

Activities of Czech President Miloš Zeman as the Kremlin's Trojan Horse



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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program which aims to expose and confront instruments of Russian influence and disinformation operations focused against Western democracies.

Since Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, the Kremlin's threat to Europe has become a contentious topic of political debates. Although the threat posed by Russia is broadly acknowledged at the public and political level, some European statesmen nonetheless play the role of Russia's advocate not only by ignoring the Kremlin's deeds but by actively serving its interests, for example by criticizing anti-Russian sanctions. Together with pro-Russian interest groups and Russians living in Europe, a broad network of pro-Kremlin proxies is under developments. This network interferes with European structures and disturbs them with its actions. Through disinformation campaigns, propaganda, and anti-European and anti-democratic rhetoric, these pro-Russian elements in Europe seek to influence public opinion in order to effect desired political change. The aim is to instil doubts about citizens' national and normative identities in order to reduce support for domestic democratic and pro-European authorities. Through these efforts to undermine the fundamental values systems on which the European identity has been erected, the European community as well as EU institutions and the traditional political elites of European states are facing contestation and destabilization. According to a report by the European Parliament, "the very active influence policy that Russia is deploying towards Western countries (Russian media in foreign languages, propaganda, ties to political parties or personalities, cyber threats...), although its real impact is difficult to measure, has created more political mistrust in European capitals."¹

The term "Trojan horse" has been applied to describe high-ranking European statesmen who promote the Kremlin's interest within their countries and the EU more broadly. According to a report by the Atlantic Council, "the Kremlin uses these Trojan horses to destabilize European politics so efficiently, that even Russia's limited might could become a decisive factor in matters of European and international security."² The overarching goal of Russia's destabilization efforts in Europe is to weaken the transatlantic alliance: NATO and the European Union. The objectives that Russia is pursuing *vis-à-vis* its "neighbourhood", to which the Czech Republic belongs by virtue of its membership in the Soviet bloc and Warsaw Pact, are more specific: the Kremlin seeks to control national and local government and side-line pro-European leadership by co-opting political and business elites, exerting pressure on political decision-making and advocating policies that serve Russian favour.³ Czech President Miloš Zeman, the head of a state that controls the executive, is one of the Kremlin's most notorious Trojan horses. How difficult is it to shape and influence state politics when one of your closest friends is the head of the executive? Miloš Zeman, through his pro-Kremlin attitudes and actions, epitomizes how Russian influence and co-optation operates at the highest state level.⁴

During his presidency (2013-2018), Miloš Zeman took numerous steps in favour of a hostile foreign power. These actions frequently contradicted official Czech government policy, EU policy, or reports of the Security Information Service (BIS). These activities fall under five categories, detailed below:

¹ http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2017/578016/EXPO_IDA%282017%29578016_EN.pdf

² http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_web_0228_third_edition.pdf

³ http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/The_Kremlins_Trojan_Horses_2_web_1121.pdf

⁴ <https://euobserver.com/opinion/133789>

1. Spreading Kremlin narratives on the international scene

In an interview with Chinese state television (where he also said he had come to China to learn how to "stabilize society"), President Zeman said that in Ukraine "it is not primarily Russian aggression, but simply a civil war [...] One of the first steps of the new [Ukrainian] government was the abolition of the Russian language on the territory of Ukraine, which was a complete nonsense. It was one of the facts that provoked a civil war."⁵ Zeman again questioned Russian aggression in Ukraine and cited disinformation about the "civil war" to deny Russia's involvement in the conflict. However, it is well documented that the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine was and has not been oppressed: there is no plausible evidence of cause for civil war. The segment of the population with separatist inclinations was in active prior to Russian invasion of the region. Russia's engagement in the war was crucial to escalating separatism. Without Russian aid financial, logistical and personnel, separatism in Ukraine would not stand a chance.

2. The spread of Kremlin narratives in the Czech Republic

In an interview for Czech Radio, Zeman said that Russia is not the Soviet Union, and that democracy exists in Russia since it has elections, parties and opposition press.⁶ The president utterly ignores the fact that the Russian Federation scores very low on democracy measures: the media is not free, elections are manipulated, legitimate opposition and civil society is stifled. According to Freedom House, Russia is ranked as a "consolidated authoritarian regime". It is therefore ludicrous for Miloš Zeman to compare Russia to Western democracies.⁷

3. The presence in the Russian information space in order to support Putin's regime

"On one side, you have Kosovo, where the UN guaranteed non-autonomy, but the guarantee was not fulfilled, and on the other hand you have Crimea, where referendum was held,"⁸ said Miloš Zeman in an interview with the deputy director of the Russian press agency TASS.⁹ "This is the double standard, which is wrong," he added. Zeman repeats another of the Kremlin's arguments for the occupation of the Crimea, i.e. the "Kosovo precedent". However, the major difference is the fact that Russian speakers in Crimea were not facing oppression or persecution, while the Albanian population in Kosovo endured enormous repressions and massacres at the hands of ethnic Serbs. The claims of the Kremlin are fictional. The same defence from Moscow was also expressed during Russian intervention in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, which are still Russian protectorates dependent on its military and economic aid.¹⁰

⁵ http://www.lidovky.cz/chci-se-priucit-jak-stabilizovat-spolecnost-rekl-zeman-v-cine-pue-zpravu-domov.aspx?c=A141101_120320_ln_domov_ele

⁶ <http://echo24.cz/a/wr6d4/vulgarni-zeman-v-rozhlase-kunda-sem-kunda-tam-hovno-zkurvili>

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2017/russia>

⁸ Miloš Zeman says that, despite the UN's guarantee that Kosovo will not be a sovereign state and will remain under UN rule within Serbia, Kosovo declared its independence in 2008. This independence has been recognized by more than 100 independent countries (including most of the EU member states). According to Miloš Zeman, it opposes the situation in Crimea where a referendum on the independence was held with a positive outcome. Despite a positive outcome of the referendum, the vast majority of countries refuse to acknowledge Crimea as an autonomous sovereign republic. Zeman considers it a double standard, especially from the West, which almost unambiguously acknowledged an independence of Kosovo but not an independence of Crimea.

⁹ <https://www.novinky.cz/zahranicni/evropa/455200-zeman-kritizoval-dvoji-metr-eu-na-krym-a-na-kosovo.html>

¹⁰ https://zpravy.idnes.cz/porovnani-odtrzeni-kosova-a-krymu-d5x-/zahranicni.aspx?c=A140307_121925_zahranicni_tp

4. Support of confederates, extremists and pro-Kremlin dis-informers in the Czech Republic

Martin Nejedly has become Miloš Zeman's most influential adviser not holding security clearance. He received a diplomatic passport, which is the standard for employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and selected constitutional officials.¹¹ According to the Chancellery of the President, the reason for this benefit is that Nejedly accompanies the President as a member of the foreign delegation of the government.

Martin Nejedly spent most of the 90s working in Russia in close relation to Moscow political elite. He came back to the Czech Republic in early 2000s and in 2007 he launched Lukoil Aviation Czech, a Czech brand of Lukoil, where he personally owned 40% share. During Zeman's first presidential campaign, Nejedly was in charge of the finances of the campaign and he run the campaign also as a whole. After Miloš Zeman's victory of the presidential election, Martin Nejedly became his "economic advisor". Nejedly accompanied Miloš Zeman on many official international trips including the celebration of the defeat of fascism in Moscow and the President's trip to China in 2015. Martin Nejedly's presence at the Castle, combined with his lack of status and related professional constraints, grant him virtually unlimited opportunity to travel with a diplomatic passport to Russia, where he can negotiate with anyone about anything.

Nejedly is and has been an absolutely key figure around Miloš Zeman. His long-standing relationships with the Russian energy company Lukoil and other influential Russians make him a suitable liaison officer for promoting Kremlin attitudes in the Czech Republic and "pro-Russian" lobbying for access to decision-making processes and exclusive information from Prague Castle. The indispensability of keeping Martin Nejedly in the exclusive position close to Miloš Zeman became even more evident in 2016 when his position next to the President came under threat. As Mr. Nejedly was doing business via Lukoil Aviation Czech, a company which he was leading and co-owning, he got into trouble. He owed 32,6 million CZK (approx. EUR 1,2 million) to the Czech state, losing a court decision on that. In October 2016, Moscow headquarters of Lukoil, paid of his debt.¹²

Our interpretation is that the Kremlin used its money to keep its confidant next to the Czech President prior to the 2018 presidential election which is in progress right now. Despite Miloš Zeman's claim that he is not going to do any campaign, there are many billboards around the Czech Republic promoting Zeman for the president stating "Zeman again! 2018". According to him and his spokesman, these billboards were paid by a so-called "Club of Miloš Zeman's friends". On the web-site of this Club is stated that the billboards cost almost 8 million CZK but nobody is able to explain who the "Miloš Zeman's friend" actually are.¹³ Martin Nejedly declined declassify where the money came from and Czech senator Jan Veleba (also a member of the "Club of Miloš Zeman's friends") left a broadcasting studio when a reporter asked him about it and he was not able to answer. We cannot cast out a

¹¹ https://www.lidovky.cz/nejedleho-rady-nad-zlato-zemanuv-muz-protekci-ziskal-diplomaticky-pas-1zv-zpravvy-domov.aspx?c=A151006_224445_In-media_ele

¹² <http://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Policy-shift-overview-How-the-Czech-Republic-became-one-of-the-European-leaders-in-countering-Russian-disinformation-1.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.info.cz/volby/prezidentske-volby-2018/financovani-zemanovy-kampane-zustava-nepruhledne-sponzori-mlci-22085.html>

possibility that Zeman's campaign is partly financed from a foreign power as Russia or China while Martin Nejedlý is the head manager of the campaign.¹⁴

5. Attempts to sabotage the Czech government's policy towards Russian Federation

Miloš Zeman ridiculed cyber-attacks against the Czech Foreign Ministry. According to Zeman, "talks about cyber-attacks are fashionable".¹⁵ Zeman disputes the concerns of both experts and government authorities about increased cyber-attacks against democratic institutions. In its annual report for 2016, the Czech Security Information Service (BIS), highlighted large-scale cyber-attacks and related cyber-bullying, mainly from Russia, in particular the APT28 / Sofacy campaign¹⁶, which focused on diplomacy, military, and science and research. The same campaign also attacked the Foreign Affairs and Defence Ministries in other European countries.

The troubling consequences of these activities include: the growth of clientelism, the integration of the Czech national economy with the grey Russian economy and finance, the maintenance and legitimization of the Kremlin's authoritarian regime, the disruption of the Czech Republic's transatlantic geopolitical orientation, the manipulation of public opinion, the questioning of the normative foundations of Czech foreign policy, the undermining of relations with Euro-Atlantic allies, energy and raw material dependence on Russia, the opening of doors to Russian influence operations and espionage, legitimization of the Kremlin's criminal activities, etc. It is documented a case of a Czech citizen who actively fought in the east of Ukraine on the side of pro-Russian separatists.¹⁷ Another concrete example is the negotiation on completion of nuclear power plants in the Czech Republic. For the contract President Zeman promotes Russian company Rosatom without a competition.¹⁸ The Czech society is visibly divided into two almost equally large groups. Miloš Zeman maintains this division by his statements. Part of the people who support Zeman adopt his opinions and promote them. This is reflected, for example, in the activity of pro-Kremlin-oriented "news" web-sites which are extremely active in the Czech Republic and produce many articles on daily bases. Moreover, the number of these disinformation web-sites is growing as well as the number of its readers.¹⁹ Miloš Zeman's electorate trust him almost unconditionally; there is a frequent absence of critical reflection on his statements, even though he does not hesitate to say, for example, that "there are too many journalists and they should be liquidated."²⁰ His statements on Crimea (see above) legitimize the proven Russian aggression there, which puts the Czech Republic in a difficult international position. The consequences of Zeman's pro-Kremlin attitude are moving from the theoretical level to reality.

¹⁴ <https://www.respekt.cz/politika/kdo-zadal-pomlouvacny-inzerat-na-drahose>

¹⁵ https://www.lidovky.cz/zvasty-o-kyberutocich-jsou-moda-zeman-se-vysmal- napadeni-pocitacu-na-mzv-1q0-zpravv-domov.aspx?c=A170205_214902_in_domov_sij

¹⁶ Researchers have spotted a Russian cyber espionage group targeting individuals with spear-phishing messages using documents referencing a NATO cybersecurity conference. The hackers targeted individuals with a specific interest in the CyCon US cybersecurity conference organized by the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) in collaboration with the Army Cyber Institute at West Point in Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ https://www.lidovky.cz/policie-obvinila-prvniho-cecha-ktery-na-ukrajine-bojoval-na-strane-separatistu-gct-zpravv-domov.aspx?c=A170611_190248_in_domov_pev

¹⁸ https://jihlava.idnes.cz/prezident-milos-zeman-v-jaderne-elektrarne-dukovany-f9x-jihlava-zpravv.aspx?c=A170629_151855_jihlava-zpravv_mv

¹⁹ <http://forum24.cz/reditel-bis-koudelka-pocet-dezinformacnich-a-proruskych-webu-roste/>

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNnX2Rjq5Zk>

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