

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This text is an executive summary of a forthcoming publication “United We Stand, Divided We Fall: The Kremlin’s Leverage in the Visegrad Countries” a thorough study written by a consortium of leading experts from think tanks in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The publication is a part of a long-term initiative of the Prague Security Studies Institute to shed light on the diverse tools and subversive methods the Kremlin uses to gain influence in Central and Eastern Europe.

Coordinated by:

Prague Security Studies Institute

Project Partners:

Prague Security Studies Institute (Czech Republic)

Slovak Foreign Policy Association (Slovakia)

Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (Hungary)

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CZECH REPUBLIC

Given the Slavic roots of Czech society and four decades of Soviet rule, there are residual positive attitudes toward Russia among certain segments of the population. However, while some hold pro-Moscow views simply out of conviction, most are influenced by a deliberate Russian strategy advanced by those with close business and personal ties to the Kremlin.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

- With fifty-five accredited diplomats (ninety-two including spouses) in 2017, the diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation is disproportionately larger than the diplomatic missions of the Czech Republic's Western allies. Through both overt and covert activities, the Embassy plays a pivotal role in the Kremlin's influence operations.
- The Czech Republic is believed to be a regional hub for Russian intelligence. Czech security experts assess that intelligence personnel represent around one-third of the Embassy staff in addition to those without diplomatic cover.
- President Zeman has repeatedly called for the lifting of economic sanctions against Russia and promoted friendly relations and closer economic cooperation. Among his closest allies and supporters are such figures as Martin Nejedlý or Zdeněk Zbytek, entrepreneurs with well-established ties to Russian businessmen and diplomats who have consistently lobbied for Russian business interests in the Czech Republic.
- Traces of support can be seen among extremists and paramilitary groups as well, yet only a few go beyond the ideological support. The only exception is the extremist political movement Řád národa (Order of the Nation) headquartered in a villa that belongs to the Russian Embassy.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

- Numerous Czech NGOs and cultural organizations hold favourable positions towards Russia and, wittingly or unwittingly, spread Kremlin-manufactured or inspired disinformation and other distorted narratives. In most cases, however, direct Kremlin involvement and financial support has not been demonstrated.
- Several pro-Russian NGOs, such as the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, take part in pan-Slavic congresses which serve as networking opportunities and further integration within the pro-Kremlin informal 'club' of NGOs.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE AND EXTREMISM

- Examples of the Kremlin's influence can be found across the entire political spectrum. The most consistent supporter of Russia among Czech political parties is, however, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia.
- Several MPs have travelled to the Donbass and/or Crimea since 2014 on so-called 'observation missions', thus breaching Ukrainian law and causing diplomatic disputes.
- Among the most vocal advocates of the Kremlin's interests are two prominent figures: the current Czech President Miloš Zeman, and ex-president Václav Klaus. Both are known for their close links to the Russian business community and have repeatedly participated in the annual Rhodes Forum, "Dialogue of Civilizations", organized by the Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

- There are forty to fifty platforms that actively spread pro-Russian disinformation and Kremlin-inspired narratives in the Czech Republic, most of them active since 2014. Only the Czech version of the international outlet Sputnik is financed by the Russian government, other media outlets claim no allegiance to Kremlin.
- Outlet Parlamentní listy (Parliamentary Letters) has become by far the most successful of the disinformation platforms, attracting attention by emotionally-charged articles with catchy titles. Pro-Russian and anti-Western articles prevail within its content. The outlet has strong links and unique access to President Miloš Zeman.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

- Despite relatively small, yet not unimportant, bilateral trade and FDI, many of the Kremlin's business operations are likely obscured through an extensive web of foreign subsidiaries. The official data, therefore, hardly captures the full picture of Russian economic influence in the country.
- The Czech Republic depends on gas and oil deliveries from Russia for some two-thirds of its annual needs. This translates into powerful political leverage and bargaining tool. For example Russian state-owned gas giant, Gazprom, has a very significant presence in the country and is known for its efforts to exert control over the transit, storage, and trade of natural gas in Central Europe.

- Russia has ongoing interest in keeping its leverage over the Czech nuclear energy sector. The subsidiary of state-owned nuclear agency Rosatom, TVEL, is the sole supplier of nuclear fuel (at least until 2020) for both the Temelín and Dukovany power plants. In line with the State Energy Concept, the new tender for the Dukovany power plant is being prepared and Rosatom is likely to be a serious contender.

HUNGARY

Compared to other Visegrad countries, the substance of subversive messages, the focus of actors, and their distribution across the political-cultural field, differs in Hungary since it is neither a Slavic country, nor does it have any substantial Leftist-Communist political traditions.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

- Russia has the largest diplomatic mission in Hungary with forty-eight accredited diplomats (seventy-four including spouses) in 2017. The Embassy maintains an active relationship with Hungarian-Russian friendship societies, cultural societies, and Hungarian universities. Exhibitions, cultural events, and anniversaries are organized in line with the Kremlin’s narrative.
- There are proven links between the Russian Embassy’s staff and far-right groups and individuals (e.g. Hungarian National Movement) in addition to pro-Kremlin journalists of the printed press.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE, ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH INSTITUTES

- A series of organizations promote Russian culture and seek to strengthen bilateral ties. Specifically, the Russkiy Mir Foundation has become more active in recent years and opened new centers in Pecs and Debrecen, resulting in an intensified relationship between Russia and Southern and Eastern Hungary.
- Pro-Russian grassroots organizations hardly exist at this point in time, partly because the Hungarian civil society is inherently weak.
- The Hungarian government has encouraged and supported pro-Russian organizations since 2010, creating an impression that this change was elevated to an official government policy level. Among the NGOs are actors which receive state funding and take part in sharing the pro-Russian agenda.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE AND EXTREMISM

- The pro-Russian narrative in Hungary is no longer spearheaded by the extremist parties, but instead by mainstream governmental parties. In the last seven years, the governing party Fidesz has been pushing a new narrative, and adopted a more favourable stance towards Russia, especially with regards to Russo-Hungarian economic ties.
- The most well-known far-right party with pro-Russian orientation is Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary, currently the second largest party in Hungary. It maintains active relations with Russia, from which it previously received financial support as well. Instrumental in this relationship was Bela Kovacs, a proven Russian intelligence operative. However, Russia and Jobbik have grown distant in recent months as Fidesz, has become a more relevant partner for Russian authorities.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

- Hungary is characterized by a specific phenomenon: the presence of pro-Russian disinformation in the mainstream media, primarily in channels either state-owned or influenced by the government. The state news agency MTI, for example, has referred to the separatists in Eastern Ukraine as a legitimate state and blamed the United States for the *en masse* death of civilians in Syria.
- There are 80–100 websites in Hungary spreading the pro-Kremlin narratives, most with limited reach. Around 6–10 of these can be considered to have legitimate influence. In terms of content, a very small segment is tailored to the Hungarian audience.

- Channels offering ‘alternative news’ are significantly more popular than direct channels from Russia or other openly pro-Russian sites.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

- Bilateral economic ties are limited, with foreign trade peaking at 6,44 % in 2008, and since 2014 have been on steady decline.

- Russia’s economic presence in Hungary is generally not significant with one major exception: the nuclear power plant Paks 2 project. Investment in this project accounts for around 10 % of the Hungarian GDP, with 80% of the costs covered by the Russian Vnesheconombank. It is assumed that the project will increase Hungary’s dependence on Russian nuclear technology and financial support, which may translate into political leverage.

POLAND

In terms of Russian influence and vulnerability to the Kremlin’s soft power tools, Poland represents a distinctive case among Central and Eastern European states. Despite the fact that it shares the experience of being Moscow’s satellite during the communist times, just like the other V4 states, Poland’s specifically traumatising and negative historical experience with Russia has united the Polish political class around a consensus to reduce, rather than foster, new dependencies on Russia.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

- The diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation in Poland, with its sixty-five accredited diplomats (118 including spouses) in 2017, is one of the largest in the country. To compare, there are just forty German accredited diplomats, and seventy-seven American accredited diplomats.

- More politically significant organizations, such as Kukiz’15 or Kresy, cannot be described as consistently pro-Russian. However, many of their positions, most importantly those against Ukraine, are in line with the Kremlin’s interests and narratives.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

- The Polish political landscape is dominated by the former anti-communist opposition and lacks any major party or key figure that would advocate, on a nationwide level, for a closer relationship with the current Russian leadership.
- Russian influence is most visible amongst various radical movements and associations. Apart from an anti-establishment sentiment, they share anti-American (or anti-Western) and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, connected with the historical memories of the Wołyń massacre. By emphasizing a more nationalistic attitude, marginal political groupings may indirectly support the Kremlin’s goal of sowing greater divisions within Polish society.
- Among the openly pro-Russian organisations, the pro-Russian party Zmiana (Change) plays a central role. The party is led by Mateusz Piskorski, who was arrested in 2016 on espionage charges. He has also been involved in a transnational network of anti-Western and pro-Russian activists, and taken part in propagandistic actions aimed at legitimizing the Kremlin’s policies including “election monitoring missions” in an occupied Crimea.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE, ACADEMIA AND THINK-TANKS

- Russian state-affiliated institutions, such as Russkiy Mir or the Russian Center for Science and Culture, which is a part of Rossotrudnichestvo (the Russian federal agency promoting Russia’s positive image abroad), promote Russian culture and organize trips to Russia for Polish academics and teachers. Their presence and influence in Poland is limited however, as a result of the strongly pro-Western orientation of Polish elites, historical memory within society, the lack of a significant Russian minority, or the autocephalous status of the Orthodox Church in Poland.
- The think-tank field lacks significant actors with ties to Russia, except for the European Center for Geopolitical Analysis (ECAG), which is closely linked to the openly pro-Russian party Zmiana. The ECAG was believed to be one of the key organizations responsible for recruiting members of the election observation missions for the Russian-backed separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine.
- In the field of academia, recent years brought some highly publicized cases of scholars openly praising Russian authorities for their actions during the Ukraine crisis, or for defending “true Christian values”.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

- Russian media plays a relatively minor role in Poland, but there have been attempts to boost its presence.
- Many Internet-based sources presenting anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, and less often openly pro-Russian agendas are often institutionally weak, but with a growing audience.
- Pro-Kremlin circles often seek to fuel the already existing tensions within Poland, and its relations with its neighbors, particularly Ukraine and Lithuania.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

- Trade relations with Russia have, in recent years, been severely harmed by the Russian economic recession, sanctions, as well as falling oil prices. In 2016, Russia was the 8th largest recipient of Polish exports and the 3rd largest exporter to Poland. FDI from Russia in 2015 accounted for just 0,2 % of the total FDI stock in Poland.
- The Polish political class has been wary for years of creating economic dependencies on Russia, and thus potentially hostile acquisition attempts concerning the oil company Lotos Group or the chemical group Azoty never came to pass. Nevertheless, there are two areas which are particularly vulnerable. First, Poland is dependent on Russia's energy resources, mainly natural gas. Second, Russia plays a significant role in the Polish agricultural sector.

SLOVAKIA

The Pan-Slavic concept and cultural proximity of the Slovak and Russian nations were highlighted in the 19th century, and used for strengthening the Slovak position in their claims for national sovereignty. This legacy partly explains the positive sentiments of certain segments of Slovak society towards Russia, which Russia has attempted to exploit in its "influence activities."

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

- There have been twenty-three accredited Russian diplomats (thirty-two including spouses) in the Slovak Republic in 2017. The number might seem low in comparison with other Visegrad countries but it is given by Slovakia's difference in size – to put it into context, there are twenty-six American and only fourteen German diplomats.
- The Russian Embassy in Slovakia is the main contact point of pro-Kremlin activities. It organizes various memorial and cultural events, holds conferences, and purposefully shares media content made by conspiratorial media sources.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

- A handful of NGOs and associations spread both Russian culture and ideas of cooperation between Slovakia and Russia. They often use rhetoric based on pan-Slavism and anti-EU or anti-NATO sentiments. They serve as platforms for spreading conspiracies and pro-Russian demagoguery.
- An illustrative case is the Slovak-Russian Society headed by the former Prime Minister, Ján Čarnogurský, who has become a strong promoter of the Russian regime and pro-Kremlin narratives, even those based on fabricated facts.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

- Ambivalence in the attitudes of the key Slovak politicians towards Russia, and the inconsistency of Slovak political strategy have been characteristic features of Slovak foreign policy toward Russia in recent years. On a number of occasions, Prime Minister Robert Fico, who on the official level supports sanctions, advocated for strengthening Slovak-Russian ties and positive attitude towards Putin's policy.
- The People's party Our Slovakia, headed by Marian Kotleba, espouses extremist ideology, presents itself as anti-EU and pro-Kremlin, and maintains ties with paramilitary organisations. Leaked emails of a Belarus-born writer and pro-Russian ideologue, Alexander Usovsky, suggest Kotleba's links to Russian oligarchs and financial support coming from Russia.

PARAMILITARY GROUPS

- Slovakia have in recent years experienced a growth in influence of pro-Russian paramilitary groups. Some of them are aligned with pro-Russian ideology and others even have Russian economic support. For example, Slovak Conscripts have cooperated with the Russian ultra conservative and nationalistic organization, Narodny Sobor (National Council).

- Several members of Slovak paramilitary groups have joined the conflict in the Donbass within the pro-Russian militants' units, highlighting the radicalizing potential of such forces.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

- Similarly to the Czech Republic, Slovakia has seen an upsurge in pro-Russian disinformation since 2014. According to the Slovak initiative Konspiratori.sk, there are around 108 Slovak and Czech servers that spread untrustworthy content. Despite their pro-Russian orientation, none of them claim allegiance to the Kremlin and only informal links exist.
- The Kremlin's hand goes beyond the Internet. In 2016, the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic, headed by Jaroslav Rezník, who has recently become the director of the public service Radio and TV Station, signed a contract with the Kremlin-owned Sputnik. The contract was soon terminated due to the pressure from the media and civil society.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

- Mutual trade between Russia and Slovakia is not very significant – in the first half of 2015, Russia's import share was just 6 % and their export share only 2,3 %. Claims about possible massive damage to the Slovak economy caused by sanctions against Russia are therefore not substantiated.
- Signs of the usage of economic and financial tools of Russian influence in Slovakia could be discovered by tracking connections between members of the Slovak governmental party SMER-SD (Direction – Social Democrats) with influential business figures with ties to Russia.