these attempts faded.

With regard to the sanctions regime, most of the political parties in Poland support their existence. The only exception is the Polish People's Party (PSL) who have traditionally advocated the interests of agricultural workers, harmed by the sanctions. Regarding the non-governmental organizations, the Polish government previously promoted cooperation with their Russian partners, but this approach took a dramatic turn in the post-2014 environment. When trying to identify pro-Russian elements among political parties, the pro-Russian Zmiana (Change) stands out; its leader, Mateusz Piskorski was detained in May of 2016 on espionage charges.

Given the strong anti-Russian sentiments, propaganda narratives have to be adjusted for Poland and thus are different from other countries. As they cannot openly promote pro-Russian themes, focus is shifted

towards politicization of issues that divide society, such as nationalism or anti-Ukrainian and anti-Lithuanian sentiments. On this subject matter, one of the speaker pointed out the important role of ‘non-mainstream’ or ‘alternative’ media and social networks groups that have been the beneficiary of increasing prominence. Messages that are being spread through these channels are not necessarily pro-Kremlin, but rather socially destructive.

In the **Czech Republic** one speaker emphasized the fact that there are generally two types of pro-Russian influence actors: ones that can be directly linked to Russian government and those that are Kremlin-inspired, but with no proven ties. Together these two types amplify the phenomenon of pro-Russian disinformation messages. Based on public sources it can be proven that only one medium operating in the Czech language is financed by the Kremlin - Sputnik news. Moreover, there is one other disinformation outlet, Eurodenik.cz, which is owned by Russian citizens living in Prague. But all the other disinformation portals (the number has been estimated at around 40) claim no allegiance to Kremlin and they like to present themselves as promoting alternative viewpoints.

It has been also noted that in the political sphere, old networks from the past remain to be of vital importance, and a number of key individuals from the communist party openly voice their pro-Russian stance. Similarly, a couple of President Zeman’s advisors have vested interest for keeping positive relations with regard to Russia. For example Martin Nejedlý, former head of Lukoil Aviation Czech, and Zdenek Zbytek, who maintains ties with Russian diplomats and businesses, would fit into this category.

The Czech Republic reportedly has a significant presence of Russian intelligence officers stationed on its soil. This can be partly explained by favorable location, and the size of Russian embassy. Another sphere where one can possibly identify Russian influence are in non-governmental institutions that advocate pro-Kremlin narratives. Over the past few years, Moscow realized that it is important to step up its work in the public diplomacy sector and specifically its cultural center *Rossotrudichestvo*, which plays an increasingly vital role in cultivating ties and contacts (through informal cooperation, projects of common interests and events) with like-minded NGOs.

It has been estimated that there are some 17,000 firms operating in the Czech Republic in which the owners come from Russia. Thus business and trade relations are regularly highlighted as a possible area where influence can be exercised. Yet, the exact number of Kremlin-friendly businesses is hard to assess due to the fact that a number of companies operate through shell entities registered in places like Cyprus.

A different situation exists in **Hungary**. As the only non-Slavic nation of the four countries, Russian efforts cannot utilize the themes of Slavic brotherhood in Hungary. Instead, they have to promote a different set of narratives to further feelings of affinity. The speaker noted that the support for Russian narratives remains quite stable. On the political level, Hungary’s main political parties promote cooperation with Russia. For instance, government’s policy of Eastern Opening was initiated in 2010. According to the speaker pro-Russian NGOs are not significant in Hungary and the government has a negative stance towards the civil society in general.

The presence of Russian community and existing trade chambers are relatively marginal. Instead, it has been uncovered that in Hungary, Russia prefers to offer support to the right-wing radicals. Notably, there are recorded ties between the Hungarian National Front and Russian embassy officials. It was also noted that some Facebook pages founded by radical right-wing groups were taken over by Russians. In Hungary, pro-Russian propaganda attempts to build on already existing narratives. On some occasions, fake news are published even in mainstream media and by the official news agency.

Q&A

Propaganda Narratives in the Region

One participant made the observation that disinformation messages tend to be adjusted to the realities in a particular country and region. Unsurprisingly, the more divided the society, the more vulnerable and prone they are to manipulation. In addition, themes of these campaigns have been changing with time as well. While in 2014 topics connected to Ukraine prevailed in disinformation campaigns, with the introduction of refugee crises in late 2015 disinformation and conspiracies shifted their focus to terrorism and immigration. Understandably, this demonstrates that they are highly adaptable to current events. It was also noted that in the last few weeks anti-migration rhetoric has been slowly retreating. An explanation could be seen in the decreased number of immigrants in the region.

In Poland propaganda has been focusing on nationalism and anti-Ukrainian sentiment as well as on defamation of the EU (portrayed as too bureaucratic) and NATO (being seen as too militaristic). Social issues and anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiment are also exploited through these mediums as well.

One participant added that in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, openly pro-Russian and strongly manipulative websites are less influential than “bridge media” that try to exploit gray areas between mainstream media and sources of alternative information, such as Parlamentní Listy and Hlavní Správy. This is mainly due to the fact that these 'bridge media' groups are very effective in imitating mainstream media as well as in mixing disinformation into relevant news.

Counter-Measures

Subsequently, the discussion turned towards finding appropriate counter-measures to Russian influence activities. One speaker warned that the answer to propaganda should not be more propaganda; mostly because people in the region, and especially older generations that still remember Soviet propaganda, are skeptical towards it. Instead, myth-busting, supporting mainstream media as well as cooperation between state institutions and NGOs should be strengthened. One speaker indicated that propaganda usually

targets specific socio-economic problems and weaknesses, thus such weaknesses need to be identified and addressed accordingly.

It was generally agreed that education is an extremely crucial counter-measure. A number of areas should be reformed in the educational systems of the Visegrad countries, mainly:

1. Education of critical thinking and media literacy
2. Education of history (the last 70 years that are crucial for understanding the complexity of current events are often neglected in schools)
3. Civic Education (the role of government, EU, NATO)
4. Capacity of teachers need to be improved (many teachers in Slovakia support extremist ideology and politicians, such as Marian Kotleba)
5. Education of politicians and state officials in areas such as strategic communication and cyber security is crucial as well.

If children do not receive appropriate information in elementary and high schools, they will receive such information on the Internet, which is overloaded by fake news and disinformation. Alternative forms of educating society, such as the use of ICT technologies or YouTube, can also benefit the society.

One good regional example of the government's response to the phenomenon of Russian influence is the new Center for Hybrid Threats and Terrorism that was recently created under the Czech Ministry of Interior. It was also noted that the role of the center will be mostly internal communication and coordination between state authorities, countering propaganda is only one among many activities of the center

Impact Assessment

Participants agreed that measuring impact of pro-Russian disinformation is challenging. The line between Russian propaganda and interests of other entities is very blurred. In Hungary, for example, government itself previously used fake news in its own interests. Since democracy and western institutions are the most frequent targets of pro-Russian disinformation, what people think about Russia and Kremlin is less important than their perception of liberal values. To conclude, it was suggested that divisive narratives most frequently targeted by Russian propaganda need to be identified and monitored in opinion polls to track their growth.



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