

ČESKÉ VĚŘE DEZINFORMACÍ VOLBY

European Elections 2019

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Introduction

Unfortunately, disinformation has become a regular part of campaigns prior to elections in the Czech Republic. A great example is the so-called “lithium affair,” which influenced the Parliamentary Elections in 2017.¹ Disinformation aiming to harm particular candidates also appeared before the Presidential Elections in 2018.² An important lesson from previous elections is that disinformation can cause the biggest harm if it appears not only on fringe websites, but also on mainstream media or is used by politicians in their campaigns. Hence, researchers from the Prague Security Studies Institute have decided to continue with their research series, “Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation” and focus on the European Parliament Elections of 2019.

The analysis aimed to answer two research questions. Firstly, in which manner websites known for spreading of manipulative content reported on the events related to the European Union (EU).³ Secondly, researchers monitored the way in which the eight most-read websites known for spreading of manipulative content reported on the European election itself. The time period—six weeks prior the elections—remained the same in both cases.⁴ This method was chosen because disinformation could target not only political parties, but also the EU itself (as it happened previously in the Czech information space⁵) and by doing so, support candidates with a Eurosceptic agenda.

The European elections were not an important topic for the monitored websites.⁶ They only started to pay

more significant attention to this topic during the week before the elections. However, this trend could also be observed in the mainstream media, that did not report about this event extensively either. Even though the EU was depicted negatively by the monitored websites, they did not try to bring their own specific topics into the debate. Their coverage was rather reactive, and thus mostly described the topics already present in the public debate. The most-often mentioned political party was the extreme right-wing SPD. This party was not only depicted positively, but its members also got significant room to express their opinions. The SPD had one advantage against the other parties: the leader of the party in the elections, Ivan David, is an editor of the conspiracy website *Nová republika*, that supported the party prior the elections. Only a negligible amount of disinformation appeared before the elections. Moreover, the majority of disinformation campaigns were not produced by the analysed websites, but by the SPD party, that used them as a part of the election campaign.⁷ As this analysis has shown, that so-called Czech alternative media are quite heterogeneous, and it should be not be seen as only one distinct type of media platforms, but instead should be examined in the context of the rest of the information space. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that disinformation as such is not only coming from outside, but also becomes an important part of the strategy of certain domestic political actors.

1 Jonáš Syrovátka, „České volby v éře dezinformací: Parlamentní volby 2017“, Prague Security Studies Institute (<http://www.pssi.cz/russia-s-influence-activities-in-cee/volby/parliamentaryelection2017/detail>)

2 Jonáš Syrovátka a Jaroslav Hroch, „České volby v éře dezinformací: Prezidentské volby 2018“, Prague Security Studies Institute (<http://www.pssi.cz/russia-s-influence-activities-in-cee/volby/presidentialelection2018/detail>)

3 The research sample consisted 31 websites mentioned in the list of websites spreading contested content created by *Konspirátoři.sk*. For this reason it was not analysed in which manner the website *Parlamentní listy* informed about the EU. However this websites was analysed within the second part of the research focused on reporting about the elections.

4 Concretely AC24, Aeronet, Sputnik CZ, Nová republika, Česko aktuálně, Svobodné noviny, Parlamentní listy a Zvěděvec; number of readers were gathered from the project *Mapa médií* (<http://www.mapamedii.cz/>)

5 Jonáš Syrovátka a Nikos Štěpánek, „Nejpopulárnější mýty o EU“, Prague Security Studies Institute (<http://www.pssi.cz/russia-s-influence-activities-in-cee/volby>)

6 Facebook pages known for spreading of disinformation were not interested in the elections neither (compare Miroslava Sawiris et al., „European Elections in the V4: From disinformation campaigns to narrative amplification“, *Globsec* (<https://www.globsec.org/publications/european-elections-in-the-v4-from-disinformation-campaigns-to-narrative-amplification/>))

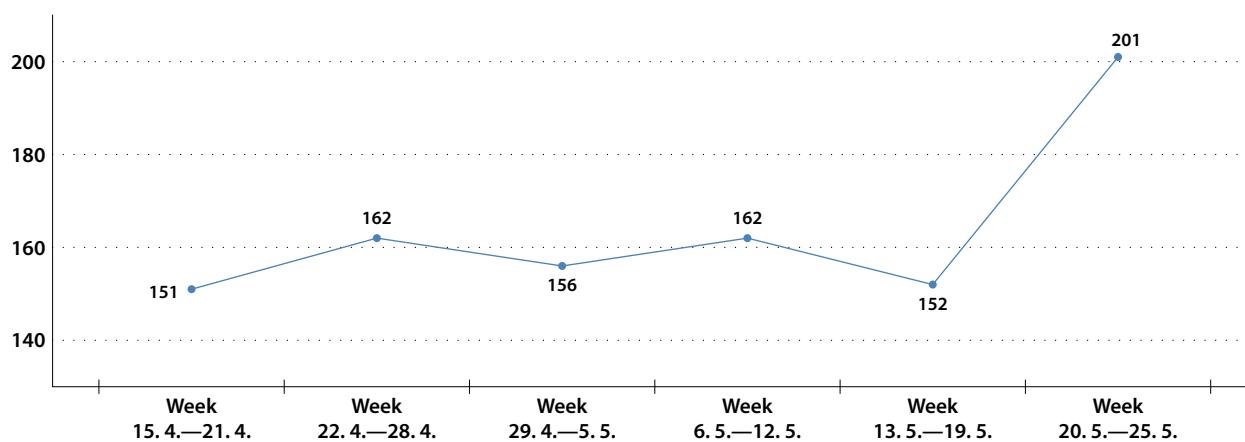
7 Jan Cemper, „PŘEHLED: Evropské volby ve světle dezinformací“, *Manipulátoři.cz* (<https://manipulatori.cz/prehled-evropske-volby-ve-svetle-dezinformaci/>)

Reporting on the EU

In total, 984 texts about the European Union⁸ were published on the 31 websites which are known for spreading manipulative content (for the full list, see the Appendix). Within the observed six weeks, the number of articles related to this topic remained more or less constant. However, it increased sharply during the last week prior the elections (see Graph n. 1). In

comparison to other topics—such as the USA (1495 texts) or Russia (1849 texts)—the EU appeared to have a secondary importance, despite the upcoming elections. The highest number of texts mentioning the EU was published on Sputnik CZ (265 texts), Haló noviny (115 texts) and Euportál (91 texts).

Graph no. 1 – The number of texts mentioning the EU



No dominant topic appeared on the monitored websites. They usually discussed the same events as the mainstream media. However, the interpretation of these events was usually biased and one-sided.

The 15th anniversary of the Czech Republic joining the EU was one of the main topics (mentioned in 21 texts). It was described as a bad decision which limited the sovereignty of the country.⁹ Other topics were the varying quality of food products in the EU, and the decline of the Czech food industry (mentioned in 25 articles) in which some articles blamed the EU for it.¹⁰ The rise of populist movements across Europe

(represented by the Italian Vice-Minister Matteo Salvini¹¹ and, shortly before the elections, also by British Member of the European Parliament Janice Atkinson¹²), mentioned in 33 texts, was described as a positive trend. The demonstration of the extreme right-wing party the SPD, in held in April in Prague (18 texts) received significant attention.¹³ The EU was often linked to the migration topic in general (such association appeared in 196 texts).

Several topics that the mainstream media did not cover extensively was discussed on the analysed websites:

⁸ Key word used for search was „EU“

⁹ Radim Fiala, „Připomínáme si 15 let od vstupu České republiky do Evropské unie a opět se nám v reálu ukázala totalitní tvář EU a jejich českých přísluhovačů“, Euportál (<https://www.euportal.cz/Articles/21059-pripominame-si-15-let-od-vstupu-ceske-republiky-do-evropske-unie-a-opet-se-nam-v-realu-ukazala-totalitni-tvar-eu-a-jejich-ceskych-prisluhovacu.aspx>)

¹⁰ „Připravte se na Sok. Současná kvalita zeleniny v Česku“, AC24 (<https://ac24.cz/-/pripravte-se-na-sok-soucasna-kvalita-zeleniny-v-cesku>)

¹¹ „Co nedokázala EU, to dokázal nacionalistický ministr italské vlády Salvini + FOTO“, Českoaktuálně (<https://ceskoaktualne.cz/2019/05/uprchlici-zpravy/co-nedokazala-eu-to-dokazal-nacionalisticky-ministr-italske-vlady-salvini-foto/>)

¹² Janice Atkinson, „EU je diktaturou nevolených a neúspěšných politiků, kteří v rámci svých vlastních národů selhali. Tito nezvolení diktátoři nám vnutili masovou a nekontrolovanou migraci. Na svých rukou mají krev Evropanů“ Euportál (<https://www.euportal.cz/Articles/21163-eu-je-diktaturou-nevolenych-a-neuspesnych-politiku-keri-v-ramci-svych-vlastnich-narodu-selhali-tito-nezvoleni-diktatori-nam-vnutili-masovou-a-nekontrolovanou-migraci-na-svych-rukou-maji-krev-evropanu.aspx>)

¹³ Pavel Kopecký, „Řev europaviánů do státní hymny na Václaváku: Bitva nejen o naši zemi. Kontinent na pokraji zkázy? Lídři burcují: Přijďte k eurovolbám! Marine Le Penová: Svoboda a národ mluví našimi ústy! Pod mediální blokádou“, Protiproud (<http://www.protiproud.cz/politika/4395-rev-europavianu-do-statni-hymny-na-vaclavaku-bitva-nejen-o-nasi-zemi-kontinent-na-pokraji-zkazy-lidri-burcuji-prijdte-k-eurovolbam-marine-le-penova-svoboda-a-narod-mluvi-nasimi-usty-pod-medialni-blokadou.htm>)

- The statement by French President Emmanuel Macron, in which he claimed that the approach of certain countries to the migration crisis might lead to their exclusion from the Schengen area (mentioned in 11 articles) was widely discussed. This statement was interpreted as a direct threat to the V4 countries and as another reason for leaving the EU.¹⁴
- The questioning of the economic benefits of Czech membership in the EU was another frequent topic (mentioned in 10 articles). The misrepresentation of data of economist Thomas Piketty served as the basis for this argumentation in most of the cases.¹⁵
- The third most covered topic (mentioned in 8 articles) was the quote by the Swedish Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, who mentioned the possibility of imposing sanctions on countries showing a lack of solidarity over the migration problem.
- This claim was discussed on the monitored websites two times; the first time was in mid-April when the statement was made¹⁶ by the prime minister, and the second time was a week before the elections.¹⁷

Only a negligible amount of disinformation was published on the monitored websites before the elections. The most prominent one was the article claiming that 2 million migrants received debit cards totaling in 1,55 billion euro from the EU. The article was constructed around an imprecise citation from chief security advisers to the Hungarian Prime Minister. This story was accompanied by a photomontage, that appeared already in 2018, when it was used in the article claiming that it was billionaire George Soros who gave the credit cards to migrants. This disinformation was first published by the website Megazine,¹⁸ and afterwards by the website AC24.¹⁹

Several monitored websites also highlighted a movie called Pryč z EU (Leave the EU) advocating for Czexit, which was published on YouTube in April 2019, by the minor movement Strana nezávislosti ČR (the Czech Independence party). Some of the claims in this movie contained manipulative arguments.²⁰

Reporting on the European elections

During the six weeks before the elections, 207 articles focused on the campaigns were published on the eight most read websites spreading manipulative content.²¹ The number of articles has been constant over time,

with only a slight increase during the week before the elections.²² Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the election campaign was not an important topic for the monitored websites.

14 Lubomír Vylíčil, „Že by se to už sypalo?“, Rukojmi (<http://www.rukojmi.cz/clanky/zahranicni-politika/8068-ze-by-se-to-uz-sypalo>)

15 Jan Cemper, „HOAX: Ať žije EU, ale za své a další špatné interpretace Pikettyho analýzy“, Manipulátoři.cz (<https://manipulatori.cz/hoax-at-zije-eu-ale-za-sve-a-dalsi-spatne-interpretace-pikettyho-analyzy/>)

16 Petr Dvořák, „Švédský premiér vyhrožuje sankcemi zemím EU, které odmítají migranty“, Megazine (<http://megazine.cz/2019/04/svedsky-premier-vyhrozuje-sankcemi-zemim-eu-ktere-odmitaji-migranty/>)

17 „Švédsko hodlá zavést sankce proti zemím EU, které odmítají přijímat migranty“, Euportál (<https://www.euportal.cz/Articles/21141-svedsko-hodla-zavest-sankce-proti-zemim-eu-ktere-odmitaji-prijimat-migranty.aspx>)

18 Petr Dvořák, „Maďarsko: EU poskytla dvěma milionům migrantů anonymní platební karty v celkové hodnotě 1,55 miliardy eur“, Megazine (<http://megazine.cz/2019/05/maarsko-eu-poskytla-dvema-milionum-migrantu-anonymni-platebni-karty-v-celkove-hodnote-155-miliardy-eur/>)

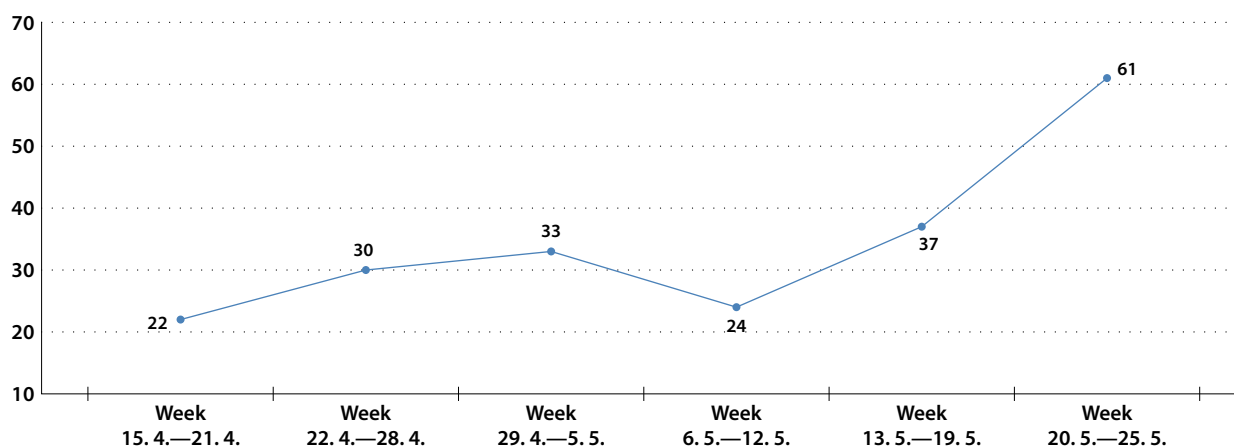
19 „Více než 2 miliony migrantů obdržely debetní karty od EU v hodnotě 1,55 miliard eur“, AC24 (<https://ac24.cz/-/vice-nez-2-miliony-migrantu-obdrzely-debetni-karty-od-eu-v-hodnote-1-55-miliard-eur>)

20 Milan Vidlák, „Po internetu se „tichou poštou“ šíří film, ze kterého mají elity vtr. Nemohl do televize ani do kina. Jako za starých časů?“, Časopis Šifra (<https://www.casopis-sifra.cz/po-internetu-se-siri-film-ze-ktereho-maji-elity-vtr-nemohl-do-televize-ani-do-kina-jako-za-starych-casu/>)

21 See footnote number 4

22 Key word used for search was „volby“

Graph no. 2 – Number of articles focusing on the elections



Topics

The majority of articles focused on election-related events and thus did not differ significantly from the mainstream media, for example, the topic of different food quality in the EU countries (mentioned in 11 texts), that was widely discussed in all Czech media outlets. A significant number of texts were purely factional and informational, and focused on the course of the campaign (so for example, introduced individual candidates and their programs, summed up the political debates, or presented the results of opinion polls). In general, the texts were focused on a wide variety of issues.

Only three particular topics were discussed in more detail:

- The first was the demonstration in Prague organized by the SPD party (mentioned in 15 articles). The articles focused on the speeches by guests invited to the event (including Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders) and commented on simultaneous

counterdemonstrations whose participants were ridiculed.²³

- The second topic was the lawsuit by a member of the European Parliament, Kateřina Konečná (from extreme left-wing party KSČM), against the SPD which claimed that Konečná voted in favour of refugee quotas in the European Parliament.²⁴ The monitored websites had a different attitude to this affair. Nová republika sided with the SPD,²⁵ Sputnik CZ quoted KSČM statements,²⁶ and Aeronet²⁷ criticised both subjects.
- The third topic was an internal dispute in the SPD, which was primarily publicised by Aeronet. On May 21, Aeronet published a text describing the friction between the party leader, Tomio Okamura, and election frontrunner Ivan David.²⁸ In the other article, Aeronet criticized SPD candidate Robert Vašíček, and published a video of him visiting a mosque and speaking positively about Islam (which is completely against the rhetoric

23 „VIDEO Podívejte, jak ti rádoby demokratičtí sluníčkáři pískají... Okamura mluvil na Václaváku, v postranních ulicích dělali odpůrci bordel“, Parlamentní listy (<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/VIDEO-Podivejte-jak-ti-radoby-demokraticti-slunickari-piskaji-Okamura-mluvil-na-Vaclavaku-v-postrannich-ulicich-delali-odpurci-bordel-579146>)

24 „Souboj mezi SPD a KSČM. Poteče tady krev?“, Sputnik CZ (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/politika/201905179920113-katerina-konecna-spd-kscm-trest-oznameni-tiskova-konference-komentar/>)

25 Ivan David, „Kateřina Konečná (KSČM) lže, když tvrdí, že SPD lže. Prokazatelně hlasovala pro usnesení, které má vést k odstranění překážek pro příchod kohokoli z Afriky do EU.“, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/katerina-konecna-kscm-lze-kdyz-tvrdi-ze.html>)

26 „Mezi Konečnou a SPD to vře. Spojili se s lidmi z EP, které nezajímáme, tvrdí komunistka a připravuje žalobu na Okamuru“, Sputnik CZ (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201905179914130-mez-konecnou-a-spd-to-vre-spojili-se-s-lidmi-z-ep-ktere-nezajimame-tvrdi-komunistka-a-pripravuje/>)

27 Vedoucí kolotoče, „Válka mezi SPD a KSČM o stejné voliče? Tomio Okamura převzal článek z Aeronetu a použil informace do svých volebních novin jako municí proti KSČM, Kateřina Konečná na SPD podává žalobu! Celkem 13 z 15 europoslanců Marine Le Pen hlasovalo proti ČR a proti zákazu dvoji kvality potravin. Ivan David zřejmě nečte Aeronet, protože i o tom jsme psali! Národní zájmy Francie jsou ostře proti národním zájmům České republiky, hlasování o dvoji kvalitě potravin to natvrdo potvrdilo!“, Aeronet (<https://aeronet.cz/news/valka-mez-spd-a-kscm-o-stejne-volice-tomio-okamura-prevzal-clanek-z-aeronetu-a-pouzil-informace-do-svych-volebnich-novin-jako-munici-proti-kscm-katerina-konecna-na-spd-podava-zalobu/>)

28 Vedoucí kolotoče, „Exkluzivně: Uvnitř SPD se rozjela kampaň proti Ivanu Davidovi, vedení pražské SPD v uzavřené diskusní skupině na Facebooku vyjadřuje nespokojenost s lidem kandidátky do EU parlamentu! Ivan David nezná volební program SPD a dokonce prý je „pako“, ale za ty prachy to stojí ty volby zkusit i s ním! Epizoda s Hynkem Beranem prý byla chyba, přiznává v soukromém chatu místopředseda pražské SPD! Vítězslav Novák prohlašuje, že pražská SPD bude volit č. 7 Roberta Vašíčka a nikoliv jedničku Ivana Davida!“, Aeronet (<https://aeronet.cz/news/exkluzivne-uvnitř-spd-se-rozjela-kampan-proti-ivanu-davidovi-vedeni-prazske-spd-v-uzavrene-diskusni-skupine-na-facebooku-vyjadruje-nespokojenost-s-lidrem-kandidatky-do-eu-parlamentu/>)

pushed by the SPD). Moreover, Aeronet offered voters an alternative instead of David and Vašíček, and asked voters to support the former general Hynek Blaško (number eight on the list). Aeronet claimed that voting for Blaško

is the only option “to save what remains from the SPD party.”²⁹ In the end Blaško surprisingly succeed and became MEP for together with the elections frontrunner Ivan David.

Perception of individual parties

There were 495 mentions about parliament parties running in the European elections in 207 analysed texts. Non-parliament parties were mentioned only rarely.

Out of all the parties, the SPD was the most frequently mentioned (92 articles in total). In 46 cases, the authors of these articles were either members or candidates of of the SPD, or the texts were based on their statements (often taken from Facebook). The most prominent author was the frontrunner for the SDP, Ivan David, who authored 11 articles. The website Nová republika also published several interviews that David conducted with other party members.³⁰ In comparison to other parties, the SPD could present its views without any significant criticism, and freely react to other parties’ statements. Nová republika then, for example, published the article criticizing the KSČM for its lawsuit against the SPD.³¹ The SPD fully used this to its advantage, as it used the media space to present itself as the only true nationalist party capable of succeeding in the elections and to critique the other parties.³² The number of articles with positive mentions towards the SPD was higher than for the rest of the prospective parties. On the other hand, the number of negative mentions were very few. However, the website Aeronet was a vocal and consistent critic of the SPD (see below).

Another frequently cited party was the KSČM (54 mentions in total, of which 15 were citations) which was covered mainly by the websites Sputnik CZ and Parlamentní listy (7 articles in both cases). The Communist Party was mentioned in relation to

the struggle with the SPD,³³ and with regards to its traditional celebrations of the 1st of May.³⁴

The second-most mentioned topic was the party of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, ANO (79 articles). Presumably, the attention could stem from the significant role of party in the Czech politics. ANO was frequently criticized for bad governance and the scandals of Mr. Babiš.³⁵ The third most mentioned party was the ČSSD (61 articles), which is currently a member of the coalition government with ANO. The general sentiment towards the ČSSD was mostly negative.

Other subjects were mentioned less frequently and mostly in a negative context. Negative sentiment was mostly present within articles mentioning the liberal coalition TOP 09/STAN; there were 33 negative mentions out of 56 in total. The centrists Pirates (22 negative mentions out of 48) and the conservative KDU-ČSL (25 negative mentions out of 46) had a similar ratio.

Parties not present in the parliament were mentioned only scarcely, and mainly in articles describing the pre-election debates in Czech television.

29 Vedoucí kolotoče, „VIDEO: Skandál v SPD pouhé 2 dny před volbami, kandidát do EU Robert Vašíček se na uniklém videu modlí v měsitě na Gibraltar, předčítá z koránu a omlouvá Islámský stát a Taliban, všechno to jsou prý lži a pomluvy, které jsou o nich šířeny! Redakce Aeronetu měla pravdu, když před Robertem Vašíčkem varovala jako kádrem George Sorose! Jak zareaguje vedení SPD v této kritické situaci, když jejich “vlastenecký” kandidát do Evropského parlamentu omlouvá Islámský stát a Taliban?”, Aeronet (<https://aeronet.cz/news/video-skandal-v-spd-pouhe-2-dny-pred-volbami-kandidat-do-eu-robert-vasicek-se-na-uniklem-video-modli-v-mesite-na-gibraltaru-predcita-z-koranu-a-omlouvava-islamsky-stat-a-taliban/>)

30 Ivan David, “Ivan David se ptá a Jan Hrnčíř odpovídá: naše hospodářství v rámci Evropské unie. Zdrucující kritika”, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/ivan-david-se-ptaj-hnrcir-odpovida.html>)

31 Ivan David, “Katerina Konečná (KSČM) lže, když tvrdí, že SPD lže. Prokazatelně hlasovala pro usnesení, které má vést k odstranění překážek pro příchod kohokoli z Afriky do EU.”, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/katerina-konecna-kscm-lze-kdyz-tvrdi-ze.html>)

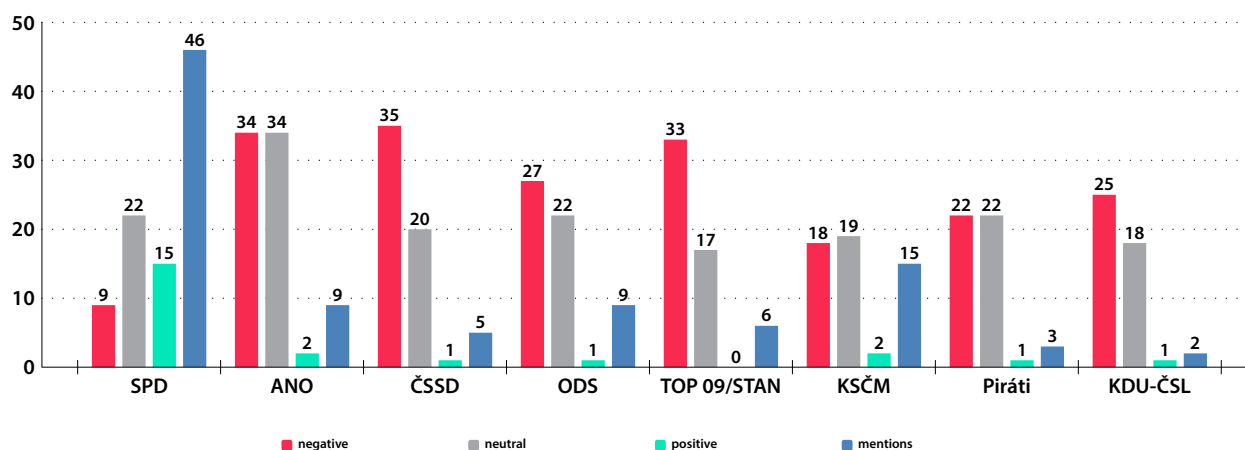
32 Daniela Černá, “Kilo brambor za 99 korun. Ať pan Babiš místo řepky zasadí mrkev. Je to habadůra, nenechte se opít rohlíkem, varuje před volbami Okamura”, Parlamentní listy (<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Kilo-brambor-za-99-korun-At-pan-Babis-misto-repyk-zasadi-mrkev-Je-to-habadura-nenechte-se-opit-rohlikem-varuje-pred-volbami-Okamura-582436>)

33 See the footnote no. 24.

34 “Milouš Jakeš hájil EU. A začalo to padat...”, Parlamentní listy (<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Milous-Jakes-hajil-EU-A-zacalo-to-padat-579940>)

35 Marek Korejs, “Nevhodné srovnání. Kubera a Klaus degradují utrpení lidí, říká Boleslav Buzek”, Parlamentní listy (<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Nevhodne-srovnani-Kubera-a-Klaus-degraduji-utrpeni-lidi-rika-Boleslav-Buzek-582386>)

Chart no. 3 – Sentiments towards parties



Analysed websites

The majority of the analysed websites did not consider the European Parliament elections to be that noteworthy; some of them only published very few articles on them. The exception was the website Parlamentní listy that covers domestic politics quite extensively, and therefore it is not surprising that the elections were seen as relevant topic. Also the website

Nová republika cover the elections due to the fact that its editor—and at the same time the frontrunner of the SPD—Ivan David used it as its communication platform. Nová republika, however, reported not only on the elections, but also on a broader array of topics. The website Aeronet showed its interests in the elections mainly in a few articles criticizing the SPD.

Table no. 1 – Publications of observed websites

Name of the platform	Published (in total)	Focused on elections	Perceptual share
AC24	397	2	0,5 %
Aeronet	30	5	16,6 %
Českoaktuálně	342	4	1,1 %
Nová republika	320	19	5,9 %
Parlamentní listy	1559	128	8,2 %
Sputnik CZ	1925	40	2,0 %
Svobodné noviny	193	9	4,6 %
Zvědavce	34	0	0 %

AC24

One of the most popular conspiracy websites published only two articles related to the European Parliament elections over the observed period. The first article was taken from Sputnik CZ and it cited a Facebook post written by SPD Deputy Radim Fiala criticizing a supposed change in the voting mechanism in the Council of the European Union.³⁶ The second article revolved around a statement made by the coalition

between Svobodní, Liberland, and Radostné Česko, Odejeme bez placení, criticizing a video of the public initiative Tentokrát budu volit (This time I’m voting), that asked people to vote in the elections.³⁷

Aeronet

This notorious website spreading disinformation became interested only in the final week before the elections took place (4 out of its 5 articles on the

36 „Bude o všem rozhodovat Brusel? Prý se v EU chystá šílená věc, varuje český poslanec“, AC24 (<https://ac24.cz/-/bude-o-vsem-rozhodovat-brusel-pry-se-v-eu-chysta-silena-vec-varuje-cesky-poslanec>)
 37 „Nejste proEU? Tak nechodte k volbám,“ vzkazuje známý český režisér Hřebejk“, AC24 (<https://ac24.cz/-/nejste-proeu-tak-nechodte-k-volbam-vzkazuje-znamy-cesky-reziser-hrebejk>)

elections were published in that week). The first article inaccurately described the internal procedures of the Union.³⁸ In contrast to other analysed websites, Aeronet was very critical and even defamatory towards the SPD.³⁹ Right before the elections, several articles were published with the intent of damaging SPD candidate Robert Vašíček (see Topics).

Českoaktuálně

The interest of this website in the elections was minimal. The four published articles only reflected the mainstream debate, especially on food quality,⁴⁰ and the SPD demonstration in Prague.⁴¹

Nová republika

This website reported rather actively on the elections. The prime reason for that is the fact that the election frontrunner of the SPD, Ivan David, is a long-time editor of the page. Mr. David himself is an author of more than half of the articles focused on the elections published on this website. His articles were focused on a wide range of topics: the tax on alcohol and tobacco products⁴², the evolution of food regulation,⁴³ or the possibility of an EU reform.⁴⁴ In some of his texts, Mr. David utilized manipulative arguments, such as the European Commission is undoubtedly involved in organizing illegal immigration into the EU.⁴⁵ His articles reflected the overall attitude of the website itself, which perceives the EU negatively.⁴⁶

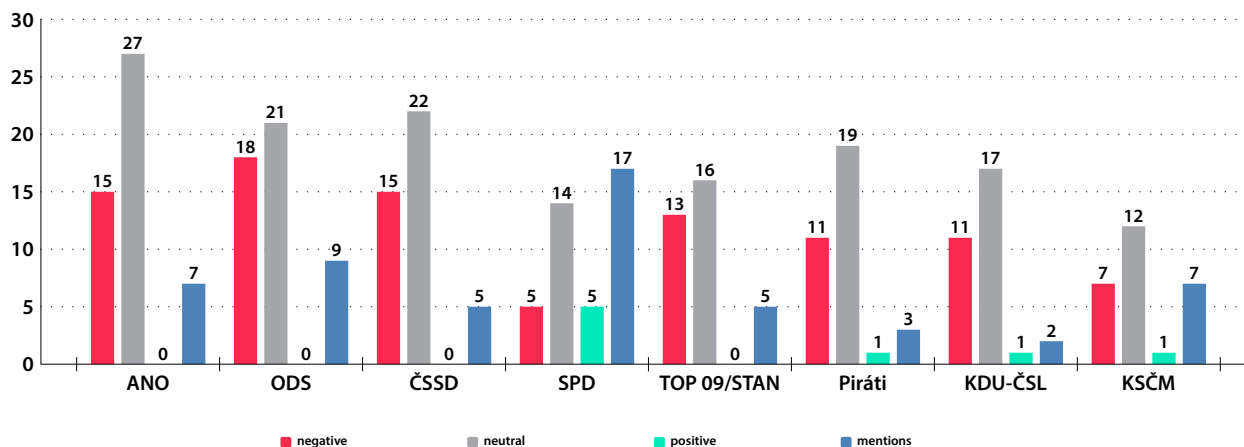
Parlamentní listy

The most active website was Parlamentní listy, who published 128 articles. The majority of them was focused on the pre-election events (for example articles summarizing the debates among various candidates

were quite frequent⁴⁷). Some attention was dedicated even to small non-parliamentary parties. From the parliamentary parties, the SPD was favoured to some extent, as its candidates were cited more often than candidates of other parties. The SPD candidates were cited in 17 articles, whereas candidates of the second-most cited party, the ODS, were only cited in 9 texts. Other parties were mentioned mostly negatively or neutrally, whereas the SPD was the only party that received a substantial amount of positive mentions (5 positive mentions). Also, the number of critical articles towards the SPD was lower than that of others (see chart no. 4). The articles on this platform were also often critical of the EU.⁴⁸

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- 38 Vedoucí kolotoče, „Klára Samková: Kandidují do Evropského parlamentu a nevědí, že to není parlament! Zákony navrhuje pouze Evropská komise a EU parlament k nim zaujímá stanoviska, která ale pro EU komisi nejsou závazná! Samková zopakovala, že jediná šance na změnu je zevnitř států za pomoci bojkotu evropských norem podle vzoru Maďarska! Jenže kolik politiků v ČR má koule postavit se Evropské komisi? Europoslanci jsou iluzí a hrou na demokratické zastoupení v naprosto nedemokratickém kolosu Evropské unie!“, Aeronet (<https://aeronet.cz/news/klara-samkova-kandiduji-do-evropskeho-parlamentu-a-nevedi-ze-to-neni-parlament-zakony-navrhuje-pouze-evropska-komise-a-eu-parlament-k-nim-zaujima-stanoviska-ktera-ale-pro-eu-komisi-nejsou-zavazna/>)
- 39 „Okamura versus Aeronet. Jejich vztah ochladl po vyloučení poslance Volného z SPD“, ČT24 (<https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/media/2774528-okamura-versus-aeronet-jejich-vztah-ochladl-po-vyloucení-poslance-volneho-z-spd>)
- 40 „Západní potravinářské firmy zakazují obchodům, aby do ČR dovezly kvalitnější verzi výrobku třeba z Německa“, Českoaktuálně (<https://ceskoaktualne.cz/2019/05/blog/zapadni-potravinarske-firmy-zakazuji-obchodum-aby-do-cr-dovezly-kvalitnejsi-verzi-vyrobu-treba-z-nemecka/>)
- 41 Soeren Kern, „Volby do Evropského parlamentu: „Právě začala bitva o Evropu“, Českoaktuálně (<https://ceskoaktualne.cz/2019/05/evropska-unie/volby-do-evropskeho-parlamentu-prave-zacala-bitva-o-evropu/>)
- 42 Ivan David, „Babišova ministryně financí Alena Schillerová jde ve šlépějích Miroslava Kalouska k další metanolové tragédii“, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/04/babisova-ministryne-financi-alena.html>)
- 43 Ivan David, „Nejen bezmasé salámy – aneb proč Brusel nemá rád normy“, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/bezmase-salamy-aneb-proc-nas-brusel.html>)
- 44 Ivan David, „Ivan David: Reforma EU? Nemožné! - a říká proč“, Nová republika (http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/ivan-david-reforma-eu-nemozne-rika-proc_15.html)
- 45 Ivan David, „Lídr SPD Ivan David: Islám systematicky vyvražďuje odpůrce, EU možná zahubí Evropu. Feri je arogantní, Pavel Fischer se zachoval jako prase. A Kalousek...“, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/lidr-spd-ivan-david-islam-systematicky.html>)
- 46 See Martin Koller, „Lekce z Geopolitiky II.“, Nová republika (<http://www.novarepublika.cz/2019/05/lekce-z-geopolitiky-ii.html>)
- 47 „Okamura spustil a Soukup ziral: Já xenofob? Mně se sluníčkáři za šikmé oči smějí dodnes!“, Parlamentní listy (<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Okamura-spustil-a-Soukup-ziral-Ja-xenofob-Mne-se-slunickari-za-sikme-oci-smejí-dodnes-582554>)
- 48 Oldřich Szaban, „Milion nadřzených migrantů může v Německu sednout na vlak a vyrazit k nám na ženské. Spisovatel a kandidát do EP doporučuje kalašnikov na púde“, Parlamentní listy (<https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/rozhovory/Milion-nadrzenych-migrantu-muze-v-Nemecku-sednout-na-vlak-a-vyrazit-k-nam-na-zenske-Spisovatel-a-kandidat-do-EP-doporucuje-kalashnikov-na-pude-578303>)

Chart no. 4 – Sentiments towards parties on the website Parlamentní listy



Sputnik CZ

The local branch of the Russian state-owned news agency, Sputnik, reported intensively on the elections with 40 published articles in total. The interest is, however, predictable, as Sputnik tries to be perceived as a standard medium, and so must cover all major political events. The majority of the texts were informative in nature, and presented, for example, the programme of the parties or described pre-election events.⁴⁹ In comparison to other parties, the KSČM and the SPD were given more space to express their opinion, with 7 and 6 citations respectively.

Svobodné noviny

This website, which labels itself a counterweight to the mainstream media, published 9 articles covering the elections in total. The theme of the articles was similar to the other observed websites, as it also covered the SPD demonstration in Prague for example.⁵⁰

Zvědavce

This quite popular conspiratorial website did not publish any articles related to the European elections.

49 „Babiš volá po silném Česku! Jako Trump si nasadil červenou čepici a s Charanzovou připravuje kampaň (VIDEO)“, Sputnik CZ (<https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201905029785516-babis-vola-po-silnem-cesku-jako-trump-si-nasadil-červenou-čepici-a-s-charanzovou-připravuje-kampaň/>)

50 Tomáš Vyoral, „Wilders, Le Pen nebo Salvini mají ve čtvrtek promluvit v Praze. Zahraje Ortel. Média „mlčí“. Bude na Václaváku veselo?“, Svobodné noviny (<http://svobodnenoviny.eu/wilders-le-pen-nebo-salvini-maji-ve-čtvrtek-promluvit-v-praze-zahraje-ortel-media-mlči-bude-na-vaclavaku-veselo/>)

Conclusion

Despite the initial worries that the European Parliament elections may become a target for disinformation, the opposite was proven to be true in the Czech case. The websites which are known for spreading manipulative content and disinformation did not pay much attention to the elections, or to the EU as a whole. These websites did not publish a significant number of articles, nor did they have the ambition to present their own topics regarding the public debate. They rather reacted to that which was already present (such as the debate about the different quality of food across the EU). However, these websites reflected on occurring events in a biased manner, based on their ideological profile. These websites, therefore, should not be perceived as a separate category, but rather as a specific, but still inseparable, part of the general media space. This was best exemplified in their low level of interest in the European elections, which was typical not only for the analysed websites, but also for the Czech media at large. This conclusion has far-reaching consequences not only for the understanding of the way in which these platforms operate, but also for further research.

The fact that the observed websites were biased and partisan only confirms their leaning towards extremist forces on both sides of the political spectrum. Their support was manifested through the absence of criticism and by providing media space to select candidates rather than by writing articles openly favouring certain party. Before the European elections, the support of the SPD was evident, especially on the website Nová republika. The relationship between

platforms spreading manipulative content and extremist parties is, however, not always as straightforward as the example of Aeronet and its ambivalent articles on the SPD and the KSČM dispute have shown. Therefore this topic should be studied further.

Disinformation as such was practically absent before the elections, and when it appeared, it was certain parties who spread spread them rather than the analysed platforms. Therefore, research should not only focus on disinformation as such, but on the more broad news coverage of various issues. Attention should be paid to less evident manipulative techniques, such as the uneven distribution of the media space to various actors of the public debate, or the biased coverage of certain events. Consequently, the websites spreading manipulative content should be observed not only through their ideological profiling and in relation to disinformation, but also through a more general prism of journalist standards.

The European elections went off without any major incidents. Nevertheless, research on the potential influence of disinformation on the elections should be further explored. Especially since the elections are a crucial, yet vulnerable, part of democracy. However, attention should also be dedicated to the physical, and cyber, security of elections, and not only to the information domain. Only such a comprehensive approach would be able to secure the integrity of the electoral process which is the bedrock of Western democratic institutions.

Appendix

The list of analysed websites spreading manipulative content used in the chapter focused on the reporting on the EU

Name of the website	Evaluation of the Konspiratori.sk (10 = highest amount of contested content)	Number of Facebook followers	Number of readers in January 2019 (according to the Mapa médií)
AC24	9,1	85 422	1 340 000
Aeronet	9,7	929	1 030 000
Bez politické korektnosti	9,4	—	50 110
Časopis šifra	8,8	11 618	165 170
Česko aktuálně	8,9	27 197	259 850
Czech Free Press	9,6	11 201	231 420
E-republika	8,4	407	—
Eu portal	8,9	—	181 160
Eurabia	8,9	—	—
Eurasia24.cz	9,2	—	—
Eu Server	8,9	—	—
Free Globe	9,4	—	60 970
Haló noviny	6,3	837	67 380
Isstras.eu	9,1	—	—
Lajkit.cz	8,3	4 556	—
Megazine.cz	9,0	12 219	—
Nová republika	9,3	—	692 650
Nwoo.org	9,7	—	291 940
OrgoNet	9,7	—	—
Outsidermedia.cz	7,8	77	59 000
Proč proto	8,8	9 081	—
Protiproud	9,5	19 988	587 920
První zprávy	7,1	3 191	594 820
Rukojmí.cz	9,3	1 560	240 410
Skrytá pravda	8,6	1 026	154 700
Stalo se	9,5	—	—
Sputnik CZ	8,4	37 242	—
Svět kolem nás	8,8	17 927	—
Svobodné noviny	9,3	17 777	186 700
Vlastenecké noviny	9,3	—	103 100
Zvědavec	9,8	—	464 020

