

Impact of disinformation operations in the Czech Republic

Research summary – specialized polling



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Kremlin Watch is a strategic program of the European Values Think-Tank, which aims to unravel and confront instruments of Russian hybrid war which is focused against liberal-democratic system..

About the survey

STEM agency has conducted a poll with a representative sample of 1061 respondents. The level of trust towards disinformation spread by alternative media was tested. Based on this data, Disinformation Index was created.

The data file is a result of a representative survey among residents of the Czech Republic older than 18 years. Quota sampling was applied with criteria of gender, age, education and place of residence. Two face-to-face interviewing techniques were used – PAPI (753 respondents) and CAPI (308 respondents). 302 interviewers collaborated on the research. A total of 1,061 respondents were interviewed. The dataset was weighted by previous election to the Czech Chamber of Deputies. This poll was conducted from 13th of 21st of June 2016.

This project was done together with Slovak Atlantic Commission within framework of “GLOBSEC Trends”.

Main findings:

A quarter of Czechs believe disinformation and disinformation projects. These people perceive threats differently, often see Russia as an ally and question or deny the geopolitical alignment of the Czech Republic to the West.

- 25.5% of Czechs believe disinformation
- 24.5% believe the alternative (disinformation, pro-Kremlin) media more than traditional¹

Despite limited US involvement in Syria, half of Czechs believe that the USA are responsible for Syrian refugees coming to Europe. Creating this impression is the obvious aim of the pro-Kremlin disinformation operations.

- 50.2 % of the public thinks that the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees coming to Europe are the responsibility of the United States
- 28.3% of Czechs think that the Russian military intervention in Syria helps to solve the Europe's migration crisis

¹Respondents were provided with examples of traditional media (such as Czech Television, Czech Radio and newspapers Právo or Hospodářské noviny) and the "alternative media", which can be proven to spread disinformation (for example Parlamentní listy, AC24.cz, Prvnizpravy.cz). More about the disinformation projects can be found on www.dezinformatori.cz.

Manipulation of the public is successful in the case of disinformation about what is happening in Ukraine. Nearly four out of ten Czechs blame the USA for the Ukrainian crisis, although there are Russian troops occupying part of the territory of Ukraine.

- 38% of respondents think that the Ukrainian crisis was caused by US and NATO
- 30.6% of respondents believe that the fascist forces have a crucial influence on the Ukrainian government

Only a fifth of the Czech population believe the Kremlin lie of that the organized Russian forces are not operating in Ukraine. Czech President Miloš Zeman still claims so.

- 19.6% think that organized Russian forces do not operate in Ukraine.

Roughly half the population wants the Czech Republic to be in position "between East and West." Four out of ten Czechs would prefer neutrality to the membership in NATO.

- 48.3% chose a position between East and West.
- When the respondents were asked whether membership in NATO is good or bad, only 17.3% chose the second option. But as soon as the word neutrality appeared strong 39.4% responded that neutrality would be better option than NATO. We expect the use of this narrative by disinformation operations, in Slovakia it is already being used massively.

Only less than one-third of Czechs consider EU membership a good thing. Four out of ten are undecided whether the EU is a good or bad thing, which means that in the case of a referendum on EU membership, we can expect that these people would decide only based on the experience during the campaign. The campaign can be strongly influenced by disinformation operations. Efforts to promote a referendum on leaving the EU come from the far right, far left, and the President of the Czech Republic.

- Only 31.5% of respondents considered EU membership a good thing.

- If there was a referendum on the withdrawal of the Czech Republic from the EU, 40.6% of people would most likely decide only on the basis of an ongoing campaign before the referendum as they opted for the “don’t know” option in the questionnaire.

Membership in NATO has strong support, building of alliance infrastructure in the country is now rejected, however, four out of ten Czechs would have supported it.

- 55.6% of the public does not agree with allowing NATO to build its infrastructure in the country, 39.1% agree.
- 68.5% of respondents agree that NATO is important for the security of our country.

DETAILED RESULTS & INTERPRETATIONS

GEOPOLITICS OF THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Q1. There has been much discussion about the geopolitical and civilizational integration of the Czech Republic in our society recently. Would you like the Czech Republic to be:

	%
<i>Part of the West</i>	30.0
<i>Somewhere between the West and the East</i>	48.3
<i>Part of the East</i>	3.7
<i>DK/NA</i>	18.0
<i>Total</i>	100

In the first question the respondents were asked to identify their preferred civilizational alignment of the Czech Republic. The results – 30 % choosing West, 3.7 % East and **48.3 % opting for position between West and East.** There are obviously different roots for this outcome, nevertheless we would argue that the middle “in between” position corresponds with the aim of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns and their subversive narrative of “do not trust anyone, if not Russia than the West neither.”

Q2. Which countries do you think the Czech Republic should have the closest relationship with?
List three countries at most (multiple response)

	N	%
<i>Slovakia</i>	670	63,1
<i>Germany</i>	536	50,5
<i>Austria</i>	418	39,4
<i>Poland</i>	334	31,5
<i>Russia</i>	207	19,5
<i>Great Britain</i>	153	14,4
<i>USA</i>	131	12,3
<i>Hungary</i>	105	9,9
<i>France</i>	78	7,3
<i>China</i>	69	6,5%
<i>Italy</i>	13	1,2%
<i>Other country</i>	129	12,1%
<i>DK/NA</i>	34	3,2%

Regarding countries with which the Czech Republic should have the closest relations, the poll shows that behind Slovakia, which enjoys traditionally exceptional relations, and the neighbouring Austria, Germany and Poland, Russia (19,5%) takes place surpassing the United States (12,3 %).

**Q3. What is your opinion on the membership of the Czech Republic in following organizations?
It is a:**

	<i>European Union</i>	<i>NATO</i>	<i>United Nations</i>	<i>Visegrád group</i>
<i>Good thing</i>	31.5	43.7	56.1	54.1
<i>Bad thing</i>	23.8	17.3	8.5	6.5
<i>Neither a good nor a bad thing</i>	40.6	30.1	26.5	25.6
<i>DK/NA</i>	4.1	8.9	9.0	13.8
<i>Total</i>	100	100	100	100

The Czech public's view of the membership in the **EU is rather bleak. Only 31.5 % consider it a good thing**, which is lower than NATO, UN and the Visegrad group (the last two are much less controversial). Many people do not consider membership in the EU and NATO neither a good, nor bad thing (40.6 % and 30.1 %).

If the referendum on Czexit is held, these 40.6 % of people will most probably decide how to vote only during and according to the campaign. Czech EU membership might be in danger in that case also due to pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts against the EU membership. Again, there are various reasons for the low level of support for EU membership such as long-term dominance of euro-sceptic discourse, nevertheless it is a fact that the aim of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns is Czech Republic seriously thinking about and potentially leaving the EU.

THREATS, NATO AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

Q6. To what degree do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	<i>Completely disagree</i>	<i>Rather disagree</i>	<i>Rather agree</i>	<i>Completely agree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>The Czech Republic's NATO membership is important for our security</i>	7.2	18.7	34.3	34.2	5.6	100
<i>The Czech Republic should allow NATO to build installations on the country's territory.</i>	25.6	30.0	<u>27.8</u>	<u>11.3</u>	5.3	100
<i>If a NATO country was under military attack, the Czech Republic should take part – together with other members – in its defence.</i>	8.2	16.7	42.3	25.4	7.4	100
<i>If the Baltic countries were attacked by Russia, the Army of the Czech Republic should take part in their defence.</i>	16.5	24.9	31.1	15.9	11.6	100

There is a considerable resistance towards placing NATO structures on the Czech soil with 55.6 % not agreeing with allowing NATO to build this infrastructure and 19.1 % in favour. On the other hand, 68.5 % agree that NATO is important for the security of the country.

25.4 % strongly agree that the Czech Republic should protect a NATO member state under attack together with other NATO member states. 42.3 % partly agree which makes the support rather strong. But when asked about specific scenario of Russia launching an attack into Baltic states the support drops and the resistance grows into 16.5 % strongly against Czech involvement and 24.9 % rather against.

While 67,7 % Czechs say that *if a NATO country was under military attack, the Czech Republic should take part – together with other members – in its defence*, 47 % say that *If the Baltic countries were attacked by Russia, the Army of the Czech Republic should take part in their defence*. That makes it a **20,7 % difference between collective defence in general and explicit case for defending Baltic state against Russian aggression.**

Q4. Why do you think the Czech Republic's NATO membership is a good thing? Please state your main arguments and reasons why you think so.

	%
<i>Security, guarantee for our country</i>	28.5
<i>Protection from attack</i>	26.2
<i>Common military protection</i>	16.2
<i>Joint Force</i>	16.0
<i>Border protection</i>	2.8
<i>Other answer</i>	6.2
<i>DK/NA</i>	4.1

(N=464)

Q5. Why do you think the Czech Republic's NATO membership is a bad thing? Please state your main arguments and reasons why you think so.

	%
<i>NATO as an aggressor, criticism of NATO</i>	19.7
<i>Loss of independence</i>	19.0
<i>High financial costs</i>	10.2
<i>Mandatory participation of soldiers in conflicts</i>	8.2
<i>Distrust, disagreement with mil. organizations</i>	8.2
<i>Neutrality is better</i>	4.4
<i>Other answer</i>	19.5
<i>DK/NA</i>	10.7

(N=184)

Reasons why people consider NATO membership a good thing are surprisingly in line with the real function of the organization with respondents stating that security, protection from attack and common military protection are the main benefits. On the other hand, when those who think NATO membership is a negative thing are asked to say why, conspiracy and disinformation argumentations show up, with answers like the loss of independence and NATO being an aggressive organization, pronounced by those who oppose it. Participation of Czech soldiers on missions is considered to be negative aspect of NATO membership only by 8.2 %.

Q7. Which threats are currently the most serious for our country? List three threats at most, please.

	N	%
<i>Refugees</i>	532	50.2
<i>Terrorism, attacks, assassinations</i>	440	41.5
<i>Islamic fundamentalism</i>	223	21.0
<i>Russia, threat from the East</i>	190	17.9
<i>Natural disasters, climate</i>	72	6.8
<i>Criminality, organized crime, corruption</i>	69	6.5
<i>Military conflict, attack</i>	66	6.2
<i>Economic crisis, poverty</i>	59	5.6
<i>Problems in domestic politics</i>	55	5.1
<i>USA</i>	48	4.5
<i>Political extremism</i>	32	3.0
<i>Weapons of mass destruction</i>	28	2.6
<i>Domination of Germany</i>	25	2.4
<i>Other answer</i>	256	24.1
<i>DK/NA</i>	67	6.3

The public considers the refugees (50.2 %) the biggest threat to the country at this moment. Terrorism (41.5 %) closely follows with Islamic fundamentalism third (21 %). Russia and threat from the East is the fourth most serious threat with 17.9 %.

TRUST IN MEDIA AND CONSPIRACIES

Q8. Opinions on whether our citizens get quality information about the world events or whether the important things are concealed from people currently differ in the Czech Republic. Which of the two following opinions is closer to what you think?

A. opinion: I trust traditional media more (such as Česká televize, Český rozhlas, Právo or Hospodářské noviny)

B. opinion: I trust alternative media more (such as Parlamentní listy, AC24.cz, PrvníZprávy.cz)

	%
<i>Definitely opinion A</i>	27.2
<i>Rather opinion A</i>	31.8
<i>Rather opinion B</i>	15.2
<i>Definitely opinion B</i>	9.3
<i>DK/NA</i>	16.5
<i>Total</i>	100

To test the trust in media, respondents were asked if they trust the traditional media or the alternative (with examples of prominent Czech media publishing disinformation content). 59 % still trusts the traditional media more, 16.5 % is undecided and considerable 24.5 % trusts the alternative media more than the traditional. The number of people who do not trust the traditional media is expected to grow as mainstream media are one of the key targets for pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts.

Q9. To what degree you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	<i>Completely disagree</i>	<i>Rather disagree</i>	<i>Rather agree</i>	<i>Completely agree</i>	<i>DK/NA</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>Neutrality could ensure The Czech Republic's security more than NATO membership.</i>	14.9	36.9	<u>24.6</u>	<u>14.8</u>	8.9	100
<i>NATO pushes Slavic nations against each other</i>	15.8	42.5	21.9	10.7	9.1	100
<i>The United States use NATO to control other countries (for example the Czech Republic) and force their will on them.</i>	8.6	27.7	<u>39.1</u>	<u>18.7</u>	5.9	100
<i>NATO is an aggressive organisation, which is a threat to other countries (such as Russia).</i>	18.5	36.7	24.0	12.2	8.6	100

<i>NATO's expansion is a breach of its promise to Russia</i>	15.2	32.1	20.9	11.6	20.3	100
<i>The Czech Republic is spending too much money on defence.</i>	15.5	36.8	22.2	12.8	12.7	100
<i>NATO and the US are responsible for the crisis in Ukraine.</i>	18.0	30.8	<u>23.5</u>	<u>14.5</u>	13.1	100
<i>Ukraine is part of Russia's sphere of influence, thus Russia has a right to have a role in decisions taken on Ukraine.</i>	31.0	30.6	22.5	5.2	10.7	100
<i>Fascist forces have had a significant influence on the decisions of Ukrainian government for the last two years.</i>	17.2	32.0	<u>23.4</u>	<u>7.2</u>	20.3	100
<i>Russian Federation's organized military forces and military technology operate in the Eastern Ukraine</i>	3.3	14.3	<u>43.3</u>	<u>19.0</u>	20.2	100
<i>The United States are responsible for the arrival of hundreds of thousands Syrian refugees into Europe</i>	11.9	26.4	28.2	22.0	11.5	100

An important insight came from the question whether neutrality would secure safety better than NATO. When previously asked to say if NATO membership is a good or bad thing, only 17.3 % stated that it is negative. **But as soon the word neutrality appeared strong 39.4 % think that neutrality would be better than NATO.** Neutrality as a better alternative for NATO is widely used as a Kremlin narrative in the media and even more extensive use of this narrative is expected.

The idea that the US controls states like the Czech Republic through NATO is disturbingly prevalent with 57.8 % believing in this statement. 31.5 % believes that NATO enlargement consists of breaking the promise given to Russia not to enlarge itself (which was never officially given). This argument is a pure manufactured disinformation spread by the Kremlin and apparently it works.

Another examples of this are 38 % thinking that the Ukraine crisis was caused by the US and NATO and 30.6 % respondents stating that the fascist forces have key influence in the Ukrainian government. Very high number of 50.2 % of the public thinks that the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees coming

into Europe are the responsibility of the United States. This false narrative is the core of pro-Kremlin disinformation discourse, especially in Czech and Slovak language space. It is fair to assess this disinformation narrative as being successful while it has convinced significant part of Czech society about messages that are not factually true. On the other hand, **only 17.6 % thinks that the Russian forces are not operating in Ukraine.**

THE DISINFORMATION INDEX

The Disinformation Index is based on nine correlating questions. The correlation has been validated by factor analysis. The disinformation index is a score combined from all of these questions. It is located on a scale 1 – 5 where 1 stands for “believes completely in disinformation” and 5 stands for “completely informed”. The score is interpreted in the following manner:

Score	
1 – 2.49	Believes in disinformation
2.5 – 3.49	Lacking information
3.5 – 5	Informed

According to the Index, 25.5 % of the population believe in disinformation, 35.6 % do not have sufficient information and 38.9 % can be considered informed. The data also show that the preference in alternative media influences the support for fabricated disinformation myths.

	<i>Believes in disinformation</i>	<i>Lacking information</i>	<i>Informed</i>
<i>Traditional media</i>	19.5 %	35.1 %	45.4 %
<i>Alternative media</i>	39.6 %	31.2 %	29.2 %
<i>Lacking information</i>	26.2 %	43.4 %	30.1 %
<i>Total</i>	25.6 %	35.5 %	38.9 %

Among those who trust the alternative media 39.6 % believe in disinformation while only 19.5 % among those who trust the traditional media. In contrast, 45.5 % of those who trust the traditional media can be considered informed, with alternative media this is only 29.2 %.

Generally, however, we can say that confidence in disinformation is also high among those who trust the traditional media. The scores cannot be considered favourable.

Age has a significant influence. The group between 18 to 29 believes in disinformation the least (19.6 %) but also lacks information the most (40.2 %). The best informed people are between 30 and 44 (43.5 %) and the least those who are older than 60 (31.4 % disinformed).

Education also has an effect. Best informed are the university graduates (47.7 %). Among people with elementary education 30.4 % subscribes to disinformation, but more often they lack information (40.9 %).

Preference in the alternative media has an impact on the perception of threats. Confidence in the pro-Kremlin media raises concerns about refugees and migration, problems in domestic politics, fear of the US, EU and Germany. Conversely, decreases the fear of terrorism, Russia and electoral conflicts and foreign attack.

Trust in the alternative media also has an impact on the perception of Russia as an ally, on the low support for Czech alignment to the West and on the belief that neutrality would guarantee the security of the Czech Republic better than NATO membership.

ROLE OF THE US AND RUSSIA

Q10. Do you see the role of the United States in Europe and the world as positive or negative?

	%
<i>Completely positive</i>	4.0
<i>Rather positive</i>	30.8
<i>Rather negative</i>	32.2
<i>Completely negative</i>	19.0
<i>DK/NA</i>	14.0
<i>Total</i>	100

When asked to say whether they see the role of the US in Europe negatively or positively, only 4 % of the respondents see it definitely positively and 19 % see it negatively, 30.8 % see it rather positively and 32.2 % rather negatively.

Q11. Do you think that the Russian military intervention in Syria helps to solve the European migration crisis?

	%
<i>Definitely yes</i>	7.1
<i>Rather yes</i>	21.1
<i>Rather not</i>	33.0
<i>Definitely not</i>	20.5
<i>DK/NA</i>	18.2
<i>Total</i>	100

The majority of 53.5 % think that Russia's involvement in Syria does not help to solve the European migration crisis and **28.2 % thinks otherwise**. Again, this fits into the pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative that Russia is fighting ISIS in Syria, despite many factual evidence that main portion of Russian involvement is not targeted at countering ISIS in Syria.

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