

# FROM ANTI-VACCINATION TO KREMLIN'S PROXY

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HIDDEN MALIGN DOMESTIC  
AND FOREIGN  
“GREY ZONE” MEDIA INFLUENCE  
IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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This paper is the summary of the results of a research project lasting over six months, covering domestic and foreign hidden malign influence activities pursued through the so-called “grey zone” media in three countries – the Czech Republic, Serbia and Hungary –, during a period of heightened international tensions related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Political Capital has assessed in numerous studies how the Kremlin or the Hungarian hybrid political regime has used their extensive media empire to conduct active measures or political smear-campaigns in service of political or geopolitical goals. In this study, we set out to understand the inner workings of clandestine disinformation campaigns carried out by mostly anonymous media actors to conduct or influence political campaigns, specifically in the run-up to the Czech, Serbian and Hungarian elections, and destabilise the region in general after the outbreak of the war. For more information on the project, please visit our website.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- In Central-Eastern Europe, a so-called “grey zone” has emerged in the media, which tries to influence public opinion and pre-election political campaigns through hyper-partisan and sometimes even extremist – often anonymous or only seemingly “independent” – political communication, utilising conspiracy theories and ignoring the standards of ethical journalism.
- What differentiates the “grey zone” media from the mainstream in most cases is a specific media strategy that attempts to mask or remove the original partisan sources of messages and not to rely on traditional media organisations to manipulate or hide authorship, editorial, or ownership background.
- Our media research in the Czech Republic has, therefore, looked at the Czech political campaign communication between 1 September and 31 October 2021 to map and reveal the Czech “grey zone” media ecosystem, its role in the “dirty campaign,” and the war-related rhetoric later in 2022.
- As a result of our research, we could identify two different layers of the “grey zone” media. The first one is comprised of mostly inscrutable conspiracy or clickbait outlets, such as Pravý prostor, New World Order Opposition, and CZ24 News, established five to ten years prior, whereas a new kind of anti-vaccination media led by public faces and new anti-vaccination movements, such as Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES, TV Šalingrad, or Srdcem pro vlast, has sprung up since the start of the pandemic in 2020.
- The old and new grey zone media have, however, all supported nationalistic and anti-establishment political players during the 2021 Czech parliamentary elections, which culminated in the undermining of democratic institutional frameworks – by accusing the government of trying to establish a “totalitarian regime” on the back of the pandemic restrictions or the mainstream media / the public broadcaster (the Czech Television; ČT) of political bias as opposed to the “sole source of objective truth” represented by conspiracy or anti-vaccination outlets.
- The anti-democratic nature of the “grey zone” media became even more scrutinized after the Russian invasion of Ukraine started, when the Czech Internet Association (CZ.NIC) decided to ban some of these outlets on the ground of their threat to national security in the form of spreading conspiracy theories about the war and justifying Russian actions. These narratives did indeed reiterate the Kremlin’s pretexts for the war; for example, that “there has been a genocide committed by Ukraine against ethnic Russians”; “NATO was just looking for excuses to move troops to its borders”; or “the West, including the Czech Republic, was the one escalating tensions through its military supplies delivered to the ‘Kyiv regime.’”

- The network analysis of hyperlinks between grey zone media and third-party sources has revealed that the domestic and foreign malign disinformation campaigns had established a two-tier dissemination system of disinformation narratives: Czech pro-Kremlin pages, such as Sputnik's Czech site, or conspiracy pages reference mainstream media to formulate their initial anti-West messages. Then the same narratives are fed right into a variety of different conspiracy pages that disseminate them to a much wider far-right/Eurosceptic/anti-vaccination audience. In this process, new and mainly anti-vaccination media, such as TV Šalingrad, Za pravdu or Srdcem pro Vlast, has fused with the old guard of conspiracy grey zone outlets such as Právý prostor, Aeronet, or the clickbait website Parlamentní listy, which form the backbone of the grey zone ecosystem to date.
- The investigative part of our research has revealed a markedly different political-financial modus operandi for the old and new outlets of the grey zone media. Whereas new anti-vaccination sites are openly crowdsourcing, selling merchandise, and led by public faces, such as Otevřeme Česko-Chcípl PES, Zdravé forum, or TV Světlo, the old guard, such as CZ24 News, Právý prostor, or AC24 News, relies on mostly clandestine funding and/or clickbait ad revenues.
- The new grey zone media ecosystem has become one of the main tools of foreign malign influence operations of the Kremlin due to its closeness to pro-Kremlin media and general anti-West and Eurosceptic audiences in the Czech Republic. The national security threat posed by them grows by the day because they command a new anti-vaccination audience, started to evolve into new, so far unsuccessful, political alternatives and migrate to new social media platforms, such as Telegram, with encrypted and untransparent ways of mass communication.



## INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of the new social media platforms in the early 2000s, which have simultaneously reinvented and marginalised classical mass media, new media technologies have enabled the development of new political manipulation techniques based on algorithm-enhanced individual targeting, artificial intelligence, bot- or troll armies etc. More importantly, the new media platforms and technologies have disrupted the local elites' traditional communication with their publics or electorates by allowing local or foreign political actors abroad to bypass entirely – with the help of social media platforms' cloud-based online infrastructures – traditional political or media organisations, as they seek to reach and manipulate target audiences. The latest iteration of malign domestic or foreign manipulation attempts may be observed in so-called “hybrid political regimes,” such as Hungary and Serbia, or more clear-cut autocracies, such as Russia or China, which use a variety of semi-transparent, non-transparent, or anonymous forms of new and social media outlets and accounts to influence publics at home or abroad, in order to exert “soft” or “sharp power” in addition to their traditional media channels.

## RESEARCH FOCI

**Our novel research focused on the mapping and public exposure of the so called “grey zone” media that have been established in the last several years by parties, foreign powers, NGOs, lesser-known entities or unknown actors and financed through obscure channels to influence public debate around key topics in Hungary,** alongside other Central-Eastern European countries. These include the anti-LGBTQ law in Hungary,<sup>II</sup> patriotism in Serbia,<sup>III</sup> the corruption of politicians<sup>IV</sup> or the anti-vaccination movement in the Czech Republic.<sup>V</sup> The Czech and Serbian country case studies are to be found in separate studies on the project homepage of Political Capital.<sup>VI</sup>

This new breed of the so-called “grey zone” media ecosystem has not (re)invented political propaganda as such: it has rather found new ways to disseminate it in a covert way in order to manipulate or deceive news consumers unable to discern who and why is communicating on specific issues, and to whom. We have chosen to investigate the “grey zone” media ecosystem from a comparative perspective in the run-up to three general elections in two fundamentally different political systems in Central-Eastern Europe: the 2021 general elections of the Czech Republic, which is a liberal democracy with a high-functioning democratic public sphere; and the 2022 election campaigns of the “hybrid regimes” in Hungary and Serbia, where the political, economic and media systems are institutionally dominated and distorted in favour of the ruling parties to restrict basic political and human rights, including the freedom of speech or media. Therefore, the fundamental role and functioning of the “white” or “grey” media is markedly different in these countries. Whereas the “grey zone” media represent a rather small niche, as compared to the robust and mostly independent mainstream “white” media, operated by fringe actors in the Czech Republic, the Serbian or Hungarian governments use “grey zone” media to further expand their already dominant positions in their respective media spaces by targeting unaffiliated or even opposition-minded audiences.

Likewise, opposition actors or parties in hybrid regimes or autocracies are also reliant on the use of “grey zone” media to compensate for the lack of a strong, independent “white” media. As these media can also convey external, malign Russian or Chinese influence due to their editorial policy or ownership,<sup>1</sup> or general anti-West and Eurosceptic political platforms, we have examined their rhetoric about the war between 1 January and 1 March 2022 in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## DEFINITION OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA

Our research distinguished between “white,” “grey” and “black” propaganda and related communication infrastructures. While “white” propaganda would be open about their intent, sources etc., “black” propaganda would pretend to be a source other than themselves. Between the white and black propaganda is the “grey zone” media and propaganda which differs in four key aspects from independent mainstream media: (1) they primarily disseminate party or some sort of political propaganda; (2) their content-production relies extensively on the use of disinformation, not adhering to any journalistic ethical standards; (3) they do not establish traditional media organisations; finally, (4) they hide or somehow manipulate the transparency of authorship, or their editorial or financial backgrounds.

We consider websites or social media pages “grey zone” media if they either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote the governmental parties’ or the opposition parties’ political messages through the aggressive use of new or social media. A media outlet was classified as part of the “grey zone” if the nature and content of the site met the two predefined mandatory criteria (hyper-partisanship or news manipulation) and at least two of the five secondary criteria (time of establishment; reproduction of partisan content; hyper-partisan memes; editorial or financial opacity; intermediary funding) – for the full list and explanation of the selection criteria please see Annex 1. In this respect, we regarded official think tanks, GONGOs or other organisations financed by parties as part of the “grey zone” strategy of a party if they were engaged in the coordinated dissemination of party propaganda before the elections.<sup>2</sup> **As these media can also convey external, malign Russian or Chinese influence due to their editorial policy or ownership,<sup>3</sup> or general anti-West and Eurosceptic political platforms, we have examined their rhetoric about the war between 1 January and 1 March 2022 in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.**

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1 We specifically included local pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing outlets that had been established to convey specific geopolitical positions in our initial list of media for each country under investigation.

2 We did not consider, however, governmental, organisational or individual webpages, blogs, YouTube channels etc. fringe media since these are communication or public relations channels of certain individuals or organisations without the need or expectation to report on any other matter than their individual activities or interests.

3 We specifically included local pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing outlets that had been established to convey specific geopolitical positions in our initial list of media for each country under investigation.

## METHODOLOGY

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Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodology to monitor and collect historical media data present on Hungarian “grey zone” webpages and Facebook pages, Twitter or YouTube accounts. We have monitored the pre-election period between September 1 and October 31 in the Czech Republic, and the November 1 – December 31 period for Serbia and Hungary. **Given the unexpected invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, we also monitored narratives about the war between January 1 and March 1, 2022 in all three countries under investigation.** The quantitative dataset used in the analysis was generated using the SentiOne social media listening platform, which allowed us to access the data of websites, public Facebook pages and groups to conduct trend, sampling, statistical and network analysis of media content production. For more on methodology see please Annex 2.

Our main hypothesis asserted that the “grey zone” has been created either to directly manipulate the electorate or will be used indirectly by domestic or foreign actors to shape the electoral outcome and the public debate around essential issues on the political agenda during the elections.

To test our assumption and reveal the “grey zone” media, we have defined five research goals:

1. Mapping the size of the “grey zone” network in terms of numbers and their interconnectedness – based on the networks generated using the hyperlinks in elections-related messages.
2. Revealing the main political, economic or other reason behind the establishment and modus operandi of the sites under consideration.
3. Identifying influence operations orchestrated by certain actors or mostly uncoordinated media campaigns and narratives around central issues that have been carried out before, during or after the elections.
4. Establishing the possible links between the “grey zone” media and other domestic or foreign pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing media.
5. Raising awareness of the presence and manipulative nature of the “grey zone”, the actors behind these media in all the three countries under consideration among journalists, local policymakers, the foreign and domestic general audiences.

To adequately measure media and their networks employing a “grey zone” media strategy, we have defined seven categories of media to be measured that meet our initial set of criteria and are engaged in a specific type of media production in each country: (1) anonymous hyper-partisan sources; (2) the top 10 conspiracy sources;<sup>4</sup> (3) the top 10 clickbait sites; (4) the top 10 GONGOs sources; (5) the top 10 pro-Kremlin local sources; (6) the top 10 pro-Beijing local sources; (7) other types of sources. For a detailed explanation of our media categories, please see Annex 1.

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4 We defined a minimum number of sites, which could be extended by our research partners in each country.



## THE CZECH POLITICAL SYSTEM AND MEDIA SPACE

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The chapters on the political system, the media space and the political campaigns in each country serve as a context to understand how and why each “grey zone” functions, and how grey zone media communication is dependent (in either a negative or positive way) on mainstream media, political parties’ and politicians’ communication.

The Czech Republic is a Central European parliamentary democracy and a member of the European Union (EU) since 2004 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1999. Before the parliamentary election in October 2021, the Czech Republic was led by a minority coalition government consisting of ANO 2011, a populist centre-right political movement, and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) on the centre-left. The coalition led the country from 2018 to 2021, with external support from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). The government was led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, leader of ANO and a businessman, one of the richest people in the Czech Republic. Jan Hamáček from ČSSD served as his minister of the interior.<sup>5</sup>

Running against Andrej Babiš as sort of an “entrenched leader,” two electoral alliances formed from the main opposition parliamentary parties. One was the centre-right alliance SPOLU (Together) consisting of the liberal-conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and TOP 09, as well as the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL). The alliance was led by Petr Fiala from ODS, with a pro-Western and ultimately pro-European agenda, but with Eurosceptic factions within the party. It focused on closer relations with NATO and fiscal responsibility.<sup>6</sup> The second alliance – Pirates and Mayors – consisted of the liberal progressive Czech Pirate Party led by Ivan Bartoš, focused on civil rights and political transparency, and Mayors and Independents, with an agenda of localism and subsidiarity, led by Vít Rakušan.<sup>7</sup>

The national-conservative part of the opposition included Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a populist party on the right-far right end of the spectrum led by Tomio Okamura, and known for Euroscepticism and a strong anti-immigration stance.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Tricolour Citizens’ Movement also represented hard Eurosceptics, under the leadership of Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková. Their stances were closely matched by the non-parliamentary Free Bloc, another Eurosceptic formation whose name was a wordplay on the name of its leader, Lubomír Volný.<sup>9</sup> He is a former member of SPD, which he left due to in-party disagreements.

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5 Andrej Babiš II. Vláda | Vláda ČR, accessed 16 February 2022, <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/historie-minulych-vlad/prehled-vlad-cr/1993-2018-cr/andrej-babis-ii/prehled-clenu-vlady-andreje-babise-27-6-2018-trva-175411/>

6 ‘SPOLU dáme Česko dohromady’, accessed 16 February 2022, <https://www.spolu21.cz/>

7 Starostové a nezávislí, ‘Program’, Starostové a nezávislí, accessed 16 February 2022, <https://www.starostove-nezavisli.cz/program>

8 ‘Program’, SPD - Svoboda a přímá demokracie (blog), accessed 16 February 2022, <https://www.spd.cz/program-vypis/>

9 “Volný” means “free” in Czech

As for the state of the Czech media, the Czech Republic ranks 40th in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index, showing a slow gradual decline in the last 10 years.<sup>10</sup> The Czechs generally rely on trusted and influential public broadcasting services,<sup>11</sup> namely the Czech Television and the Czech Radio,<sup>12</sup> but the number of people who do not follow the news at all is rising— from 31% in 2016 to 37% in 2021.<sup>13</sup> However, the ongoing search for a sustainable economic model in the digital age and the exit of Western investors from the market led to the concentration of private media ownership in the hands of a few Czech businessmen.<sup>14</sup> This was exemplified by the purchase of the television station NOVA by the PPF investment group in 2020,<sup>15</sup> majority-owned by the then wealthiest person in the Czech Republic, Petr Kellner,<sup>16</sup> and more importantly, by the now-former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and his acquisition of the media group Mafra in 2013. Mafra owns some of the most popular media in the Czech Republic – newspapers *MF Dnes* and *Lidové noviny*, as well as the most visited Czech news server, iDnes.<sup>17</sup> Due to conflict of interest issues, Babiš transferred Mafra to a trust fund;<sup>18</sup> nevertheless, there are views that Babiš is using these media for self-promotion, thus distorting the media space and political competition as such.<sup>19</sup>

According to the Digital News Report, the main source for news consumption in the Czech Republic is online media, used by 87% of the population, with television in second place at 74%.

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10 'Czech Republic: Increasing Media Concentration | Reporters without Borders', RSF, accessed 16 February 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/czech-republic>

11 According to the Digital News Report, 60% of the population trusts the Czech Television as a news source, and the figures are similar for the Czech Radio. 'Digital News Report: Češi získávají zprávy z internetu a TV, věří ČT a ČRo', MediaGuru.cz, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2021/06/digital-news-report-cesi-ziskavaji-zpravy-z-internetu-a-tv-veri-ct-a-cro/>

12 'Czech Republic', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, accessed 16 February 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021/czech-republic>

13 'Výzkum: Češi a zpravodajství', Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, accessed 16 February 2022, <https://www.nfnz.cz/studie-a-analyzy/bezmala-40-cechu-se-zpravodajstvi-vyhyba/>

14 'Vulnerability-Index\_Czechia.Pdf', accessed 22 February 2022, [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index\\_Czechia.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_Czechia.pdf)

15 'Sale of TV Nova Completes Transformation of Czech Media Landscape', European Journalism Observatory - EJO (blog), 13 May 2020, <https://en.ejo.ch/media-economics/sale-of-tv-nova-completes-transformation-of-czech-media-landscape>

16 Kellner died unexpectedly in 2021 but the group remains in the ownership of his family.

17 Pavla Francová, 'Miliardář Babiš mediálním magnátem. Koupil vydavatele MF Dnes, Lidových novin i Metra', Hospodářské noviny (HN.cz), 26 June 2013, <https://byznys.hn.cz/ci-60141790-andrej-babis-koupil-mafra>

18 'Babiš dal akcie svých firem do svěrenských fondů. Počítá se zpětným převodem | Aktuálně.cz', Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje, 3 February 2017, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/ekonomika/zacal-prevod-babisovych-firem-na-sverensky-fond-dokumenty-po/r-b4c13298ea0511e6b2310025900fea04/>

19 'Výzkumnice: Babišova média? Jeho vliv je plíživý, novináři jsou chyceni v systému | Aktuálně.cz', Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje, 28 January 2022, <https://video.aktualne.cz/dvtv/vyzkumnice-babisova-media-jeho-vliv-je-plizivy-novinari-jsou/r-e6b0b8c6805c11ec9136ac1f6b220ee8/>

Social media as a news source has grown by 50% in the last six years,<sup>20</sup> with YouTube and Facebook as the most used platforms.<sup>21</sup> However, as opposed to the Czech Television (60%) and Czech Radio (59%), social media have earned little trust so far (17%). Commercial television, including TV Nova and TV Prima, is also dominant in the Czech media scene and attracts almost half of the total advertising spent.<sup>22</sup> As for Czech newspapers, the largest market shares are held by the daily tabloid *Blesk*, *Mladá Fronta Dnes*<sup>23</sup> with its popular online version iDnes,<sup>24</sup> and the daily *Právo* with its most visited internet server novinky.cz.<sup>25 26</sup>

The Czech Republic is also witnessing the rise of self-proclaimed alternative media in opposition to the mainstream media, which threatens the latter's relatively trusted position in the Czech media space.<sup>27</sup> This alternative media scene includes a pro-Russian network of the Czech branch of Russian state news agency Sputnik and approximately 40 anti-system and conspiratorial websites.<sup>28</sup>

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20 'Digital News Report 2021', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2021>

21 'Czechia: Most Used Social Media Platforms 2021 | Statista', accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1281022/czechia-most-used-social-media-platforms/>

22 'Digital News Report: Češi Získávají Zprávy z Internetu a TV, Věří ČT a ČRo | MediaGuru', accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.mediaguru.cz/clanky/2021/O6/digital-news-report-cesi-ziskavaji-zpravy-z-internetu-a-tv-veri-ct-a-cro/>

23 'Blesk.Cz - Zprávy, Celebrity, Sport, Zábava', accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.blesk.cz/>

24 'iDNES.cz - s námi víte víc', iDNES.cz, accessed 21 February 2022, <http://www.idnes.cz/>

25 'Novinky.Cz - Nejčtenější Zprávy Na Českém Internetu', accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.novinky.cz/>

26 'Czech Media', accessed 21 February 2022, [https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues\\_and\\_press/czech\\_media/index.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/issues_and_press/czech_media/index.html)

27 'GLOBSEC-Trends-2021\_final.Pdf', accessed 21 February 2022, [https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021\\_final.pdf](https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/GLOBSEC-Trends-2021_final.pdf)

28 'Case Study of Disinformation Related to Coronavirus', Prague Security Studies Institute, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/11-case-study-of-disinformation-related-to-coronavirus>

## CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION BEFORE THE ELECTIONS

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This chapter outlines the state of the mainstream campaign and campaign communication, political strategies, main political scandals, issues or narratives that might be used by the “grey zone” media to push their messages, reinforce or weaken the mainstream campaign communication of political parties.

Ever since the last parliamentary election in 2017, the incumbent ANO 2011 was among the top three leaders in the polls.<sup>29</sup> In his campaign, Andrej Babiš put emphasis on “how to protect national interests, our standard of living, our culture and individuality”.<sup>30</sup> The target group of his campaign was also illustrated by his invitation of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán for a formal visit. Orbán visited the Czech Republic shortly before the elections and even endorsed ANO at one of its rallies.<sup>31</sup> These stances also gained Babiš sympathy from nationalists and positive coverage in the alternative media. They also defended him after the Pandora Papers scandal which surfaced five days before the election, when the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists published leaked documents uncovering potentially problematic offshore activities of several global political leaders, including Andrej Babiš.<sup>32</sup>

When ANO started falling behind the Pirate Party in the polls in the early 2021, ANO’s campaign focused on criticism of the Pirates that bordered on manipulation. The criticism targeted their progressive positions, namely their supposed openness to immigration and the legalisation of drug use.<sup>33</sup> The Pirate Party itself, in an alliance with the Mayors and Independents, also steadily appeared among the top three poll leaders. They offered a program including lower taxes, better healthcare availability, digitalisation, transparent governance, and climate protection, as well as adoption of the euro. The agenda was embodied in their slogan „Let’s give the country back its future”.<sup>34</sup> The SPOLU

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29 ‘Průzkumy a Výzkumy · Sněmovní Volby 2021, Programy Do Voleb’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://2021.programydovoleb.cz/pruzkumy-a-odhady>

30 ‘Babiš v Ústí Zahájil Kampaň ANO. Slíbil Zvýšit Důchody a Zaútočil Na Obě Koalice - Aktuálně.Cz’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/politika/babis-v-usti-zahajil-kampan-ano-slibil-zvysit-duchody-a-zaut/r-b7146a360b6811ec8fa20cc47ab5f122/>

31 ‘Orbán Podpoří Babiše v Kampani. Přijede Na Mítink Do Ústeckého Kraje - Seznam Zprávy’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/orban-podpori-babise-v-kampani-prijede-na-mitink-do-usteckeho-kraje-175207>

32 ‘PSSI Perspective #15: Pandora Papers - Novinářská Praxe a Integrita ve Střetu s Alternativními Médii’, Prague Security Studies Institute, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/64-pssi-perspective-15-pandora-papers-novinarska-praxe-a-integrita-ve-stretu-s-alternativnimi-medii>

33 ‘Babiš Nazval Piráty Největším Ohrožením Země a Neokomunistickou Partou. Reagoval Tak v Interpelacích | Domov | Lidovky.Cz’, accessed 21 February 2022, [https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/premier-babis-nazval-piraty-nejvetsim-ohrozenim-zeme-extremni-levici-a-neomarxisty.A201203\\_165541\\_ln\\_domov\\_lihav](https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/premier-babis-nazval-piraty-nejvetsim-ohrozenim-zeme-extremni-levici-a-neomarxisty.A201203_165541_ln_domov_lihav)

34 Česká pirátská strana, ‘Piráti a Starostové - program pro volby 2021’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.pirati.cz/program/>

alliance was the third group to top the polls and even moved ahead of the Pirate Party in September 2021. Their program supported membership in the EU and NATO and included the simplification of social benefits, better use of EU funds, and focus on education as well as climate change.<sup>35</sup>

Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), on the right-far right end of the spectrum, polled steadily in fourth place with approximately 10% support, with plans for “the adoption of a functional referendum law” that would lead to a possible future referendum on membership in the EU and NATO.<sup>36</sup> SPD, like Free Bloc and Tricolour, opposed the COVID-19 restriction and mandatory vaccination; this stance was embodied in Tricolour’s slogan “We have a right to live”.<sup>37</sup> Tricolour also presented itself as a true right-wing movement as opposed to the SPOLU alliance. All in all, these national-conservative parties campaigned for traditional values and a referendum on membership in the EU, which they saw as an entity that violates Czech sovereignty by imposing irrational policies such as the European Green Deal. These parties also blamed the mainstream media for discriminating against the nationalist voice in pre-election debates and thus manipulating the election process.<sup>38</sup>

Altogether, Babiš’s leadership was a significant topic of this election, which even got the label “the referendum about Andrej Babiš”.<sup>39</sup> Naturally, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic affected the pre-election campaign, including the opposition’s criticism of Babiš and his government for the way he handled the health crisis, with emphasis on the high death rate.<sup>40</sup> In return, the governing parties defended their approach, claiming that if the opposition had been in power, the impact of the pandemic would have been even worse.

Another outcome of the pandemic was that opposition to COVID-19 restrictions even became the sole agenda of several new political movements, such as Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES, Manifest and Hnutí Prameny. However, the pandemic was replaced by economic issues as the main topic in the final stages of campaigning. Babiš and his government were criticised for increasing food prices and rising inflation, which the SPOLU alliance labelled as the cost of Babiš’s populist and incompetent government.<sup>40</sup>

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35 ‘SPOLU dáme Česko dohromady’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.spolu21.cz/>

36 ‘Program’, SPD - Svoboda a přímá demokracie (blog), accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.spd.cz/program-vypis/>

37 ‘Máme Právo Žít.’ Uskupení Trikolora Svobodní Soukromníci Jde Do Voleb s Novým Heslem | Domov | Lidovky.Cz’, accessed 21 February 2022, [https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/mame-pravo-zit-uskupeni-trikolora-svobodni-a-soukromnici-jde-do-voleb-s-novym-heslem.A210617.162957.In\\_domov.lros](https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/mame-pravo-zit-uskupeni-trikolora-svobodni-a-soukromnici-jde-do-voleb-s-novym-heslem.A210617.162957.In_domov.lros)

38 ‘Diskriminuje nás. Koalice Trikolory žaluje ČT a chce předběžné opatření’, iDNES.cz, 9 September 2021, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/trikolora-volby-debata-ceska-televize-politika-strana.A210909.153616\\_domaci\\_elk](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/trikolora-volby-debata-ceska-televize-politika-strana.A210909.153616_domaci_elk)

39 ‘Volby 2018: KOMENTÁŘ: Babiš, Antibabiš – a Okamura. Aneb Kdo Vlastně Vyhrál Volby - IDNES.Cz’, n.d., [https://www.idnes.cz/volby/volby-2021-snemovna-premier-ano-spolu-pirati-stan-koalice.A211010.172829\\_volby\\_albe](https://www.idnes.cz/volby/volby-2021-snemovna-premier-ano-spolu-pirati-stan-koalice.A211010.172829_volby_albe)

40 Petr Fiala, “BABIŠOVA DRAHOTA” je smutným výsledkem vlády ANO, ČSSD a KSČM. Populistické rozhazování peněz v kombinaci s neschopností vedlo k vysoké inflaci a zdražování. Zvyšují se ceny potravin, či energií. To ohrožuje sociálně slabé, ale i střední třídu. ZASTAVÍME JE! TEĎ JDE O VŠECHNO!’, Tweet, @P\_Fiala (blog), 27 September 2021, [https://twitter.com/P\\_Fiala/status/1442548883368808449](https://twitter.com/P_Fiala/status/1442548883368808449)

## THE CZECH “GREY ZONE” MEDIA ECOSYSTEM

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The summary of the “grey zone” media provides an overview and a basic understanding of the “grey zone” ecosystem in the Czech Republic, their background and modus operandi in relation to mainstream politics or media, including the local pro-Russian or pro-Chinese media in each country. We used investigative methods, quantitative and qualitative analysis of narratives, time-trends of message dissemination, and finally network analysis to understand the basic composition and content production of all the media under investigation.

### THE FUNCTIONING AND MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TOP GREY ZONE OUTLETS

The Czech “grey zone” media position themselves against the mainstream media, claiming that the latter provide biased information. In contrast, the grey zone media present themselves as the only source of objective and uncensored truth. They also accused the mainstream media of discriminating against certain opposition parties, which the grey zone media support due to ideological sympathies and sometimes personal ties, as will be described in more detail below.

Although the Czech grey zone media scene is a complex one, as can be seen below, two layers of this media scene can be identified: one is a more established network of alternative media websites in the form of private media or blogs, often with untransparent structures and editorial team. The second layer is represented by newer media established in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, often run by civil and political movements with well-known leaders.

Grey zone media in the Czech Republic are embodied mainly by media that sprung up in 2020 and 2021 in reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, which fuelled the already existing anti-system sentiments. These media focus almost exclusively on opposition to the “covid totalitarian regime”<sup>41</sup> – COVID-19 restrictions, mandatory vaccination, or vaccination in general.<sup>42</sup> Some of these entities started out as civil initiatives that later developed into political movements and ran in the parliamentary election, such as Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES<sup>43</sup>, with an agenda of opposing anti-covid measures and representing the proclaimed fight for freedom. However, they were all unsuccessful candidates – with the exception of Volný blok (1.33%),<sup>44</sup> none of the movements received more than 1% of votes.<sup>VIII</sup>

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41 They often perceived the pandemic as a fraud which is used to limit human rights and establish a totalitarian regime through restrictions.

42 ‘FOTO: „Covidová Totalita.“ Odpůrci Opatření Se Sešli v Centru Prahy - Echo24.Cz’, 24, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://echo24.cz/a/Sh9Fx/foto-covidova-totalita-odpurci-opatreni-se-sesli-v-centru-prahy>

43 ‘NOVINKY A AKTUÁLNÍ AKCE: - OTEVŘEME ČESKO - Chcípl PES’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://otevremecesko.cz/>

44 This party has existed under different names since 2011, but since the pandemic started, Free Bloc built the majority of its agenda on the topic of COVID-19 and even helped spread COVID-19 related conspiracy theories.



Because of this political dimension, these movements are often represented by public faces of ordinary citizens that took it upon themselves to fight the “covid totalitarian regime”, e.g. owners of business that were impacted by the restrictions, as in the case of Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES and its leader Jakub Olbert. They are financed through voluntary contributions from their supporters to transparent accounts, as well as through selling merchandise such as T-shirts or books. Their political activities included organizing protests with the more established opposition parties, such as the Free Bloc and Tricolour. One such protest in 2021 took place on a national holiday – the Struggle for Democracy and Freedom Day on 17 November – and was attended by around 10,000 people, according to police estimates. The protest was initiated by Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES and some 30 other movements. The speakers called the government’s efforts to contain the pandemic unconstitutional and rallied the participants to defend their freedom which the government supposedly took from them.<sup>45</sup>

Although anti-covid outlets usually run their own websites, they produce the majority of their content on Facebook and other social media, including livestreams and videos where their representatives address their supporters in a very familiar and informal manner.<sup>46</sup> The messages of the anti-vaccination outlets have also been supported by public figures and celebrities, such as the musician Daniel Landa or mathematician and entrepreneur Karel Janeček, who recently declared he will be running in the presidential election in 2023.<sup>47</sup> The following table illustrates the different types of Czech anti-vaccination media. Besides the above-mentioned political movements and celebrities, *Zákony Bohatství* represents self-development and alternative, spiritual projects that also question the severity of the pandemic and the government’s solutions.

*Table 1 - Top 3 hyper-partisan sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Zákony Bohatství	Individual	-	225 684
Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES	Political movement	Opposition	90 438
Karel Janeček	Individual	Pro-opposition	73 193

45 ‘Na Staroměstském náměstí demonstrovalo proti koronavirovým opatřením na deset tisíc lidí’, iROZHLAS, accessed 21 February 2022, [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/koronavirus-cesko-praha-demonstrace-opatreni-vakcina-chcipl-pes\\_2111171750\\_vtk](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/koronavirus-cesko-praha-demonstrace-opatreni-vakcina-chcipl-pes_2111171750_vtk)

46 ‘Srdcem pro Vlast - Živě’, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/sprov.zive/>

47 ‘Miliardář Janeček Kandiduje Na Prezidenta. Do Kampaně Dá Maximum Peněz - Seznam Zprávy’, n.d., <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/volby-prezidentske-miliardar-karel-janecek-kandiduje-na-prezidenta-s-kampani-tohle-jsme-my-186378>

Another part of the Czech grey zone media scene are websites known for sharing conspiracy theories, such as Protiproud<sup>48</sup> or Svobodné noviny,<sup>49</sup> and websites relying on clickbait, such as KTV<sup>50</sup> and AC24.<sup>51</sup> Compared to the anti-vaccination media, these outlets are mostly established private media and blogs which have been part of the Czech media scene for 5 to 10 years. They are financed through ad revenues, readers' contributions and e-shops offering publications, merchandise promoting the websites or lifestyle and spiritual seminars. The authorship of the published texts is mixed – their authors are either known, such as the editor-in-chief of the website Protiproud, Petr Hájek, or disguised under a pseudonym, but the more informative texts are simply attributed to the entire editorial staff, which is usually not transparent. These well-established conspiracy and clickbait outlets have a symbiotic relationship with the newer grey zone media. They share the anti-system-oriented content and provide coverage of the protests against COVID-19 restrictions and similar events – an example being the internet television KTV. However, we could find no personal ties between these media.

In general, these outlets write positively about the national-conservative opposition parties such as SPD, Free Bloc or Tricolour mainly based on ideological sympathies, and sometimes personal connections – for example, Ivan David, an MEP from SPD, is the editor-in-chief of Nová republika and also publishes texts on conspiracy site New World Order Opposition (NWO). Their support includes the anti-vaccination fringe political movements like Otevřeme Česko or Alliance of National Forces (ANS) due to their proclaimed fight for freedom from the government's restrictions. Their approach to then-PM Babiš was a complex one – although he gained sympathy from the grey zone media thanks to his proclaimed focus on national interests and speaking against immigration, he was criticised for the continuing COVID-19 restrictions. They also found him hypocritical for criticizing the EU as long as he is not in Brussels, where he still provided the Czech Republic's support for policies such as the Green Deal.<sup>IX</sup>

Representatives of these parties are often cited, interviewed, or given the opportunity to publish an article, as opposed to the liberal opposition. This collaborative relationship allows the grey zone media to claim they have exclusive access to alternative political parties and to promote their activities, including campaigns, protests, etc. Likewise, the grey zone media encouraged their readers to support these parties as the only rational choice in the elections that would ensure that national interests and traditional values will be prioritized.

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48 'PROTIPROUD - Kontrarevoluční Magazín Petra Hájka', accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.protiproud.cz/>

49 'SVOBODNÉ NOVINY BEZ CENZURY - K VYVÁŽENÍ TOHO CO SLYŠÍTE V MAINSTREAMU „Nikdo Není Tak Beznadějně Zotročený, Jako Ti, Kteří Falešně Věří, Že Jsou Svobodní.“ Johan Wolfgang von Goethe', n.d., <https://svobodnenoviny.eu/>

50 'iktv.cz - KTV', accessed 21 February 2022, <https://iktv.cz/>

51 'z domova Archivy', AC24.cz (blog), 24, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.ac24.cz/rubrika/zpravy-z-domova/>

Table 2 illustrates the most popular conspiracy sources. Protiproud's editor-in-chief Petr Hájek is the former head of the press department of former Czech President Václav Klaus. Although the outlet was established years before the pandemic, it accommodated the anti-covid narratives into its conspiracy content. Svobodné noviny, with no known publisher, claims to balance "*the biased information from the Western mainstream*"<sup>x</sup> and has also spread pro-Kremlin narratives.<sup>xI</sup> CzechFreePress under its editor-in-chief Miroslav Suja has an unknown financial structure and has similarly added COVID-19 related conspiracies to its portfolio of deep-state, pro-Kremlin and other disinformation narratives.<sup>xII</sup>

*Table 2 - Top 3 Conspiracy sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Protiproud	Private media	Pro-nationalist opposition	21 607
Svobodné noviny	Blog	Pro-nationalist opposition	18 538
CzechFreePress	Blog	Pro-nationalist opposition	11 445

As for top clickbait sources, as seen in Table 3 below, KTV is an internet television which for the past two years provided coverage of anti-covid demonstrations. Its owner Ivan Smetana has also decided to run in the 2023 presidential election. The news source AC24 is owned by entrepreneur Ondřej Geršl, who has admitted in past interviews that besides ideological motivations, he runs his website as a business.<sup>xIII</sup> Last but not least, Parlamentní listy can be seen as a medium bridging mainstream media and conspiracy websites, due to its low-standard editorial culture and tendency to republish the Russian state-owned Sputnik CZ and providing space to extremist voices.<sup>xIV</sup> A stakeholder of its publisher is the entrepreneur and former independent senator Ivo Valenta.

*Table 3 - Top 3 Clickbait sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
KTV	Blog	Pro-nationalist opposition	108 816
AC24	Private media	Pro-nationalist opposition	80 687
Parlamentní listy	Private media	Pro-nationalist opposition	52 682

Regarding potential foreign malign influence, displayed in Tables 4 and 5, the Russian state-owned Sputnik CZ is the main pro-Kremlin outlet with a considerable reach (1.9 million visits in the two months of September and October)<sup>52</sup> and an ability to set the tone for other alternative media.<sup>53</sup> Pro-Chinese media have, to date, played a rather minor role in the Czech information space. Their activities are reduced to promoting a positive image of the country and its culture, without adapting the content to the Czech context and current topics.

Except the pro-Chinese outlets, all the mentioned groups of grey zone media represent a collaborative ecosystem in which they share each other's content, positions and support for alternative political parties. Government-organized non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) do not play a role in the Czech context, and neither do anonymous hyper-partisan sources – although there is a group of strongly patriotic outlets, it does not have a significant reach nor impact in the Czech information space, since the conspiracy websites already provide an established platform for partisan agenda.

*Table 4 - Top 3 pro-Kremlin sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Sputnik CZ	Russian state media	Pro-Russian	139 867
Raptor TV	Private media	Pro-Russian	84 477
Haló noviny	Private media	Pro-Russian / pro-opposition	1 209

*Table 5 - Top 3 Pro-Beijing sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Čínský rozhlas pro zahraničí	Chinese state media	Pro-Chinese	1 013 355
Kluk v Pekingu	Chinese state-controlled media	Pro-Chinese	36 890
Literární noviny (Reading China+ supplement) <sup>54</sup>	Private media	Pro-Chinese	8 831

<sup>52</sup> According to SimilarWeb.

<sup>53</sup> 'PSSI Perspectives #2 - Infodemic and Disinformation', Prague Security Studies Institute, accessed 21 February 2022, <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/7-pssi-perspectives-2-infodemic-and-disinformation>

<sup>54</sup> The newspaper cooperates with the Chinese government's People's Daily, 'Literární noviny šíří čínskou propagandu. A Česko jim dává státní dotace | Aktuálně.cz', Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje, 27 January 2020, <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/literarni-noviny-cina-spoluprace/r-f68e6648316811eaa24cac1f6b220ee8/>

The hyper-partisan sources of Table 6, such as Země česká domov můj, are mostly civil movements with untransparent structure of membership, leadership, and finances, although they vary a little in their level of transparency. They share a wide range of topics while maintaining a strong patriotic position. They support the anti-covid outlets either by sharing their content – e.g., AntiKavárna shares streams and recordings of anti-covid protests and vlogs from Zákony bohatství – or through official cooperation between some of the projects. For example, according to the website of Národní domobrana, it cooperates with the anti-covid projects Zdravé forum, Kulový blesk and Zlatý špendlík.

*Table 6 - Top 3 pro-Kremlin sources according to the number of followers on Facebook on March 1, 2022*

Name	Organisation type	Political orientation	Number of followers on Facebook
Země česká domov můj	Civil society	Patriotic, anti-vaccination	23 368
AntiKavárna	Civil society	Anti-liberal	20 539
Národní domobrana	Civil society	Nationalist/patriotic	18 049

As can be seen, both the established and the newer grey zone media serve as an alternative media scene in the Czech Republic which targets anti-system and nationalistic oriented followers, while also supporting political parties with the same ideological orientation. Although there were no personal ties identified among the different categories of the grey zone media, they have built a symbiotic relationship of resharing content and collaborating on sowing mistrust towards democratic institutions and independent media.

## INVESTIGATIVE RESEARCH RESULTS

The investigative research component aimed to conduct a number of in-depth interviews with journalists, editors and financiers behind the grey zone media ecosystem or media experts, so as to move beyond an exclusive reliance on open-source information, and to acquire a deeper understanding of the background of certain actors and events. Expert opinions can, therefore, support or refine some qualitative or quantitative research results of our media research.

In the Czech Republic, we conducted two interviews with founders of grey zone media projects: David Formánek, who is behind the projects Roušku dolů (Facemasks Down), Rizika vakcín (Vaccine Risks), Otevři svou mysl (Open Your Mind) and Kulový blesk (Ball Lightning); and Patrik Pečénka of the project Za pravdu (For Truth). While multiple media were approached, the investigative journalist met with reluctance to grant interviews, so this chapter will cover both interview data and investigative results to provide a complex picture of the grey zone media ecosystem.

David Formánek is a translator who has been labelled the most significant “civic” source of disinformation by the think-tank European Values, based on his content’s reach.<sup>55</sup> The common denominator of his network of projects is opposition to COVID-19 measures and vaccination, but the projects Otevři svou mysl and Kulový blesk are profiled more generally as opposition to the mainstream media. Contents produced by his outlets rely on personal testimonies and content from abroad, typically conspiracy theories and disinformation about 5G networks, the origins of COVID-19, and the pharmaceutical industry.

While Formánek also uses his media to sell products, Patrik Pečénka, an activist protesting against COVID-19 restrictions, and his outlet Za pravdu, is a solely ideologically motivated project. It is profiled as an activist medium also opposing COVID-19 measures and vaccination as an assault to freedom. He also supports anti-vaccination political movements, such as Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES. The interviewees provided very similar views on the role of their media which they perceive as a substitute for the mainstream media scene. Pečénka said: *“My initiative is mainly informing citizens about information that the media conceal or distort and turn against us who do not agree with this situation”*, meaning the official COVID-19 restrictions. As his motivation, he stated that he felt he was being robbed of freedom and blackmailed and forced through government pressure into an experimental vaccine. In the case of his initiative, as opposed to Formánek’s media network, there is no external financing through readers’ contributions or gifts involved: *“I don’t even want funding this way. I enjoy this activity and it is enough for me if people follow and support me on the internet”*.

Formánek similarly stated: *“...in times when the government behaves demonstrably illegally and issues only propagandistic declarations, uses illegal pressure and repression, fundamentally limits information, rights and freedoms guaranteed to citizens by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, Nuremberg Code, Constitution etc., it is our civil obligation to ensure access to such information in a way that allows everyone to make a free, informed opinion.”* He explicitly mentioned the Czech Television and Czech Radio as negative media examples.

Personal reasons can also play a partial role in the origins of these projects. On top of ideological reasons, Formánek was led to his activities due to losing his job with the onset of the pandemic.<sup>56</sup> Another example would be the leader of Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES Jakub Olbert who characterised himself as one of many people whose business, in his case a Prague-based restaurant, was negatively impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.<sup>57</sup>

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55 ‘„Nejúspěšnější“ Dezinformátoři v Česku: Vyniká SPD i Ledecký - Seznam Zprávy’, accessed 21 March 2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zebricek-nejuspesnejsich-dezinformatoru-vede-spd-i-csakova-148558>

56 ‘Otevři svou mysl: David Formánek’, Hovory ze země (blog), accessed 16 March 2022, <https://www.hovoryzezeme.cz/otevri-svou-mysl/>

57 ‘Tak Přijď, Hygieno! Zde to Budeš Mít Ostré. Hospoda Ozbrojená Po Zuby’, parlamentnilisty.cz, accessed 16 March 2022, <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/zpravy/kauzy/Tak-prijd-hygieno-Zde-to-budes-mit-ostre-Hospoda-ozbrojena-po-zuby-682177>



When it comes to transparency, the newer, anti-vaccination grey zone media in general are quite open both when it comes to the people behind them and their funding, which is a result of their *modus operandi*. Their social media strategy is built on public faces, for example via regular livestreams during which hosts comment on current events. This is the case of *Za pravdu* run by Patrik Pečénka, the internet televisions *TV Šalingrad* run by Renata Bernardi and *TV Světlo* run by Pavel Zítko. Another example is Lenka Tarabová, former local ombudswoman for seniors who is behind the anti-vaccination projects *Občanská neposlušnost* (Civil Disobedience)<sup>58</sup> and *Resetheus*.<sup>59</sup> Tarabová became known publicly mainly for dishonoring the Jewish symbol of the Star of David when she wrote „unvaccinated“ on it and thus compared the situation to the Holocaust.<sup>60</sup>

Generally, representatives of these anti-vaccination media maintain a close relationship with their audience. When it comes to financing, many of these anti-vaccination outlets have transparent accounts to which their followers can contribute. Hundreds of thousands of Czech crowns were acquired this way in the case of *Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES*,<sup>61</sup> *KTV*, or even millions in the case of *Zdravé forum* (Healthy Forum) since the start of the pandemic.<sup>62</sup> This differentiates the anti-vaccination grey zone media from their longer-established counterparts, e.g., hyper-partisan or conspiracy sites which tend towards non-transparency with regard to both authorship and funding. Authors of their content are often unknown or write under a pseudonym, for example *Pozorovatelka* (Observer) on *NWOO*, showing overall low editorial transparency.

The anti-vaccination grey zone media differ in their proclaimed political ambitions. For example, Formánek claimed he has no political ambitions with the reasoning: *“We perceive politics based on political parties as an obsolete, corrupt and therefore absolutely rotten system which will need a complete change in the future.”* On the other hand, multiple anti-vaccination movements ran in the elections – *Otevřeme Česko-Chcíp PES*, *Manifest.cz* (under Tricolour), *Hnutí Prameny*, *Aliance národních sil* and others, without much success. Probably the high support on social media and public events is the reason why some of these initiatives decided to run in the elections expecting a successful outcome, while others remained content with their role as alternative media.

Other grey zone media, such as *TV Šalingrad*, attempted to influence the campaign mainly by advocating for certain parties (mainly for SPD, Free Bloc and Tricolour). They also provided these parties almost unlimited and one-sided space on their platforms, in the form of interviews or resharing

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58 ‘(8) Občanská Neposlušnost | Facebook’, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/civildisobedienceON/>

59 ‘O nás’, *Resetheus z.s. (blog)*, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://resetheus.org/o-nas/>

60 ‘Lenka Tarabová a Očkování: „Židovská Hvězda“ Neočkovaný Jí Stála Místo | Blesk.Cz’, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-koronavirus/666091/zidovska-hvezda-neockovany-ji-stala-zidli-liberecka-ombudsmanka-musela-skoncit.html>

61 ‘Transparentní Účty | Česká Spořitelna’, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://www.csas.cz/cs/transparentni-ucty#/000000-6084472319/Otevreme-Cesko---Chcíp-Pes>

62 ‘Transparentní Účty | Česká Spořitelna’, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://www.csas.cz/cs/transparentni-ucty#/000000-5854718369>

their content, an example being TV Šalingrad and their support of Free Bloc.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, even after the parliamentary election, these media have continued with political protests and proactively produce content on their social media in service of the national-conservative and anti-vaccination parties, such as Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES.

As for the future of these media, their political aspirations seem to go beyond the parliamentary elections, based on our investigative work. Three representatives from the anti-vaccination media scene have already announced they will be running in the presidential election in 2023 – leader of Otevřeme Česko – Chcípl PES Jakub Olbert,<sup>64</sup> owner of the internet television KTV Ivan Smetana<sup>65</sup> and the entrepreneur and billionaire Karel Janeček.<sup>66</sup> Janeček is known for his speech at the music awards ceremony Český slavík, where he spoke against dividing society through anti-pandemic measures. He stated: *“We cannot succumb to the horrible pressure on vaccination of our children against a disease that does not threaten them in any way.”*<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the established conspiracy and clickbait media have a longstanding supportive relationship with the national-conservative opposition as self-proclaimed alternative voices in Czech society defending national interests, and this relationship is expected to continue.

**As for the grey zone media with no political ambitions, such as conspiracy websites like Protiproud or hyper-partisan outlets such as České národní listy, their proclaimed mission of replacing mainstream media in providing unbiased information can be expected to hold beyond any elections.** With the onset of the Russian war on Ukraine, while retaining their original agenda, the grey zone media as a whole also reacted with the heightened production of geopolitics-related content and disinformation narratives about the war, which is addressed in a separate chapter of this publication. Moreover, the recent shutting of pro-Russian websites by the Czech authorities, even if temporary, is expected to raise future debates on this part of the Czech information scene.

Overall, when it comes to the relationship of Czech grey zone media and Czech politics, their common denominator is their dissatisfaction and distrust towards mainstream media and public institutions, support and ideological affinity expressed towards the national-conservative opposition echoing a similar critique of democracy. That includes parties such as SPD, Tricolour, or Free Bloc, and more fringe movements such as Aliance národních sil. This is also the case of the newer, anti-vaccination grey zone media, often run by civil movements that decided to enter politics themselves,

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63 ‘(7) Facebook Live | Facebook’, accessed 16 March 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=451440786180544](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=451440786180544)

64 ‘JAKUB OLBERT - KANDIDÁT NA PREZIDENTA ČR’, OTEVŘEME ČESKO - Chcípl PES (blog), accessed 16 March 2022, <https://otevremecesko.cz/jakub-olbert-lidr-pro-hl-m-prahu/>

65 ‘Ivan Smetana oficiální kandidát na prezidenta ČR 2023’, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://ismetana.cz/>

66 Karel Janeček, ‘Úvod’, accessed 16 March 2022, <https://www.kareljanecek.cz>

67 ‘Nadační fond Neuron ukončil spolupráci s Janečkem. „Jeho názory jsou v rozporu s poznáním vědců,“ uvedl’, iROZHLAS, accessed 16 March 2022, [https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/karel-janecek-cesky-slavik-vedecka-a-spravni-rada-nf-neuron\\_2111211909\\_dok](https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/karel-janecek-cesky-slavik-vedecka-a-spravni-rada-nf-neuron_2111211909_dok)

which led to their quite transparent model of authorship and funding. This openness differentiates them from the rest of the Czech grey zone media (hyper-partisan, conspiracy, clickbait sites, etc.) which are more ambiguous in their organisational and financial models.

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE

With the help of the SentiOne platform, we generated a representative sample of 658 website articles and Facebook posts to reveal and categorize the main types of campaign narratives present in our dataset. The representative sample of all the messages' and sources' distribution within our timeframe between 1 September and 31 October 2021 allowed researchers to identify and categorize the main types of election or campaign-related narratives in each country without the need to read through thousands of articles. Narrative analysis of samples revealed the differences between the "grey zone" and mainstream interpretation of the same topics and the use of country-specific manipulation techniques employed by specific actors to influence the public discourse before the general elections.

Although the "grey zone" media acted as mainstream news sources in 14.9% of their coverage, commenting on the pre-election campaigns in an informative and detached manner, certain topics, listed in Table 7, drew their special attention and produced biased coverage.

*Table 7 - The number and ratio of the top 5 Czech narratives in the representative sample between 1 September - 31 October 2021*

Narrative	Frequency	%
COVID-19 totalitarian regime	74	11,2
Critique of the „Demobloc“ <sup>68</sup>	73	11,1
Anti-EU narrative	57	8,7
Anti-mainstream media narrative	35	5,3
Support of the national-conservative opposition	32	4,9

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<sup>68</sup> "Demobloc" is a label the grey zone media often use for the five parties that won the elections and later formed the new government – the alliances SPOLU and Pirates and Mayors

The most resonating narrative was the perception of the government's COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination as a fraud used to limit human rights and allegedly establish a “totalitarian political regime” by the Czech government. At the same time, the monitored media underplayed the severity of the pandemic and the potential danger of COVID-19.<sup>69 70</sup> The agitation of the grey zone actors' messages turned especially forceful when the health measures concerned children, whether in the form of testing or potential vaccination.<sup>71</sup> In fact, the newest and most quickly multiplying distinctive group of the Czech grey zone's anti-vaccination media run either by civil and political movements or individuals with ideological motivations focuses solely on the topic of COVID-19 as a fraud and on opposition against the official anti-pandemic measures. These media presented the elections as a chance to fight for freedom and to overthrow the supposed totalitarian regime.<sup>72</sup> They attempted to mobilise Czech citizens to oppose the measures and used their platforms to organise protests and petitions.

This perception of the elections also led grey zone media across all our identified categories (conspiracy and clickbait sites, anti-vaccination, hyper-partisan media) to support the national-conservative opposition candidates such as SPD, Tricolour, Free Bloc and more newly established political movements such as Otevřeme Česko - Chcépl PES (We Will Open Czechia- PES/DOG Croaked)<sup>73</sup> – one of multiple anti-vaccination movements which transformed themselves into political movements and ran in the elections. The grey zone media presented these parties as the right choice in the elections because they will fight for freedom against the alleged “COVID-19 totalitarian regime.” They are also supposedly the only ones who still care about Czech national interests as opposed to e.g., the alliances SPOLU and Pirates and Mayors who serve the interests of external actors such as the EU.<sup>74</sup>

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69 This is also an outcome of the research design, since we treated media in opposition to COVID-19 measures and vaccination as a country-specific (and extensive) category of Czech grey zone media.

70 kuryr, “Názor a stanovisko lékaře, aneb jaká je pravda kolem očkování proti Covidu-19,” INFOKURÝR (blog), 26 October 2021, <http://www.infokuryr.cz/n/2021/10/26/nazor-a-stanovisko-lekare-aneb-jaka-je-pravda-kolem-ockovani-proti-covidu-19/>

71 NWO, 17 September 2021, <http://www.nwo.org/2021/09/17/monika-jarsova-nedelejme-z-lidi-a-deti-zejmena-pokusne-kraliky/>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

72 “Proč v ČR nevznikla proti koronavirová parlamentní strana? Mírná opozice v mezích zákona? Proč to na Slovensku, nebo v Rakousku jde? – Česká věc,” accessed March 12, 2022, <https://ceskavec.com/2021/09/proc-v-cr-nevznikla-proti-koronavirova-parlamentni-strana-mirna-opozice-v-mezich-zakona-proc-to-na-slovensku-nebo-v-rakousku-jde>

73 The name hints at the Czech Republic's PES anti-epidemic system.

74 Protiproud, 8 October 2021, <https://www.protiproud.cz/politika/6065-otazky-hany-lipovske-zustaneme-uvezeni-v-nemeckem-protektoratu-roc-nevolit-mensi-zlo-chce-trikolora-podporit-ods-roc-jsem-jednala-s-okamurou-roc-dat-hlas-strane-ktera-se-mozna-do-snemovny-nedostane-vcerejsi-konspirace-zitrejsi-realita.htm>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

Members of these parties actively used the grey zone platforms to promote their agenda and recruit voters by providing exclusive interviews or even publishing their own articles. For example, the editor-in-chief of the conspiracy website Nová republika is Ivan David, an MEP from SPD, and another conspiracy website, Pravý prostor, which presents itself as a platform for right-wing voices, was used by members of Tricolour, including its leader Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková.<sup>75</sup>

**Both in the month before and after the elections, the grey zone media across all our categories were highly critical of the parties that eventually won the election – the alliances SPOLU and Pirates and Mayors. This liberal-conservative coalition, often labelled “the Demobloc” by the grey zone media in a derogatory manner, was seen as a representative that will serve external actors such as Brussels, rather than fight for national interests – as opposed to the national-conservative opposition.<sup>76</sup> This was the second most popular narrative identified in our sample. The monitored media made pessimistic predictions about the impact of the new government on the country, including the destruction of the economy and national sovereignty. The victory of the five-coalition was also perceived as undemocratic due to the historically highest number of lost votes<sup>77</sup> and the forming of pre-election electoral alliances which included parties that supposedly would not succeed on their own, such as TOP 09.<sup>78</sup> All in all, the democratic status and legitimacy of these parties, the later election winners, was undermined.**

**As the third most popular narrative, all categories of the grey zone media were highly critical towards the EU and often campaigned for the Czech Republic to leave the Union – for the so-called Czexit. The EU was seen as an entity that breaches national sovereignty and as the source of most of the Czech Republic’s problems, such as inflation.<sup>79</sup> A significant source of criticism was the European Green Deal, which was perceived as a prime example of an irrational EU initiative that does not provide effective solutions to the member states’ problems, merely financially burdens ordinary citizens and benefits the ruling elites in Brussels.<sup>80</sup>**

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75 “Green Deal: S Fialou Vzhůru k Světým Zítkům | Pravý Prostor,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/2021015054315/https://pravyprostor.cz/green-deal-s-fialou-vzhuru-k-svetlym-zitrkum/>

76 CZ24 News, 12 October 2021, <https://cz24.news/prijdeme-o-stat-blby-narod-cesky-medialni-analytik-presne-vi-co-bude/>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

77 Over one million votes were given to parties that did not manage to cross the electoral threshold, based on an election clause requiring at least 5% votes for a party to acquire representation in the parliament.

78 “Zvítězily Prý »demokratické« strany - Haló Noviny,” accessed 12 March 2022, <http://www.halonoviny.cz/articles/view/56048229>

79 “Jindřich Kulhavý: Začalo Skutečné Plundrování Našich Peněženek – CZ 24 News,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211024175819/https://cz24.news/jindrich-kulhavy-zacalo-skutecne-plundrovani-nasich-penezenek/>

80 “‘O GREEN DEALU SE NEDISKUTUJE!’ – Prohlásil Nikým Nevolený Nacisticko-Bolševický Hajzlík F. Timmermans. Odmítl Jakékoli Snahy Členských Zemí o Věcnou Diskusi – CZ24.NEWS,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220225153912/https://cz24.news/o-green-dealu-se-nediskutuje-prohlasil-nikym-nevoleny-nacisticko-bolsevicky-hajzlik-f-timmermans-odmitl-jakekoli-snahy-clenskyx-zemi-o-vecnou-diskusi/>

The political stances of the grey zone media, mainly conspiracy and clickbait websites, also manifested in their critique of the mainstream media, mainly the public broadcaster – the Czech Television (ČT) – as the fourth most prominent narrative. Mainstream media were accused of manipulating the election process and acting like an election candidate, because they supposedly discriminated against the voice of the national-conservative opposition, e.g., by not inviting them to pre-election debates, which supposedly helped determine the election result.<sup>81</sup> The grey zone media as a whole attempted to paint the image of mainstream media as biased and undemocratic in an attempt to deepen distrust towards them and at the same time allowing these media to present themselves as the only source of objective truth.<sup>82</sup>

These narratives came to the fore with a scandal which concerned the now former PM Andrej Babiš and his role in Pandora Papers, a data leak that exposed offshore activities of 35 current and former global leaders and over 300 current and former politicians and public officials and related suspicions of tax evasion and money laundering.<sup>xv</sup> It uncovered Babiš's real estate purchases on the French Riviera and the potentially problematic transactional process involving offshore companies by which he attained them.<sup>xvi</sup> **The Czech grey zone media, mainly conspiracy websites such as Protiproud, Aeronet, Nová republika and Pravý prostor, however presented Pandora Papers as a globalist operation of external actors (such as the EU) who use mainstream media and investigative journalists as tools to damage undesirable election candidates and therefore to manipulate the election process.** The investigative journalists were seen by the grey zone media as part of a network of the philanthropist George Soros, who used them in this attempt for a coup in the Czech Republic. Mainstream media, also labelled as “the Demobloc's media,” were seen as accomplices who simply reproduced these supposedly unsubstantiated accusations against Babiš, which were supposed to influence his election result.<sup>xvii</sup> All in all, these conspiracy grey zone media defended Babiš as a target of a globalist operation.

Table 8 illustrates the most active sources from our sample and their coverage of the identified top five narratives. Parlamentní listy as a clickbait website provided space to, and cites members of, all parts of the political spectrum, including extremist voices. Its coverage levelled a lot of criticism towards SPOLU and Pirates and Mayors as a servant of Brussels that would allegedly give up Czech sovereignty to the EU and support its irrational policies including the Green Deal, while highlighting the national-conservative opposition and their devotion to national interests. Sputnik CZ, the Russian state-owned outlet, attempted to stay seemingly independent in its news coverage, but remained visibly critical mainly of the “Demobloc”.

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81 “Předvolební Demokratická Agonie: Naprogramování Moderátoři. Vzhůru Do Technologického Gulagu? Skutečná a Zástupná Témata Voleb. ČT Je Další Stranou Usilující o Moc. Kdo Je Tady Loutkovodíčem? Budoucnost... | PROTIPROUD,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211010034527/https://www.protiproud.cz/politika/6062-predvolebni-demokraticka-agonie-naprogramovani-moderatori-vzhuru-do-technologickeho-gulagu-skutecna-a-zastupna-temata-voleb-ct-je-dalsi-stranou-usilujici-o-moc-kdo-je-tady-loutkovodicem-budoucnost.htm>

82 kuryr, “Mediální expert: Česká televize si koleduje o zrušení,” *INFOKURÝR* (blog), 2 October 2021, <http://www.infokuryr.cz/n/2021/10/02/medialni-expert-ceska-televize-si-koleduje-o-zruseni/>



CZ24 News is an aggregator of content from other grey zone media without much original production. In the monitored period, it mainly republished statements of doctors, lawyers and other public figures who opposed the anti-pandemic restrictions and vaccination or saw COVID-19 as a fraud. Another leading source was Haló noviny, which is a radical-left outlet with close connections to the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), therefore it mostly commented on the performance of leftist parties (KSČM and ČSSD) before and during the elections, without paying significant attention to other topics. Zvědavec is a conspiracy website<sup>83</sup> that stuck to its usual agenda of criticism towards the US and what it sees as a globalist world order, although it also published conspiracies related to COVID-19 and vaccination. Infokurýr is another conspiracy website that also compiles mainly opinion pieces from other conspiracy grey zone media. Infokurýr also published texts about the oppression of anti-pandemic measures and criticism of the Green Deal.

*Table 8 – Main sources and their coverage of main narratives in the Czech representative sample between 1 September – 31 October 2021*

Source	Frequency	COVID totalitarian regime	Critique of the Demobloc	Anti-EU	Support of national-conservative opposition	Anti-mainstream media
www.parlamentnilisty.cz	310	15	41	23	18	14
cz.sputniknews.com	43	-	8	2	-	7
cz24.news	40	13	2	5	1	1
www.halonoviny.cz	34	1	4	1	-	-
www.zvedavec.org	24	3	1	2	-	1
www.infokuryr.cz	21	4	2	4	1	3

Going into 2022, the narrative about the COVID-19 totalitarian regime in relation to the “Demobloc” remained among the top narratives disseminated by the grey zone media, mainly by Sputnik CZ and clickbait media such as Parlamentní listy and AC24. In January, a confidence vote took place, which the opposition supported by the grey zone media used as an opportunity to point out that in their election campaign, the “Demobloc” promised no more COVID-19 restrictions but did not keep that promise.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> It was established by Vladimír Stwora, a Czechoslovak emigrant living in Canada.

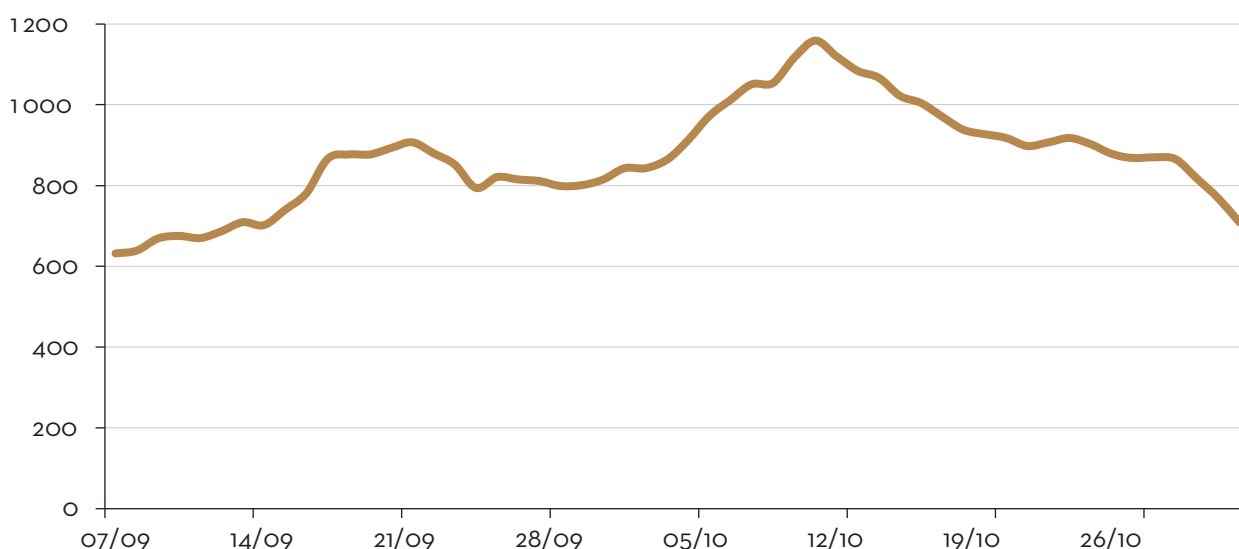
<sup>84</sup> „Konejte Věci pro ČR, Ne Brusel!“ Rakušan Odpověděl Na Útok Babiše a Hned Narazil Na Soud Veřejnosti - 12.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220112190721/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220112/konejte-veci-pro-cr-ne-brusel-rakusan-odpovedel-na-utok-babise-a-hned-narazil-na-soud-verejnosti-17190496.html>

At the end of January when the amendment to the Pandemic Law was passed by the new government and extended the executive powers under this law, criticism continued mainly from the side of the anti-vaccination media outlets.<sup>85</sup> Trend analysis of the “grey zone” media discourses.

## TREND ANALYSIS OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA DISCOURSES

The trend analysis focused on general dissemination patterns of all the grey zone media and social media under review in terms of news peaks, top sources and drivers of discussions about the political campaign leading up to the elections. The examination of message distribution over time provided us, as seen in the Czech time-trend table below, with valuable insights into the grey zone media’s dissemination tactics that tried to reach out to hyper-partisan and/or conspiracy-minded audiences in each country based on the aforementioned main types of narratives.

*The weekly number of relevant media contents (social media posts, website articles) dealing with the campaign in the Czech grey zone media between 1/9/2021 – 30/10/2021 (7-day rolling sum)*



The main news peak before the election happened on the week of 13-20 September – approximately a month before the election – with 882 articles. This peak was partly stirred up when the Electoral Committee in the Chamber of Deputies proposed that Hana Lipovská, a candidate from the Free Bloc, should be recalled from her position on the Board of public broadcaster ČT. The proposal was based on the Act on Czech Television, which states that members of the Board cannot simultaneously hold a political position, to ensure the independence of the Board.<sup>86</sup>

85 “(2) Raptor-TV.Cz – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/2017359068536366/posts/3182999308638997/>

86 Jaroslav Gavenda, “Lipovská Ztratila Nezávislost, Odvolejte Ji, Doporučil Výbor Poslancům - Seznam Zprávy,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ztratila-nezavislost-a-nestranost-poslanci-jednaji-o-odvolani-lipovske-174054>

However, Free Bloc as well as other grey zone actors, such as the pro-Russian Raptor TV,<sup>87</sup> fervently opposed this step and saw it as an attempt to get rid of critics of ČT and its CEO Petr Dvořák, and generally of people inconvenient to the former government.<sup>88</sup> This event amplified the critique of the “Demobloc” as well as the long-term campaign against mainstream media and the public broadcasters as being biased against the national-conservative opposition (such as SPD and Tricolour).

The second news peak naturally occurred during the week of 4-11 October, with 1169 articles, since the elections took place on 8-9 October and the campaigns were at their peak the week before. **Again, the Facebook page of Free Bloc was dominant among the grey zone actors with its online campaign, informing about the activities of its leader Lubomír Volný and his fight for freedom against the “COVID-19 totalitarian regime.”** This time, it also concentrated on differentiating itself from the other national-conservative candidates,<sup>89</sup> Tricolour and especially SPD, claiming that the other parties only use nationalism as a pretence to acquire money but are not, in fact, committed to the nationalist mission and values.<sup>90</sup> LIGA LIBE, a pro-gun grey zone outlet which campaigns for the right of every citizen with no previous criminal record to own a gun or a self-defence tool, also ran an influential social media campaign built on the narrative of “the EU establishing a dictatorship” (mostly in relation to its gun laws).<sup>91</sup> It also expressed its support for SPD, which is supportive of LIGA LIBE’s pro-gun agenda and even received honorary awards from the movement for their support.<sup>92</sup>

When it comes to the most active sources based on the number of published articles during the monitored period, the clear leader was Parlamentní listy, a medium which can be seen as a bridge between the Czech mainstream media and the sphere of conspiracy websites. Even though it accounted for 67% of the neutral coverage of pre-election events identified in the representative sample, it also continuously provides space for the extremist agenda and republishes content from pro-Russian websites such as Sputnik CZ.<sup>93</sup> Sputnik CZ, the Czech branch of the Russian

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87 “(2) Raptor-TV.Cz – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/2017359068536366/posts/3087590928179836/>

88 “(2) Volný Blok – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104001448364452/posts/230871199010809/>

89 “(2) Volný Blok – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104001448364452/posts/247305647367364/>

90 “(2) Volný Blok – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104001448364452/posts/246636430767619/>

91 “(2) LIGA LIBE - Petice Proti Nesmyslným Zákazům Legálních Obranných Prostředků – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/762046630473635/posts/5136836646327923/>

92 “(2) LIGA LIBE - Petice Proti Nesmyslným Zákazům Legálních Obranných Prostředků – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/762046630473635/posts/5124531967558391/>

93 Michaela Dvořáková and Jonáš Syrovátka, “VRBĚTICE: CASE STUDY OF CZECH RESILIENCE AGAINST HOSTILE PROPAGANDA,” 2021, 11.

state-owned news outlet considered by experts to be an important tool of Russian propaganda<sup>94</sup> was the second most active source. In spite of these problematic aspects, both outlets present themselves as standard media sources providing objective news coverage. Both outlets also commented on the aforementioned Pandora Papers scandal, and while some articles simply reported about the case, some authors linked it to Soros and “his” media, the mainstream media and investigative journalists, and defended Babiš.<sup>XVIII XIX</sup>

The third most active source was the website CZ24 News, which does not produce much of its own content but serves as an aggregator of content from other grey zone media. During the month before the elections, CZ24 News’s sources included mostly the aforementioned Parlamentní listy and Sputnik CZ, as well as the conspiracy website Protiproud. Other proactive sources during the monitored period were the radical-left news outlet halonoviny.cz, connected to the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, and mostly conspiracy websites such as Zvědavec, Infokurýr and Pravý prostor. CZ24 News and Pravý prostor are also examples of the media that interpreted Pandora Papers as a special-purpose operation against Babiš orchestrated by Soros and “his” media.<sup>XX XXI</sup>

When it comes to the most active grey zone media on Facebook, the leader was the Facebook page of the Free Bloc which the party actively used as a part of its campaign, mostly to inform about the activities of its leader Lubomír Volný but also to spread disinformation about COVID-19,<sup>96</sup> such as that vaccination is an attempt to murder seniors through mRNA intoxication,<sup>XXII</sup> and criticize mainstream media.<sup>97</sup> In the second place was the Facebook page of Sputnik CZ, and the top three was rounded out by Karel Janeček, the entrepreneur, now an announced candidate for president, who opposes COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination.

At the beginning of 2022, another news peak came on January 12 due to the confidence vote for the new government, but also due to two other issues. First, TOP 09 Pekarová Adamová’s Facebook post in which she expressed hopes that the Hungarian opposition will beat the current Hungarian PM Orbán in the upcoming elections, for which she received criticism from the grey zone media, claiming such declarations from the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies are improper.<sup>98</sup>

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94 Todd C. Helmus, *Russian Social Media Influence: Understanding Russian Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Research Report (Rand Corporation), RR-2237-OSD (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND Corporation, 2018).

95 The fact that Russian state media are a tool for pursuing the Russian state’s interests was eventually confirmed by Russian officials at numerous public occasions. See “Kremlin-Funded Broadcaster Lauded by Putin Starts TV News Channel in UK | Reuters,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/article/britain-russia-tvchannel-idINKBN0IJ2MR20141030>

96 “(2) Volný Blok – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/104001448364452/posts/240270494737546/>

97 “(2) Facebook Live | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=2530410500425592](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=2530410500425592)

98 “Pekarová Adamová Si Za Svým Prohlášením Stojí. Neziskovka pro Pomoc Uprchlíkům Jásá. Oč Jde? - 12.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220113000749/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220112/pekarova-adamova-si-za-svym-prohlasenim-stoji-neziskovka-pro-pomoc-uprchlikum-jasa-oc-jde-17191315.html>

The second issue concerned Jan Farský, an MP from Mayors and Independents who decided to fly to the USA for an internship awarded by the Fulbright Commission despite getting a mandate, which was criticised not only by the opposition but also by his coalition partners. He was criticized for knowing about the internship while he ran in the elections and labelled as impudent for his plans to keep his mandate while doing the internship abroad.<sup>99</sup> In the end, Farský resigned his mandate.<sup>XXIII</sup> These cases added up to the criticism of the new government, or “Demobloc”, and were mostly covered by Sputnik CZ. Although some of its articles covered the events in an objective manner, Sputnik also provided space in the form of interviews for the national-conservative opposition and their criticism of the government.<sup>100</sup> The narrative of the “COVID totalitarian regime” also remained part of the grey zone coverage and was amplified by the vote on the amendment to the Pandemic Law. The extension of executive powers under this law was seen by the anti-vaccination grey zone media as a further repression of freedom and a dictate of conditions for life.<sup>101</sup>

All in all, the grey zone media showed the ability to promptly react to current events and put forward narratives that support their overall attempts to undermine democratic institutions and independent media, whether through underplaying the seriousness of the pandemic, questioning the new government’s legitimacy or the strong criticism of ČT and other mainstream media. The composition of the most active grey zone media in the monitored period also shows a significant pro-Russian dimension of the Czech grey zone media scene. While Sputnik CZ itself ranked among the top sources, its narratives also circulated through other popular platforms. Last but not least, the political leaning of the grey zone media visible in their messaging showed the symbiotic relationship of both the established and the newer anti-vaccination grey zone media with the predominantly right-wing national conservative opposition that remains in this position after the elections.

## CZECH NARRATIVES ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

We monitored campaign messages published in the grey zone media between 1 January and 1 March 2022 to detect the emergence and evolution of the Kremlin’s war narratives based on a specific set of keywords.<sup>102</sup> Our research results revealed if and how pro-Kremlin narratives were picked up (as seen below in the time-trend table), reiterated, or localized by the diverse set of hyper-partisan, conspiracy, clickbait, pro-Kremlin and anti-covid sources to formulate their geopolitical stance and produce pretexts for the war.

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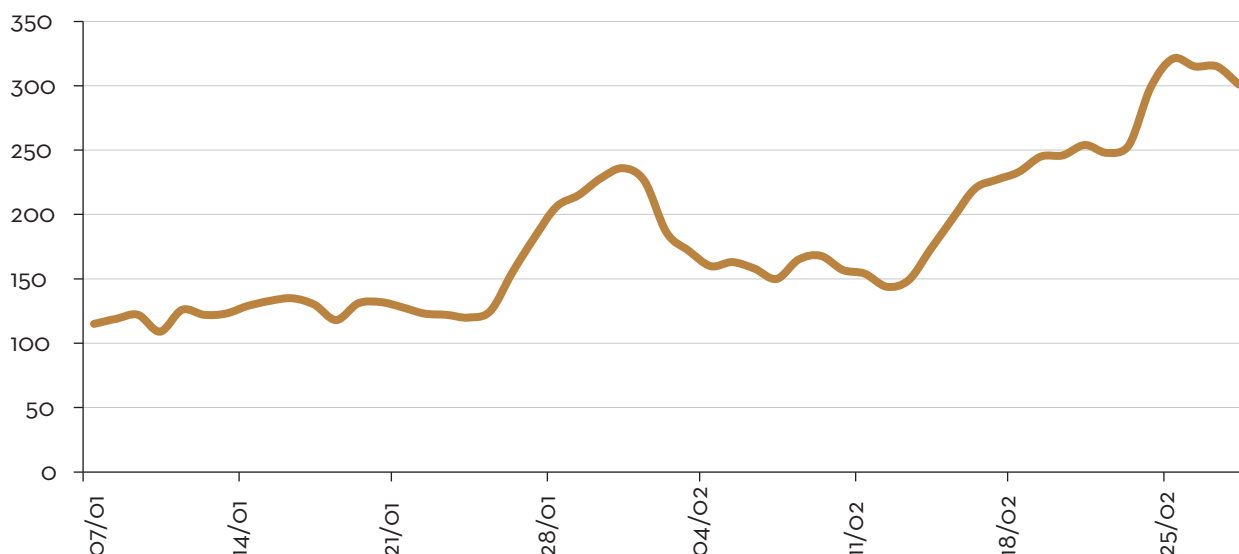
99 “Štěpánek o Farského Stáži: Horší Než Se Vy\*rat Školníkovi Před Dveře. Kalousek Chce Jeho Konec - 12.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220112142440/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220112/stepanek-o-farskeho-stazi-horsi-nez-se-vy-rat-skolnikovi-pred-dvere-kalousek-chce-jeho-konec-17179685.html>

100 “Štěpánek o Farského Stáži: Horší Než Se Vy\*rat Školníkovi Před Dveře. Kalousek Chce Jeho Konec - 12.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika.”

101 “(2) Raptor-TV.Cz - Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 12 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/2017359068536366/posts/3182999308638997/>

102 In order to collect all relevant narratives, we used a wide set of keywords that scraped all messages that contained any of the following keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Putin, Kremlin or Zelensky.

*The weekly number of relevant media contents (social media posts, website articles) dealing with the war in the Czech grey zone media between 1/1-28/2 2022 (7-day rolling sum)*



The first news peak occurred in the week of 24-31 January with 228 articles. One of the most proactive outlets of that week was the conspiracy site New World Order Opposition (NWO), run by the conspiracy theorist Jan Korál and known for its pro-Russian content. **It heavily criticised the EU, and specifically the “Islamised” Germany, and attempted to paint a picture of an EU full of disagreements and a non-uniform stance on the response to the build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian borders and a potential military aggression, especially sanctions.** For example, in his article published on NWO, Ivan David, MEP from SPD, emphasised that the sanctions would damage Europe at least as much as Russia itself and that precious money needed to develop areas such as agriculture in Europe would be “poured down the drain” in Ukraine instead.<sup>103</sup> Another, anonymous author writing under the pseudonym Pozorovatelka (translation: Observer) also strongly warned against “the reality created by the mainstream media” in relation to Ukraine, which is not to be trusted.<sup>104</sup>

Sputnik CZ also contributed significantly to this news peak. According to this Russian outlet, there was no chance of an upcoming aggression or invasion from the side of Russia, NATO was just looking for excuses to move troops to its borders.<sup>105</sup> If any potential military aggression was admitted by the

<sup>103</sup> NWO, 28 January 2022, <http://www.nwo.org/2022/01/28/rusku-sankce-ukrajine-miliony-dolaru-a-miliardy-eur/>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

<sup>104</sup> NWO, 28 January 2022, <http://www.nwo.org/2022/01/28/america-first-opet-neplati-a-martine-smide-nikdy-nezapomeneme-aneb-konspiracni-teorie-versus-mainstreamem-vytvorena-realita/>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

<sup>105</sup> “Budou Umírat Naše Děti! Petr Němec Volá Po Porážce Ruska. Jste Se Úplně Posral, Reagují Češi - 26.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126115339/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220126/budou-umirat-nase-deti-petr-nemec-vola-po-porazce-ruska-jste-se-uplne-posral-reaguji-cesi-17348786.html>



outlet, the act of aggression was either attributed to Ukraine<sup>106</sup> or the West, which had supposedly been escalating tensions through its military supplies for the “Kyiv regime”<sup>107</sup> and replacing “covid hysteria” with “war hysteria”.<sup>108</sup> The Czech Republic, which promptly reacted to Ukraine’s appeals for aid and military equipment, was likewise labelled more and more aggressive and as a country that now prefers “Russophobic” partners instead of “natural and traditional partners.”<sup>109</sup> Another narrative proliferated by Sputnik was that Russia had been trying to reach an agreement peacefully from the beginning and that all the blame for escalation is unfairly attributed to Russia by the West.<sup>110</sup>

Another active medium during this news peak was the conspiracy website Nová republika, whose editor-in-chief Ivan David is an MEP from SPD. It depicted Ukraine simply as a US “ram against the Russian regime” and accused the US of orchestrating the change of the Ukrainian political regime in 2014.<sup>111</sup> Nová republika presented mainstream media as biased Russophobic sources that brainwash their audience into thinking Putin is an evil dictator.<sup>112</sup> The mainstream media were also accused by the same outlet of defending Ukrainian fascists.<sup>113</sup> **In general, conspiracy sites were the main type of grey zone media that exposed themselves the most with relation to the war, which was predictable due to their long-term involvement in the dissemination of all kinds of pro-Russian narratives and republishing content from Russian media.**

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106 “V Rusku Vyzvali k Pomoci DLR a LLR Dodávkami Zbraní - 26.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126165141/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220126/v-rade-federace-ruska-vyzvali-k-pomoci-dlr-a-llr-dodavkami-zbrani-17352929.html>

107 “My Jsme v Pi\*i a Nemáme Na Elektřinu. Twitter Reaguje Na Chlubení Adamové a Fialy o Pomoci Ukrajině - 25.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220125221029/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220125/my-jsme-v-pii-a-nemame-na-elektrinu-twitter-reaguje-na-chlubeni-adamove-a-fialy-o-pomoci-ukrajine-17344054.html>

108 “Čechům Neunikla Hysterie Kolem Ukrajiny: Kdo Neustále Vyhrožuje? Jen Jedna Strana a Putin to Není - 29.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220129120643/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220129/cechum-neunikla-hysterie-kolem-ukrajiny-kdo-neustale-vyhrozuje-jen-jedna-strana-a-putin-to-neni---17392263.html>

109 “Česká Vláda Chce Do Chomoutu s Rusofoby, Uvažuje Se i o Dalším Vojenském Dobrodružství v Zahraničí - 26.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126213906/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220126/ceska-vlada-chce-do-chomoutu-s-rusofoby-uvazuje-se-i-o-dalsim-vojenskem-dobrodruzstvi-v-zahranici-17357922.html>

110 “My Jsme v Pi\*i a Nemáme Na Elektřinu. Twitter Reaguje Na Chlubení Adamové a Fialy o Pomoci Ukrajině - 25.01.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika.”

111 Nová republika, 27 January 2022, <https://www.novarepublika.cz/2022/01/americke-divadlo-o-hrozbe-ruske-invaze-na-ukrajinu-pokracuje-pricemz-ukrajina-neni-pro-americiany-zadnym-partnerem-ale-jen-beranidle-proti-ruskemu-rezimu-aneb-o-cem-svedci-zpusob-r>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

112 “Kdo Chce Zemřít pro Kyjev? - Nová Republika,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220126204610/https://www.novarepublika.cz/2022/01/kdo-chce-zemrit-pro-kyjev>

113 “Potáhnem Na Rusa Nevíme Proč - Nová Republika,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220221163051/https://www.novarepublika.cz/2022/01/potahnem-na-rusa-nevime-proc-2>

The second news peak predictably came in the week of 21-28 February 2022 with 315 articles, as the Russian invasion of Ukraine started on 24 February. **These events provoked a reaction from the grey zone anti-vaccination political scene – for example, Otevřeme Česko - Chcíp PES condemned the war and Russia's attack but assigned the blame to the EU and NATO for their “continual sanctions and incitement of instability” and called the Czech Republic a useful idiot of other big powers.**<sup>114</sup> This echoed the movement's spokesperson Jiří Janeček who spoke similarly about the current PM Petr Fiala for helping Ukraine. He also expressed an understanding of Putin's steps due to “*genocide in the separatist republics*”.<sup>115</sup> The narrative of genocide and the Russians as liberators of the separatist republics was also reiterated by the fringe national-conservative movement Aliance národních sil, focusing on traditional values and the defence of national interests.<sup>116</sup>

However, a shift occurred later, when Otevřeme Česko - Chcíp PES started organising help for Ukrainian refugees, which caused a split among its members and upset some of its supporters who tend towards anti-immigration stances and saw this activity as contradicting the movement's previous declarations of understanding Putin's cause. However, the movement's leader Jakub Olbert claimed that they are helping people affected by the war, just as they originally wanted to help businessmen affected by the anti-pandemic restrictions.<sup>117</sup>

NWOO continued to be active mainly with daily news translations and summaries from the Russian news server Rusvesna, which is a longstanding activity of the website, presenting Ukraine as the aggressor.<sup>118</sup> Other outlets such as the clickbait site Rukojmí put forward the interpretation that it is the US who is trying to seize Ukraine by starting a war under the pretence of defending democracy, with the EU merely serving its interests. This interpretation was also supported by Nela Lísková in her writings on the website Rukojmí. She is a former member of ČSSD and SPD and former self-proclaimed Consul of the Donetsk People's Republic in the Czech Republic, known for her pro-Russian and extremist stances.<sup>119</sup>

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114 “(10) Otevřeme Česko - Chcíp PES - Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/101667711821396/posts/356470119674486/>

115 “Užitečný idiot USA, napadl vládu zástupce Chcíp PES Janeček. Hájí Putina,” iDNES.cz, 21 February 2022, [https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/jiri-janecek-chcipl-pes-vlada-uzitecny-idiot-usa-putin-ukrajina.A220221\\_101412\\_domaci\\_kop](https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/jiri-janecek-chcipl-pes-vlada-uzitecny-idiot-usa-putin-ukrajina.A220221_101412_domaci_kop)

116 “(10) Aliance Národních Sil - Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1707668292784198/posts/3003789896505358/>

117 “Chcíp PES Voží Uprchlíky, Naštval Tím Část Fanoušků. „Sobci,“ Míní Analytik - Seznam Zprávy,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-chcipl-pes-vozi-uprchliky-nastval-tim-cast-fanousku-sobci-mini-analytik-192389>

118 NWOO, 23 February 2022, <http://www.nwoo.org/2022/02/23/rusvnext-prehled-zprav-22-2-2022/> . Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

119 Rukojmí, 21 February 2022. [http://www.rukojmi.cz/clanky/domaci-politika/12399-proc-usiluji-usa-o-valku-s-ruskem-a-devastaci-evropy?fbclid=IwAR3lrl6PcadV9K5l2HLYKSA\\_eyUWWoke1RrsCvV\\_igq7om3iqOB1-yNREDg](http://www.rukojmi.cz/clanky/domaci-politika/12399-proc-usiluji-usa-o-valku-s-ruskem-a-devastaci-evropy?fbclid=IwAR3lrl6PcadV9K5l2HLYKSA_eyUWWoke1RrsCvV_igq7om3iqOB1-yNREDg) . Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

She founded the Embassy of the People's Republic of Donetsk herself, firstly as an association. Later, she proclaimed herself as its honorary consul and presented the purpose of the association as deepening mutual economic ties and helping Donetsk citizens.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Along with Sputnik CZ, these outlets argued that Czech businesses will suffer significantly from the sanctions imposed on Russia with little chance of any compensation, while also disseminating the Kremlin's strategic narratives on genocide, as well as NATO or Western aggression against Russia.<sup>120</sup> Overall, during this peak, conspiracy websites remained the main outlet of manipulative narratives, but the official start of the invasion also invoked a reaction from the grey zone anti-vaccination political movements, who probably felt the need to communicate their stance on the war to their supporters.

Besides these news peaks, Parlamentní listy remained the outlet producing the most content with mentions of Ukraine (601 articles), providing various perspectives on the matter, even including republishing content which debunked disinformation about the war.<sup>121</sup> The website also announced that it will block any signs of support of the Russian invasion in the discussion sections,<sup>122</sup> signifying a certain shift in its stance, probably to maintain the image of a standard medium. The second most active outlet was CZ24 News (178), which aggregates content from other grey zone media, followed by Sputnik CZ with 142 articles.

The top active Facebook pages included Otevřeme Česko – Chcíp PES, the messaging of which was described above, and České národní listy, a patriotic anonymous hyper-partisan outlet which opposed the Czech mainstream media on the grounds that it is “*in the hands of Germany*”.<sup>123</sup> It also served as an aggregator of content from other grey zone media, including Nová republika and the clickbait site První zprávy. It spread conspiracies such as the fall of former Ukrainian president Yanukovich being a NATO-supported coup<sup>124</sup>, and accusing mainstream media of showing actors painted with fake blood instead of real victims of the war in their coverage of attacked Ukrainian cities.<sup>125</sup>

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120 “Nahradí Brusel Čechům Ztrátu Trhu? Výrobce Dronů Primoco UAV Kvůli Sankcím Ukončil Činnost v Rusku - 21.02.2022, Sputnik Česká Republika,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220221123754/https://cz.sputniknews.com/20220221/nahradi-brusel-cechum-ztratu-trhu-vyrobce-dronu-primoco-uav-kvuli-sankcim-ukoncil-cinnost-v-rusku-17724612.html>

121 “Výborný (KDU-ČSL): Nejčastější Dezinformace o Válce Na Ukrajině,” parlamentnilisty.cz, accessed 15 March 2022, <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/politici-voicum/Vyborny-KDU-CSL-Nejcastejsi-dezinformace-o-valce-na-Ukrajine-694402>

122 “PL Budou Blokovat Diskuse,” parlamentnilisty.cz, accessed March 15, 2022, <http://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/PL-budou-blokovat-diskuse-694647>

123 “České Národní Listy,” accessed 15 March 2022, <http://www.ceskenarodnilisty.cz/>

124 “(10) České Národní Listy – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 15 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/107618950706191/posts/503533224448093/>

125 “(10) České Národní Listy – Příspěvky | Facebook,” accessed 15 March 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=513214580146624&id=107618950706191](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=513214580146624&id=107618950706191)

When it comes to the Czech grey zone aggregators of content, including Nová republika and CZ24 News, they exemplify a characteristic of the Czech information space already identified in previous research, e.g., in the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index. It concerns Russian narratives which proliferate in the Czech Republic through the Czech Sputnik as republished content or narratives, to a web of approximately 40 anti-system and conspiracy websites, which could be seen as a channel of Russian influence operations.<sup>xxv</sup>

At the end of February 2022, a steep decline in mentions can be observed on the graph. This was also due to the fact that the Czech Internet Association CZ.NIC, the operator of the domain with the national suffix ‘.cz’, decided to block websites that spread disinformation about the invasion of Ukraine. This step was taken based on consultations with the Czech intelligence services and the recommendation of the government, which stated that these websites posed a serious threat to national security. It was based on the argument of the exceptionality and urgency of the situation, when spreading disinformation serves the Russian aggressor to manipulate Czech citizens to justify and approve the aggression towards Ukraine.<sup>126</sup>

These websites included the conspiracy websites Protiproud, Aeronet and CzechFreePress, and the clickbait websites Skrytá Pravda and První zprávy. As of the beginning of March, six more websites were blocked by the domestic mobile operators in reaction to the appeal from the government and the National Cyber Operations Centre. This step involved the conspiracy websites New World Order Opposition (NWO), Zvědavce and Svobodné noviny, the clickbait website CZ24 News, and Sputnik CZ, the Russian state-owned outlet.<sup>127</sup>

Nevertheless, these media are looking for other ways to spread their content. For example, Sputnik CZ now focuses its activities on Telegram, the online messaging service. Moreover, due to the unclear process of how the blocked websites were chosen by the Czech authorities, this step also sparked some criticism and discussions about the future of freedom of speech. It is also worth noting that the Public Prosecutor’s Office of the Czech Republic warned that publicly expressed agreement with Russia’s attack on Ukraine, as well as support or praise of Russian officials, can be prosecuted and punished with up to three years in prison.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Overall, the coverage of the Russian war in Ukraine by the grey zone media, delivered mainly by known conspiracy websites, reiterated the established pro-Kremlin narratives. These included the emphasis on the Czech Republic’s economic dependence on Russia and fear-inducing predictions

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126 However, the domain operator announced that this step is temporary, lasting one month. “CZ.NIC - Sdružení CZ.NIC Zablockovalo Weby Šířící Dezinformace Spojené s Rusko-Ukrajinským Konfliktem,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://www.nic.cz/page/4301/sdruzeni-cznic-zablokovalo-weby-sirici-dezinformace-spojene-s-rusko-ukrajinskym-konfliktem/>

127 “Jsou Zablockované Další Dezinformační Weby, Tentokrát Od Operátorů - Seznam Zprávy,” accessed 14 March 2022, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-zivot-v-cesku-jsou-zablokovane-dalsi-dezinformacni-weby-tentokrat-od-operatoru-191290>

about the impact of dismantling Czech-Russian ties. Another tactic was contrasting Russia, as a 'natural and traditional ally,' with the supposedly selfish and exploitative Western allies. Lastly, although the monitored outlets mostly did not deny the war, they painted the West as the real aggressors responsible for this conflict. These media justified the war as an intervention against genocide or as a reaction to long-term provocation from the West.

## NETWORK ANALYSIS

Based on hyperlinks found in the texts of webpage articles or Facebook posts, we created a network database of interlinked domains to see how our "grey zone" sources linked to each other or to third-party domains to produce campaign messages.<sup>128</sup> The network database allowed us to create a directed graph<sup>129</sup> using the Gephi software<sup>130</sup> to analyse which domains or groups of domains played a central role in the formulation of disinformation narratives, how the "grey zone" media ecosystem organised itself into clusters and reached out to other media, and how the pro-Kremlin or pro-Beijing media tried to influence the campaign discourse in each of the countries under investigation. Our analysis also addresses the overall level of connection between the Czech grey zone media and other parts of the local information scene.

Using modularity class-ranking to group the nodes,<sup>131</sup> we could identify several subgroups or clusters of nodes which occupy statistically a similar network position in terms of their interconnectivity. Clusters or subgroups of nodes highlight how the graph is organised around specific nodes, what types of media serve as a "bridge" between different parts of the Czech network, how the Czech grey zone is situated in the Czech media in particular, and the European or global media in general. The nodes of the Czech graph are generally evenly distributed (i.e., on average, each node has a higher number of edges and there are numerous large nodes organising the whole graph). Specifically, the total number of nodes is 805, alongside 1138 edges. When we look at the clean network that has been cleared of all the nodes with fewer than 2 edges, displayed on Figure 1 below, it becomes evident that Pravý prostor, Parlamentní listy, Zvědavec, Tadesco, Aeronet, and New World Order Opposition (NWO) are the media the network is organised around.

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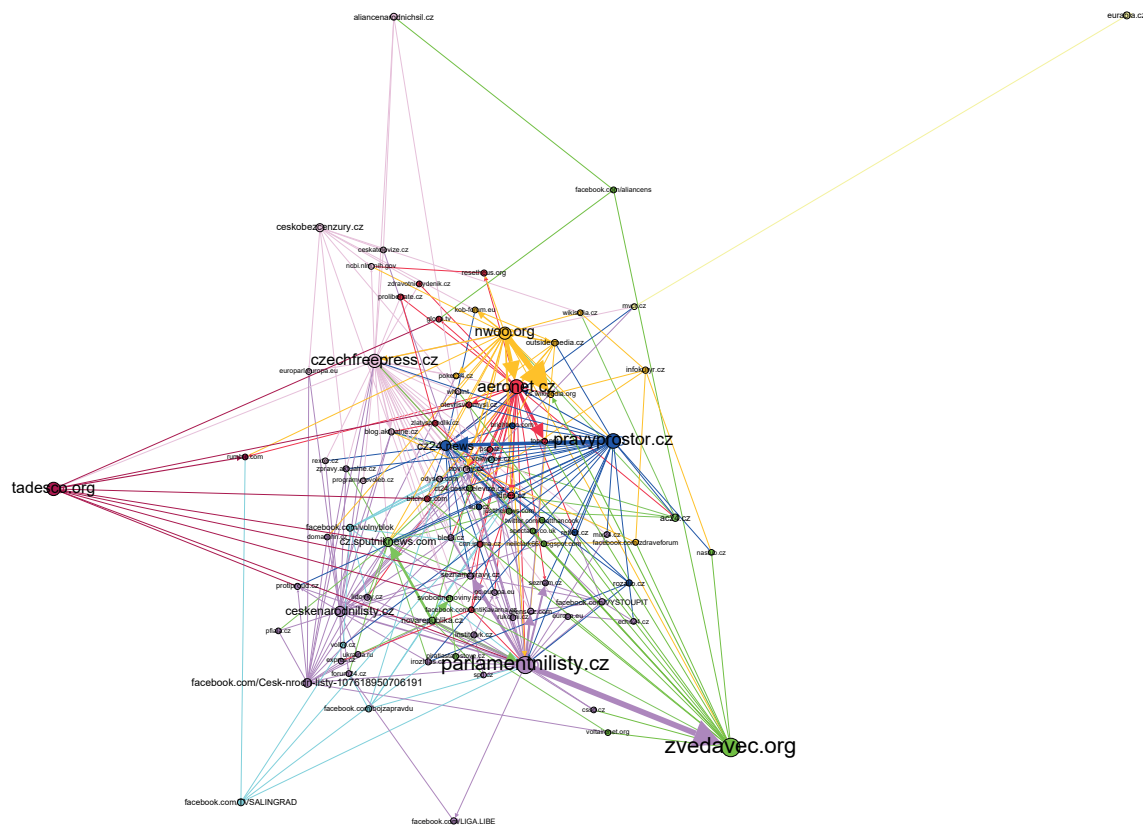
128 We have since expanded our initial list of grey zone media. Our final databases contained political campaign-related messages that were either produced by our initial or by the extended list of grey zone media as source domains, whereas the target domains contain both grey zone media and third-party media that were referenced by media contents produced by our final grey zone list.

129 In mathematics, and more specifically in graph theory, a directed graph (or digraph) is a graph that is made up of a set of vertices connected by directed edges.

130 'Gephi - The Open Graph Viz Platform', accessed 12 October 2021, <https://gephi.org/>

131 Modularity (community detection) is a measure of network structure. It was designed to measure the strength of division of a network into modules. Networks with high modularity have dense connections between the nodes within modules but sparse connections between nodes in different modules.

**Figure 1. The Czech clean grey zone media network diagram and its main clusters displayed in different colours (node size is proportional to the number of connections [edges];  $k$ -core=3, only those nodes are visible that have at least 3 edges)<sup>132</sup>**



Source: Political Capital's and International Republican Institute's network analysis based on SentiOne data. [Click here to download this image in high resolution.](#)

The common characteristic of these media is that they are conspiracy grey zone media, with the exception of the clickbait website Parlamentní listy, which, however, has a special position on the Czech information scene and can be seen as a bridge between the mainstream media and the sphere of conspiracy websites.<sup>133</sup> Parlamentní listy provides space for expression to representatives of all parts of the ideological and political spectrum, including extremist voices, while Pravý prostor Zvědavec, Tadesco, Aeronet, and New World Order Opposition (NWO) have had a long-term close relationship particularly with the national-conservative opposition, such as Freedom and Direct Democracy, Tricolour, and more fringe political movements such as Alliance of National Forces. These websites also serve as channels of pro-Russian narratives in the Czech space, which was also the reason why following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Pravý prostor, Zvědavec, Aeronet and NWO were blocked in the Czech Republic as threats to national security.

<sup>132</sup> A  $k$ -core of a graph  $G$  is a maximal connected subgraph of  $G$  in which all vertices have a degree of at least  $k$ . For example, the 0-core of a graph is simply the entire graph since every vertex has at least zero edges; a vertex can't have a negative number of edges. The 1-core of a graph contains the vertices that are connected to other vertices.

<sup>133</sup> Michaela Dvořáková and Jonáš Syrovátka, "VRBĚTICE: CASE STUDY OF CZECH RESILIENCE AGAINST HOSTILE PROPAGANDA," 2021, 11.



## CLUSTERS AND CENTRAL NODES

Figure 2. The purple cluster of nodes of the Czech grey zone media graph (node size is proportional to the number of connections or edges;  $k$ -core = 2, only those nodes are visible that have at least 3 edges)



Both of these media reference mainly mainstream outlets, such as the online news outlet Seznam správy, recognised for good quality journalism,<sup>134</sup> or Lidové noviny, owned by the media group Mafra, itself owned by the former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš before he transferred it to a trust fund. In the case of Parlamentní listy, the reason of its position can be explained by the fact that it poses as a standard medium and therefore produces a lot of content on current events, including interviews with people from all parts of the ideological, political and media spectrum. In the case of České národní listy, its centrality in the cluster can be attributed to its role as an aggregator of content from other media, including Parlamentní listy, although it is more openly critical towards the mainstream media coverage.

The second largest subgroup, marked in green on Figure 1, accounts for 16.65% of all nodes and is organised around the conspiracy website Zvědavec. It is run by Vladimír Stwora, a Czechoslovak emigrant in Canada, and it mostly comments on international politics, including criticism of the US and what it sees as a globalist world order. Therefore, Zvědavec references mostly foreign sources in the subgroup, such as the French website Voltaire.net.org, the British weekly *Spectator*, or the blog of the UK-based journalist Neil Clark.

The third most populous blue group (as seen in Figure 1), covering 12.3% of all nodes, is organised around the conspiracy website Pravý prostor, which characterises itself as an outlet for right-wing oriented authors and which referenced mainly another important node in this subgroup, the clickbait site CZ24 News. Unlike all the others, the central website CZ24 News does not serve as a source of original content, but rather is an aggregator of content from other grey zone media, including Parlamentní listy or the Czech version of the Russian state-run Sputnik; for example, conspiracies on the deep state, political scandals, or COVID-19. The other subgroups, each covering between 5-10% of all nodes, are similarly organised around conspiracy websites Aeronet, Tadesco, CzechFreePress and NWO, which are interconnected with other conspiracy websites, as well as anti-vaccination grey zone media such as Otevři svou mysl, Resethus, or Rozalio.

These groups are either directly or indirectly connected to the national-conservative opposition of the Czech political scene. They provide exclusive space for representatives of national-conservative parties to present their views and agenda, and some have personal connections to these parties, one example being the conspiracy website Nová republika, whose editor-in-chief is Ivan David, MEP from Freedom and Direct Democracy. The recent blocking of many of these media after the start of Russian invasion of Ukraine also underlined their role as outlets of pro-Russian narratives.

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134 "Rating médií," Nadační fond nezávislé žurnalistiky, accessed 12 April 2022, <https://www.nfnz.cz/rating-medii/zpravodajske/seznam-zpravy/>

## NETWORKED CONTENT PRODUCTION

Bridge-nodes connect different subgroups or clusters in order to produce content, reinforcing their messaging and political position. They are the nodes that can direct traffic and audience from one group to the other using hyperlinks. In our graph, some of the important bridge nodes consist of mainstream media such as Seznam Zprávy and novinky.cz, which connect multiple individual clusters such as those of Parlamentní listy, Tadesco and Pravý prostor. The mainstream media serve the grey zone media simply as sources of information about current events, on which the primary nodes then build their own manipulative narratives. For example, mainstream media were used as sources on the development of the government's handling of the pandemic, which was then used by the grey zone media as a demonstration of what they perceived as a totalitarian regime built on COVID-19 restrictions.

In this way, CZ24 News used references to the European Medicines Agency (EMA), the State Institute for Drug Control (SUKL) and mainstream media such as Seznam Správy and iDnes to challenge and discredit the effectivity of vaccination against COVID-19 and the narrative of freedom of choice when it comes to vaccination.<sup>135</sup> To support its counternarratives and conspiracy theories about toxic vaccine contents and exploitation of the pandemic to impose a totalitarian regime, CZ24 News referenced conspiracy media such as Aeronet and anti-vaccination actors such as the right-wing party Free Bloc, known for spreading COVID-19 related conspiracies itself.<sup>136</sup>

Another bridge node is constituted by the Facebook page of Za pravdu (For Truth), the anti-vaccination medium which, among producing other content, livestreams anti-vaccination public protests, which connected it to other anti-vaccination media like the internet television TV Šalingrad, or clickbait media such as Parlamentní listy.<sup>137</sup> Lastly, the Facebook page of the party Free Bloc, which built its campaign on opposition to COVID-19 restrictions, also served as a bridge node. Through its livestreams, it informed about current political events in the Chamber of Deputies and the pre-election campaigns and was reshared mainly by anti-vaccination grey zone media who also rely on video content, such as TV Šalingrad, Za pravdu, or Srdcem pro vlast.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> "PRAVDA, KTERÁ BOLÍ: JSME LABORATORNÍ ZVÍŘATA ZAVŘENÁ A PĚKNĚ ODDĚLENÁ V KLECÍCH - OKRESECH! MYSLÍTE, ŽE NÁS CHTĚJÍ CHRÁNIT, ŽE JIM JDE O NAŠE ZDRAVÍ? BOHUŽEL OPAK JE PRAVDOU! - CZ 24 News," 27 October 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211027071428/https://cz24.news/pravda-ktera-boli-jsme-laboratorni-zvirata-zavrena-a-pekne-oddelen-a-v-klecich-okresech-myslite-ze-nas-chteji-chranit-ze-jim-jde-o-nase-zdravi-bohuzel-opak-je-pravdou/>

<sup>136</sup> CZ24 News, <https://cz24.news/facebook-smazal-lubomiru-volnemu-ucet-se-100-000-navstevniku-pouhy-mesic-pred-volbami-pty-kvuli-hrozbe-legalizace-ivermectinu-v-cr-v-pripade-vstupu-volneho-bloku-do-snemovny-farma>. Due to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, access to the original content is currently blocked by the Czech authorities.

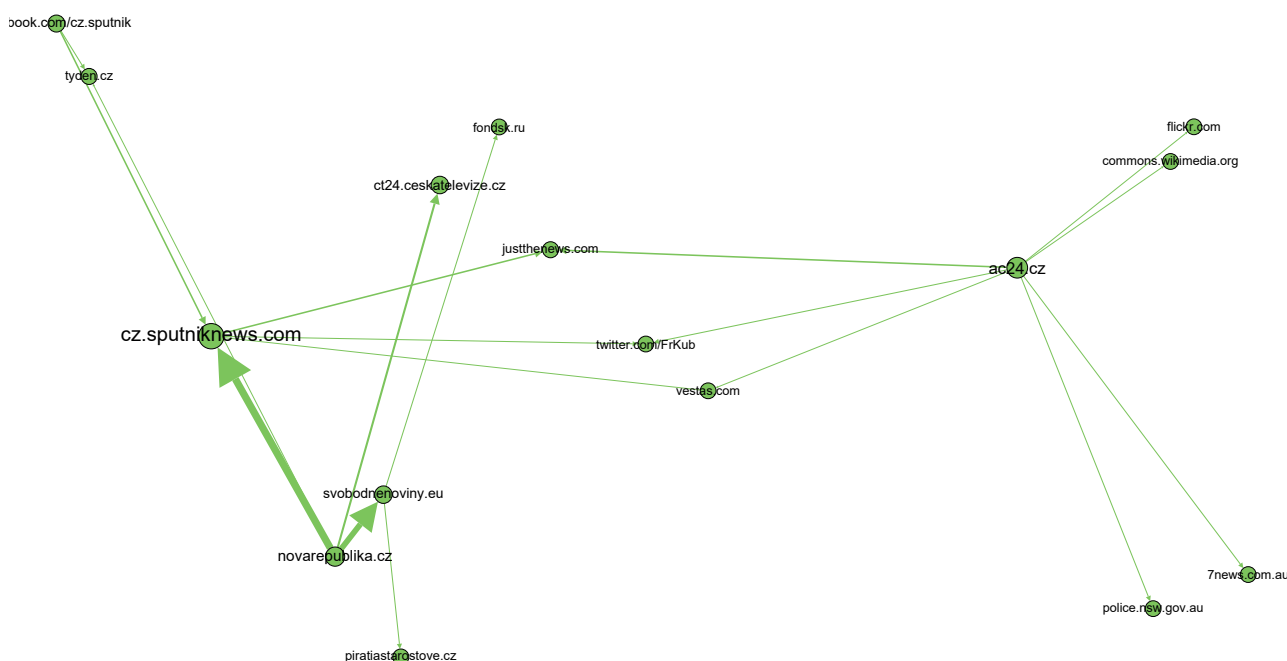
<sup>137</sup> The Facebook page of Za pravdu, its main platform, was made unavailable prior to the publication of this report.

<sup>138</sup> "(20+) Facebook Live | Facebook," accessed 11 April 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=451440786180544](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=451440786180544)

## THE ROLE OF THE PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA

When it comes to the role of pro-Kremlin media in the Czech grey zone media network, the Russian state-run news source Sputnik CZ has the strongest presence in the network, as can be seen on Figure 3, in the neon green cluster accounting for 6.83% of all nodes.

**Figure 3. The neon green cluster of nodes of the Czech grey zone media graph (node size is proportional to the number of connections or edges;  $k$ -core = 2, only those nodes are visible that have at least 2 edges)**



Source: Political Capital's and International Republican Institute's network analysis based on SentiOne data. [Click here to download this image in high resolution.](#)

Since Sputnik CZ presents itself as a standard news source, it uses mainstream media such as Novinky and Seznam správy as sources to inform about domestic current events, while serving itself as a source for other conspiracy pages such as Nová republika, which is connected to Ivan David, the MEP from the SPD party. Consequently, the network analysis has revealed that the production of geopolitically relevant disinformation narratives by the Czech grey zone media ecosystem is dependent on two stages. First, mainstream media sources are referenced by Czech pro-Kremlin pages or the grey zone's conspiracy pages to formulate their initial anti-West messages. Then the same narratives or conspiracy theories are fed right to a variety of different conspiracy pages that disseminate them to a much wider far-right/Eurosceptic/anti-vaccination audience.

Ultimately, the network analysis demonstrated that the Czech grey zone media are evenly interconnected – they frequently reference each other and replicate each other's content and narratives. Conspiracy and clickbait media which have been present on the Czech media scene for several years have a dominant role in this network and have the ability to set the tone for other grey zone media. The graph exposes that the newer anti-vaccination grey zone media, established in the last two years, have incorporated themselves into this network and there is a mutual relationship between these two layers of the grey zone media, based on reshared content. In other words, the newer media, such as TV Šalingrad, Za pravdu or Srdcem pro Vlast, have established a relationship with the central organising forces of the grey zone media ecosystem such as Parlamentní listy, Pravý prostor and Aeronet. Although mainstream media or official state websites appear in the graph, they either serve as unintentional bridge nodes due to their generally high authority and reach, or as sources of information or direct criticism to the grey zone media, which take the information and re-present it to their audience using their own interpretations.

## ANNEX 1

### DEFINITION OF THE “GREY ZONE” MEDIA

We considered websites or social media pages “grey zone” media if they either explicitly or implicitly seek to promote the governmental parties’ or the opposition parties’ political messages through the aggressive use of new or social media – even though they are not official platforms of parties, and cannot be considered mainstream media outlets. We regarded official think tanks, GONGOs or other organisations financed by parties as part of the “grey zone” strategy of a party if they are engaged in the dissemination of party propaganda or propaganda campaigns that met our selection criteria for media detailed below. We did not, however, consider governmental, organisational, or individual webpages, blogs, YouTube channels etc. media of interest, since these are communications or public relations channels of certain individuals or organisations without the need or expectation to report on any other matter than their individual activities or interests.

We have defined two compulsory and several additional criteria that are used to define and identify “grey zone” media. These media need to meet two of the compulsory and at least one of the additional/other criteria defined below.

#### *Compulsory criteria*

1. **Hyper-partisanship:** a site that has been created, either explicitly or implicitly, to support a political party or ideological side, and/or produces specific types of messages almost exclusively to reinforce the narrative of that side/party through the posts it shares.
2. **Manipulated content(s):** the media manipulates its contents through hyperboles, re-contextualisation, the use of dis- or misinformation etc. to reinforce a party line or campaign message either directly or indirectly. Manipulation in itself does not necessarily mean that the site is spreading disinformation, but it does prove that the messages or narratives are presented in a way to follow or reformulate party lines of communication.

#### *Additional criteria*

1. **Time of establishment:** media accounts and pages were set up in 2020 and 2021 to influence specific and current public debates during the election campaigns in the three countries.
2. **Reproduction of content:** sharing content that is similar to video or photo content shared on any party’s official or social media pages.
3. **Hyper-partisan memes:** the use of innovative memes mocking or mimicking the political enemies of a party without a sarcastic intention.
4. **Editorial or financial opacity:** the site does not have a proper editorial board or financial information displayed; items are either not signed or signed under pseudonyms.



5. **(Partial) funding coming from parties/government/governmental figures:** media is financed by parties through intermediary channels, organisations, shell-companies etc. to produce manipulated content
6. **Ads targeting specific electoral or audience segments:** a media outlet which targets specific audiences or political target groups to promote a particular hyper-partisan narrative, using social media ad services based on audiences' geolocation, age, gender, profession etc.

### *The seven basic categories of “grey zone media”*

To adequately measure fringe media and their networks that employ a “grey zone” media strategy, we have defined seven categories of media to be measured that meet our initial set of criteria and are engaged in a specific type of media production:

1. **Anonymous hyper-partisan sites** specifically set up to convey a specific agenda often in line with certain political parties and attempting to play a role and influence audiences during election campaigns in 2020 or 2021.
2. **The top 10 conspiracy sites/country** that also dealt with campaign issues or messages during the campaign. The ranking of these sites is based on a) ratio of conspiratorial content, c) Alexa page ranking, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
3. **The top 10 clickbait sites/country** that also dealt with campaign issues or messages during the campaign. Clickbait media is any site that links with a headline that encourages people to click to see more, without telling them much information about what they will see or over-promising or otherwise misrepresenting – in a headline, on social media, in an image, or some combination – what they are going to find when they read a story on the web.<sup>xxvii</sup>
4. **The top 10 GONGOs sites/country** that are established by the government, any party, oligarch, or public figures to push and/or finance hyper-partisan messages during the campaign and whose content or finances are not easily/directly retraceable to the original political/party actors. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
5. **The top 10 pro-Kremlin sites/country** that have been established by foreign entities, such as governments, parties, media, NGOs, local pro-Kremlin political actors or unknown actors to represent and spread the Kremlin's geopolitical narratives or political stances in a one-sided, biased way. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
6. **The top 10 pro-Beijing sites/country** that have been established by foreign entities, such as governments, parties, media, NGOs, local pro-China political actors or unknown actors to represent and spread China's geopolitical narratives or political stances in a one-sided, biased way. The ranking of these sites is based on a) the significance of the founder or financier, b) the number of followers on Facebook or Twitter or other social media accounts.
7. **Other webpages or social media pages** that have met our initial set of criteria, however, they cannot be categorised as previously mentioned types of media.

## ANNEX 2

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Our research employed both qualitative and quantitative methodology to monitor and collect historical media data present on Hungarian “grey zone” webpages and Facebook pages, Twitter or YouTube accounts. We have monitored the pre-election period between September 1 and October 31 in the Czech Republic, and the November 1 – December 31 period for Serbia and Hungary. **Given the unexpected invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, we also monitored narratives about the war between January 1 and March 1, 2022, in all three countries under investigation.** The quantitative dataset used in the analysis was generated using the social media listening platform SentiOne, which allowed us to access the data of websites and public Facebook pages and groups to conduct trend, sampling, statistical and network analyses of media content production.

#### *Steps of methodology*

First, we collected data between September 1 and October 31 for the Czech Republic, and between November 1 and December 1, 2021 for Serbia and Hungary, to create the final list of “grey zone” media in each country that met our initial set of criteria. These media were coded as part of one of the 7 categories mentioned above in separate databases following the same structure (for example, name, webpage URL, social media accounts, organisation type, political content, political leaning etc.). The different periods had been selected to reflect on the Czech elections and the second round of the opposition primary in Hungary.

Second, we collected campaign-related media data for the same periods, namely webpage articles and Facebook posts produced by the media on our lists, to generate the final databases used for narrative sampling, campaign analysis and network analysis:

- a. We filtered only political campaign-related messages (webpage articles or Facebook posts) based on a similar set of keywords in each country using the syntax of the SentiOne platform. The keyword-combination included in part the same words, such as “election,” “campaign” and “candidate” for the sake of comparability or keywords for local political actors or scandals.
- b. Filtered content was used to (a) generate representative message samples for each country for the identification and analysis of narratives in each sample; (b) analyse the main trend and sources’ data for the messages disseminated in each country in each period under investigation; (c) generate network graphs based on the hyperlinks found in the campaign-related messages for the periods under investigation. Network analysis was carried out using the Gephi software and Microsoft’s data visualisation tool Power BI provided by the International Republican Institute’s Beacon Project.<sup>xxviii</sup>

- c. We conducted additional collection of data on war-related messages in our SentiOne project for each country for the period of January 1 – March 1, 2022. Data produced by the grey zone media on our list was then used for the analysis of trends and sources to identify the main narratives disseminated by the leading sources in the grey zone media ecosystems of each country.

Third, local partners in cooperation with local investigative journalists conducted online and offline investigative research into the organisational, financial or editorial background of the “grey zone” media. Researchers used desktop research and investigations of private or state registries, and conducted in-person interviews with the owners, editors or authors of the media to obtain a deeper understanding of the modus operandi of the grey zone media in each country.

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