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# DOES RUSSIA INTERFERE IN CZECH, AUSTRIAN AND HUNGARIAN ELECTIONS?

A study by

Political Capital, European Values Think-tank in cooperation with DöW

2017

## Executive Summary

- The French and the German elections clearly proved two things about Russian efforts to meddle in foreign elections. First, there were obvious attempts at interference in both cases. Second, these efforts can easily be repulsed if there is a political will to do so.
- The main difference between the Kremlin's opportunities to meddle with elections in the West and the East is the regionally distinct modus operandi of Russian influence. While the West proved to be a breeding ground for state of the art information warfare utilizing "bots," the East has a multitude of local mainstream political, economic and disinformation actors in the pockets of the Kremlin.
- The deterioration of American – Russian, as well as American – European relations further encourage and stimulate Russian presence in the "power vacuum" left by the United States, and possibly help turn the tide in Russia's favour at least in Europe.
- In all three countries, the Kremlin clearly has its own preferred candidates who all have a different kind of relationship with Moscow. Given the fact that in Austria and Hungary pro-Russian forces are highly likely to become members of the future government (Fidesz in Hungary, FPÖ in Austria), the Czech Republic is expected to be the most intense battleground for Russian meddling efforts, especially during the presidential election.
- The stakes are high considering the fact that Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Austria are in the vicinity of Ukraine, and they have an important role in the region's and Ukraine's stability. The three countries under review demonstrate different levels of vulnerability when it comes to Russia's global and local strategy: Hungary being the most, while the Czech Republic the least susceptible to Russian influence.
- The Kremlin has strategic goals in each country's election in order to turn the tide in Europe and successfully create an Eastern Bloc of "Putinverstehers" in the midst of the European Union causing an even greater rift in Trans-Atlantic relations:
  - Sustain the political "status quo" in Hungary represented by the PM Viktor Orbán-led government after 2018 by supporting the Hungarian government's anti-NGO, anti-opposition, anti-Brussels and anti-migration agenda via official and unofficial Kremlin mouthpieces;
  - Stop the Czech governmental efforts to repulse Russian influence and support pro-Putin political players such as current Czech President Milos Zeman by directly attacking his main challengers, Jiří Drahoš and Michal Horáček;
  - Propel the far-right Austrian Freedom Party, one of the most pro-Kremlin forces on the European far-right, into a government position by aligning Austrian and German pro-Russian political players, NGO-s and media, and amplify voices aimed to abolish the sanctions regime.

## Introduction

As parliamentary or presidential elections in Central and Eastern Europe are approaching, it is worth to see what patterns of Kremlin influence we can expect in these countries: successful meddling in elections in terms of the efforts' outcome, as in the case of the US presidential election, the Brexit campaign or the Dutch referendum campaign, mostly failed attempts such as in France and Germany, or low-scale and relatively moderate meddling efforts such as in the Dutch general election.

The lessons learnt during the successful election influencing efforts gave an advance warning to authorities in Germany and France<sup>1</sup> and, as a consequence, Russia lost its element of surprise. Central Eastern Europe however might be more vulnerable. While in Germany and France mainstream politics and media have rather closed the door to Russian intrusion efforts, in CEE these doors are opening wider and wider – sometimes, as in Hungary, by the governing party. Furthermore, the Czech Republic and Hungary, as former communist states, still maintain strong and existing political, economic networks to the Kremlin, while Austria was traditionally considered the hub for Russian spies during the Cold War era.

Russian meddling in the upcoming Czech and Austrian elections in October 2016 or in Hungary later in the spring of 2018 will be welcomed, even openly endorsed by some clear-cut pro-Russian parties in the mainstream. The states, though, show different levels of preparedness for electoral intrusion. While in Hungary and Austria, the denial of or reluctance to admit the presence of Russian influence is the dominant attitude, the Czech government has set up a special inter-agency working group to protect elections<sup>2</sup> and Czech cyber defense authorities offer briefings on cyber security for political parties competing in the October parliamentary elections.<sup>3</sup> If we look at the EU28, at least 12 EU member states have updated their policies in light of the subversion attempts of Russia. The Czech Republic is one of the countries awake to the danger posed by Russian aggression,<sup>4</sup> while the Hungarian and Austrian governments seem to be ignoring this threat at the policy level.<sup>5</sup> The warning signs concerning the upcoming elections are clear and loud. Czech President Milos Zeman was not only lobbying strongly for lifting Trans-Atlantic sanctions against Russia, but also denied the presence of Russian troops in Eastern Ukraine and called for the recognition of Crimea.<sup>6</sup> The far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), a serious contender in Austria for becoming a future coalition partner in a government, has very strong personal and financial ties to the Kremlin and signed a five-year long “cooperation and coordination agreement” with the United Russia party in December 2016 after acknowledging the illegal annexation of Crimea.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, they promise the abolition of sanctions once they get in power. Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán is up for a third term in a row, and his fourth term overall. While he does not recognize Crimea as part of Russia, he has met the most frequently with Vladimir Putin among EU leaders since the annexation of Crimea, calling the sanctions a mistake practically every week. The Hungarian prime minister has been strengthening the political, economic and institutional

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<sup>1</sup> By referring to „successful meddling efforts”, we do not claim that the outcomes of these elections are obviously caused by the documented and obvious Kremlin election meddling, but only that the results showed the „right outcome” from the perspective of Moscow.

<sup>2</sup> <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/stat-bude-politicke-strany-skolit-o-bezpecnosti-na-internetu/r~25e356f468c811e7b2b5002590604f2e/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.info.cz/cesko/jak-chranit-volby-pred-utoky-vnitro-to-dalo-za-ukol-specialnimu-tymu-4067.html>

<sup>4</sup> [www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/policy-shift-overview-czech-republic-became-one-european-leaders-countering-russian-disinformation/](http://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/policy-shift-overview-czech-republic-became-one-european-leaders-countering-russian-disinformation/)

<sup>5</sup> [www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Overview-of-countermeasures-by-the-EU28-to-the-Kremlin-s-subversion-operations-1.pdf](http://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Overview-of-countermeasures-by-the-EU28-to-the-Kremlin-s-subversion-operations-1.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/europe/czech-republic-russia-milos-zeman.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-austria-farright-russia-idUSKBN1481MJ>

dependence on Russia to levels not seen ever since the country's democratic transition.<sup>8</sup> Mr. Orbán has recently started to refer to alleged Western attempts to overthrow his regime, recalling the dominant rhetoric of the Cold War in the Eastern bloc.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the current sensitive geopolitical situation, e.g. when the US legislation has just announced new sanctions against Moscow roughing the EU's feathers,<sup>10</sup> the European Council have managed to maintain the European sanctions' regime despite strong European opposition to the new US legislation. The Kremlin's primary goal is to influence elections in smaller states familiar to the power players of the Kremlin to create more ruptures within the EU, and also to establish a group of countries willing to end the sanctions. Moreover, the Kremlin aims to show the world they are still able to manipulate foreign political systems.

In the piece below, we aim to examine the interference opportunities for Russia in the upcoming elections in Central Eastern Europe (Austria, Czech Republic, and Hungary), countries that have a long history of Russian influence on multiple levels. In analysing the possible ways of influence, we build on the experiences from Western elections.

### ***The playing fields of Russia: bots vs idiots***

Before we analyze the three countries, it is worth to take a look at the arsenal that Russia has been using to try alter election outcomes. It should be pointed out that there is a significant difference between Russia's modus operandi for political influence in America and Europe, and especially in Eastern Europe.

The most discussed, but not necessarily most important, layer of influence is information warfare, especially on the internet. The comparative study of the Oxford Internet Institute, for example, named the "computational" political propaganda executed through bots, and algorithm-enhanced human interactions the most significant threat to democracy.<sup>11</sup> Information warfare has clearly manifested in the Kremlin's disinformation strategy in the CEE after Crimea's annexation, creating an even more decentralized system consisting of several hundreds, if not thousands of locally operated homepages, new media platforms on Facebook, Twitter, Vkontakte, etc. This new pro-Russian Central Eastern European disinformation network can be diverse in its ideological character, but it is mostly combining anti-globalist and anti-Western narratives from the radical left with nationalist narratives from the radical right, painting a world full of conspiracies with "fusion paranoia." While promoting Russian neo-imperialism, some of these media networks have extensive links to pro-Russian far-right parties, paramilitary organizations and even Russian intelligence services, as it was found in our recent research project covering the V4 countries and Austria.<sup>12</sup>

The Kremlin's operating space is markedly more extensive in the CEE region given the multitude of local political, economic and disinformation amplifiers, which can turn foreign meddling into more successful local elections for pro-Russian actors. The deterioration of American – Russian, as well as American – European relations further encourage and stimulate Russian presence in the relative "power vacuum" left by the United States, and possibly turn the tide in Russia's favour at least in

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.csis.org/blogs/international-consortium-closing-civic-space/hungary-crackdown-civil-society-%C3%A0-la-russe>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-lamfalussy-lectures-szakmai-konferencian/>,  
[http://index.hu/sport/2017/06/30/orban\\_meghivasara\\_putyin\\_a\\_budapesti\\_dzsudovebe\\_vendege\\_lesz/](http://index.hu/sport/2017/06/30/orban_meghivasara_putyin_a_budapesti_dzsudovebe_vendege_lesz/)

<sup>10</sup> <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/26/europe/russia-us-sanctions/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/2017/07/01/oxford-profs-tell-twitter-facebook-to-take-action-against-political-bots/>,

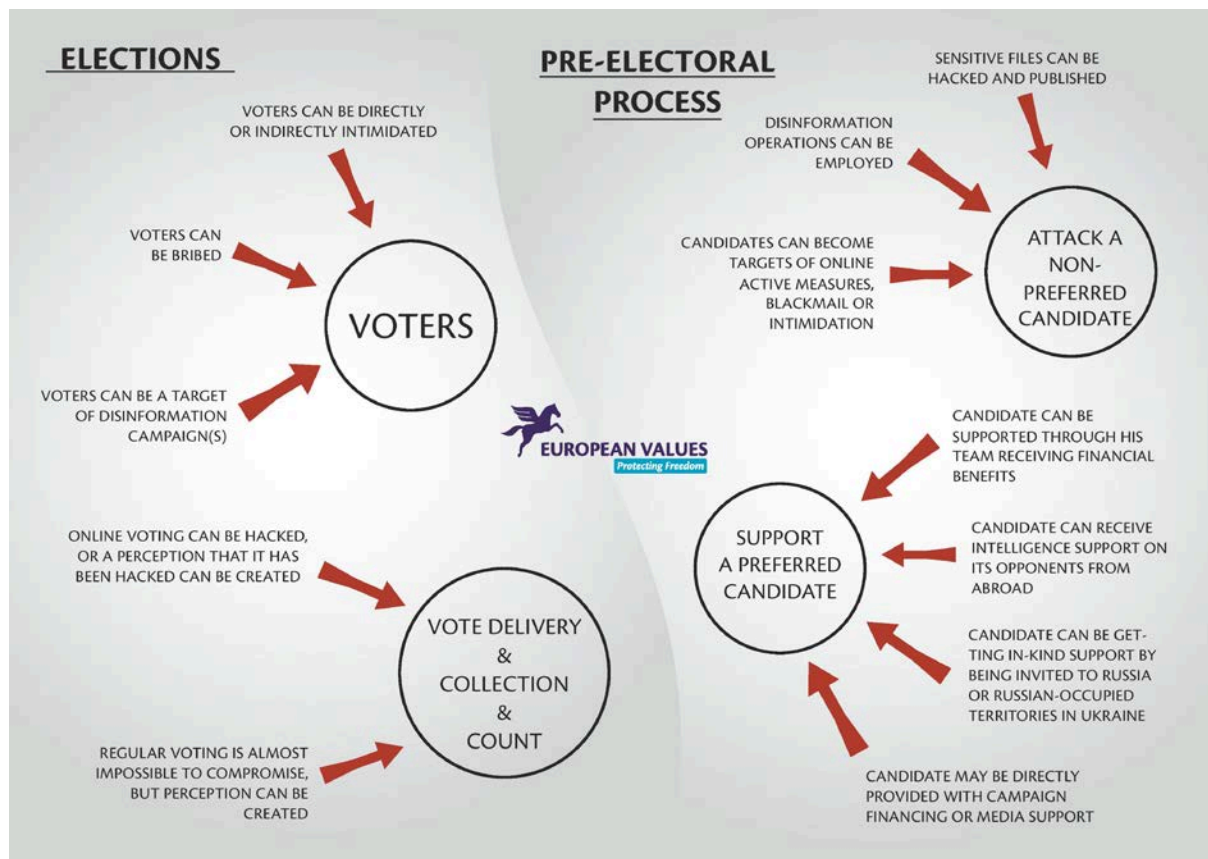
<sup>12</sup> [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=933](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=933)

Europe. As one Kremlin-related source has put it in a Washington Post article: *“Okay, you think we’re bad guys, we’re going to be bad guys, and we’ll see whether you like it or not.”*<sup>13</sup>

## Western lessons to be learned

Russia shows a consistent pattern of Russian interference abroad for at least the past 10 years.<sup>14</sup> The latest report of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security revealed that 21 states’ election infrastructure was successfully targeted by “Russian government cyber actors” during the 2016 presidential election, albeit without causing any significant interference in the election process itself.<sup>15</sup> This kind of cyber-attack introduces us to the meddling capabilities or “spectrum” of Russian or pro-Russian actors world-wide (see diagram 1). On the one end of the “meddling spectrum” we find the hacking of the critical physical infrastructure of, for example, election hardware, electric grids, etc.

**Diagram 1. Election meddling tools of the Russian Federation world-wide**



At the middle of the spectrum there is the alteration of public opinion or turning a specific group towards Moscow’s geopolitical stance. During the 2018 French presidential election, the official Russian mouthpiece Sputnik published a poll showing Moscow’s favourite, former presidential nominee Francois Fillon in the lead when in fact he was only third in the French presidential race.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-kremlin-is-done-betting-on-trump-and-planning-how-to-strike-back-against-us-sanctions/2017/07/29/6ae6dfe4-714e-11e7-8c17-533c52b2f014\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.65600fd961cb](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/the-kremlin-is-done-betting-on-trump-and-planning-how-to-strike-back-against-us-sanctions/2017/07/29/6ae6dfe4-714e-11e7-8c17-533c52b2f014_story.html?utm_term=.65600fd961cb)

<sup>14</sup> In 2007, Estonian authorities decided to move the Soviet-era “Bronze Soldier” signifying Soviet liberation of the country to a less prominent location in Estonia’s capital, Tallinn. What followed was DDoS, botnet, and spamming attacks of government, media, and banking servers suspected to be initiated by the Kremlin in association with online criminals See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/39655415>

<sup>15</sup> <https://techcrunch.com/2017/09/22/electronic-voting-state-hacking-russian-government-cyber-actors/>

Similarly, Russia Today claimed before the Dutch general elections of 2017 that the majority of the Dutch populace would prefer “Nexit” or leaving the EU.<sup>16</sup> As it turned out, not only the numbers were somewhat distorted (the Dutch poll for example excluded the number of “Do not know” responses in its final calculation), the French poll was conducted by Brand Analytics, whose parent company’s clients included the FSB, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, while the Bruges Group responsible for the Dutch research supported the separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

At the other end of the election meddling spectrum is the targeting of primary political actors, “enemies” and “friends” at the same time: the Democratic National Committee, Hillary Clinton, or Donald Trump in the US, Emmanuel Macron, Francois Fillon and Marine Le Pen in France. The latest evidence proves one thing for sure: one or the other way Donald Trump or his immediate circle was successfully targeted by Russian political and financial interests, and most likely, Russian secret services.<sup>17</sup> Sometimes, the goal is to make the interference look more extensive than it really is:

Goldstone’s careful check-in to Trump Tower on Facebook,<sup>18</sup> and Veselnitskaya going on air to confirm that Trump Jr. wanted information on Hillary Clinton “so badly” are reaching their goal by producing proof of the meeting with the Trump campaign to be used in the future.<sup>19</sup>

The German elections clearly proved that Russian attempts to interfere in elections can be repulsed as long as there is awareness and cooperation between the government, parties and mainstream media. In the German Bundestag, Angela Merkel has explicitly raised the issue of fake news, bots and the threat those present by distorting public opinion in November 2016. While an official investigation could not undoubtedly assert that there is systemic disinformation influence coming from Russia,<sup>20</sup> mainstream German politicians and institutions prepared for the worst.<sup>21</sup> As a result, all the major parties decided to refrain from using automated social media during the campaign, and several major media outlets warned German voters of the possible threat.<sup>22</sup> This concentrated effort was aided by a new bill adopted in 2017 introducing fines for social media platforms up to EUR 50 million in case they fail to remove criminal, fake, hate-inciting contents.<sup>23</sup> So, it is not a surprise that Facebook removed “tens of thousands of fake accounts” before the election in September 2017 in cooperation with German authorities such as the Federal Office for Information Security (BSI).<sup>24</sup> As a result, apart from the rather usual and expected last minute [bot-attacks](#) mainly boosting the far-right AfD there was [no](#)

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/06/06/russia-attempted-influence-french-dutch-elections-suspect-polls/>

<sup>17</sup> The meeting set up by Rob Goldstone between Mr. Trum Jr., the Russian lawyer Natalia Veselnitskaya, who used to work represent the FSB in Moscow property dealings, and among others Rinat Akhmetshin, a well-known Russian-born lobbyist to American intelligence, who used to be a Soviet intelligence officer point to a well-choreographed situation by the Kremlin. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/us/politics/trump-meeting-russia.html>, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/veselnitskaya-fsb/534528/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/rob-goldstone-amazing-social-media-trump-russia-2017-7>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/russian-lawyer-who-met-trump-jr-i-didn-t-have-n781631>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/geheimdienste-bnd-keine-beweise-fuer-desinformations-kampagne-putins-1.3365839>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-impact-of-russian-interference-on-germanys-2017-elections/>

<sup>22</sup> <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/06/Comprop-Germany.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jun/30/germany-approves-plans-to-fine-social-media-firms-up-to-50m>

<sup>24</sup> <http://money.cnn.com/2017/09/27/technology/business/facebook-german-elections-fake-accounts/index.html>



[large-scale election meddling](#) in Germany, as [many had expected before](#).<sup>25</sup> And while SPD's decline is definitely a strategic loss for the Kremlin, they can claim some credit for boosting Alternative für Deutschland's (AfD) chances via active measures such as the infamous [Lisa case](#), and possibly helping targeting Russian Germans, thus contributing to the party's spectacular entry into the Bundestag with 12.6% of the popular vote.<sup>26</sup> The party itself admitted that about a third of its voter base is made up of the Russian diaspora in Germany (making up 5% of the population),<sup>27</sup> which has been successfully targeted by the Kremlin's mouthpieces such as Sputnik, Russia Today. All in all, the Kremlin seems to have lost its momentum during the German elections, and its situation will deteriorate further if the Jamaica coalition were to form the next government without the more "pragmatic." Ostpolitik-inspired SPD in power. To sum up, the Kremlin's direct or indirect help could have contributed to a certain extent to the success of the decisively pro-Russian AfD and, at the same time, to weakening the voter base of the CDU that lost around 1 million voters to the far-right party.<sup>28</sup> But the results are far from a spectacular "victory" for the Kremlin as in the case of the US presidential election, the Brexit vote or the Dutch referendum on the trade agreement between the European Union and Ukraine in April 2016.<sup>29</sup>

## If it is a horse ride it

Central Eastern Europe is an ideal place for Russian meddling given the multitude of pro-Russian actors, significant distrust in liberal democracy and attraction to local strongmen like Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán. Thus, it is no wonder that Vladimir Putin is more popular than Angela Merkel in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Bulgaria according to the Globsec Trends 2017.<sup>30</sup> The same report rings the alarm bells on the role of traditional media: 45% of Hungarian and 49% of Czech respondents do not trust mainstream media, and a significant portion tune into disinformation outlets (4% and 9%, respectively). According to Globsec Trends 2017, altogether almost 10 % of the audience in the CEE trust online disinformation outlets' opinion on world affairs over mainstream media.<sup>31</sup>

The three countries under review demonstrate different levels of vulnerability when it comes to Russia's global and local strategy. Because of the vicinity of Ukraine, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Austria have an important role in the region's stability, and their attitude towards and behaviour concerning Russia matters a lot. For this reason, the Kremlin tries to revive age-old historical grievances between Ukraine and other countries in the region (especially its neighbours) with the help of local nationalist actors, and fuel revisionist sentiments.<sup>32</sup> This kind of destabilisation was clearly detectable on the main Hungarian pro-Russian mouthpiece (see diagram 2), Hídfő (hidfo.ru), which showed an unusually high editorial activity accompanied by a similarly high audience responsivity between 4-10 September 2016.

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<sup>25</sup> 30% of the German Twitter activity before the election was generated in favor of the AfD according to the Oxford Internet Institute's research. Another research concluded that an army of pro-Russian far-right media trolls were employed to "catapult" the #AfD hashtag into the two top trending hashtags in Germany in the two-weeks leading up to the vote.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>

<sup>27</sup> <http://time.com/4955503/germany-elections-2017-far-right-russia-angela-merkel/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/24/germany-elections-afd-europe-immigration-merkel-radical-right>

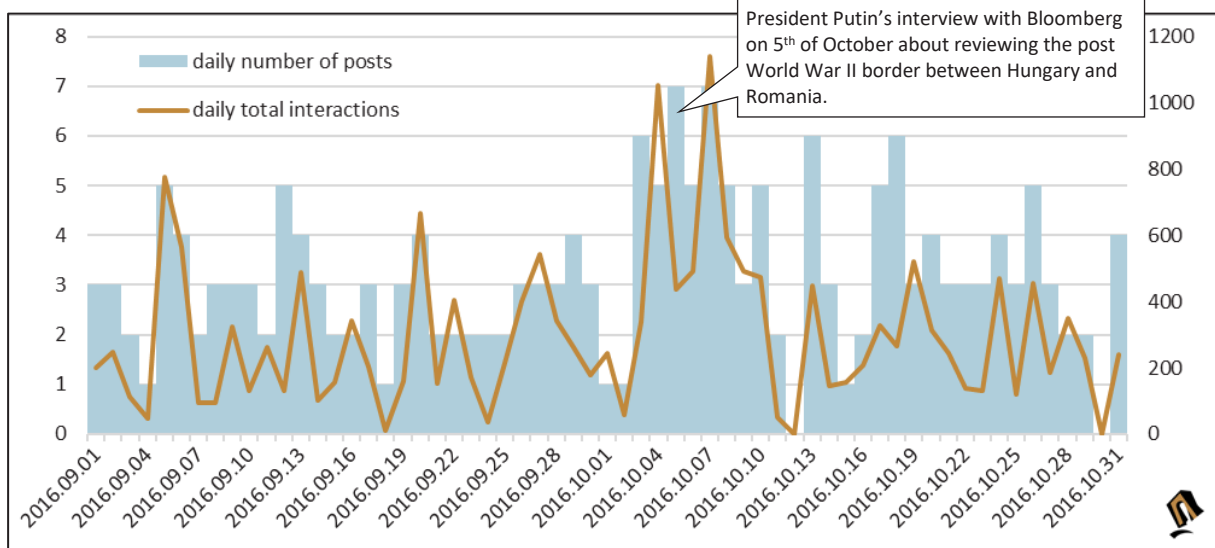
<sup>29</sup> [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-fake-news-dutch-vote.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/16/world/europe/russia-ukraine-fake-news-dutch-vote.html?_r=0)

<sup>30</sup> <http://globsec.org/globsec2017/news/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-and-signs-of-hope-from-central-and-eastern-europe>

<sup>31</sup> <http://globsec.org/globsec2017/news/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-and-signs-of-hope-from-central-and-eastern-europe>

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_summary\\_analysis\\_EN\\_20170428.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_summary_analysis_EN_20170428.pdf)

**Diagram 2: Number of posts and audience reactions; daily breakdown; Hídő Facebook page**



The main reason behind the two high spikes (marked in blue and brown) in disinformation activity during this interval was President Putin’s remarks raising the possibility of a revision of the border between Hungary and Romania if the West wants to reopen post-Second World War geopolitical questions.<sup>33</sup> Putin’s rhetoric clearly made waves because the Hungarian extreme right has never given up on border revision and on recovering territories lost after the First World War.

**To achieve these goals, this means the Kremlin needs to sustain the political “status quo” in Hungary represented by the PM Viktor Orbán-led government after 2018, stop the Czech government’s efforts to repulse Russian influence and support pro-Putin political players such as current Czech President Milos Zeman, and propel the far-right Austrian Freedom Party, armed with a fresh five-year long cooperation agreement with the United Russia party, into power. However, the Kremlin’s meddling approach will be markedly different in each country’s elections due to their special geopolitical situation and divergent vulnerabilities.**

### *Fighting anti-Russian fools*

**On an imaginary scale of Russian meddling or disinformation, the Czech Republic is politically clearly the most threatened by attacks** in light of the large and active pro-Russian disinformation network and the large Russian diplomatic community in the country, President Zeman’s activities as a decisive pro-Kremlin leading figure and the newly established policies and capacities of the Czech state – in the form of the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (CTHT) founded and operated within the Czech Ministry of Interior since the beginning of 2017, to fight disinformation,<sup>34</sup> and election meddling. According to the Vulnerability Index research conducted by Globsec, the European Values Think-tank and Political Capital Institute,<sup>35</sup> the Czech Republic is the second least vulnerable state after Poland due to state countermeasures, while Hungary overall is the most vulnerable to Russian influence. Given the fact that the Czech government has adopted a new policy document in December 2016 and

<sup>33</sup> [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_HU\\_20170428.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_HU_20170428.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> [www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/policy-shift-overview-czech-republic-became-one-european-leaders-countering-russian-disinformation/](http://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/policy-shift-overview-czech-republic-became-one-european-leaders-countering-russian-disinformation/)

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.globsec.org/upload/documents/vulnerability-index/globsec-vulnerability-index.pdf>



defined policy priorities concerning the “influence of foreign powers,”<sup>36</sup> new structures and procedures are already being put in place to repulse Kremlin influence activities. The aim is not exclusively on countering disinformation, which is considered one of the main tools in hostile foreign influence playbook. CTHH employing 20 people has been perceived by many journalists as an anti-fake news centre, a slightly misleading characterisation as its core duties are focusing on hybrid threats, but most of its work is classified.<sup>37</sup>

However, despite the Czech disinformation community clearly being the most advanced and established compared to other Central European states,<sup>38</sup> the main reasons for the effectiveness of pro-Putin politics in Prague would be the direct support for it by the Czech president and the way key disinformation entities found a working business model with an estimated revenue of up to EUR 1 million just from online advertisements in the Czech Republic.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the Czech Republic has also been a springboard to some Russian intelligence activities.<sup>40</sup> Russian diplomatic bodies employed 130-150 individuals in recent years, a number overwhelmingly large in a regional comparison.<sup>41</sup> President Zeman is constitutionally a ceremonial figure, but his informal influence is significant. Zeman is the primary patron of Russian (and also Chinese) influence in the country,<sup>42</sup> which makes it clear who the Kremlin and its proxies will presumably support in the presidential election in January 2018. Zeman supports the local pro-Putin-disinformation community, copy-pastes Putin’s messages on Ukraine or Syria, attacks the government’s efforts to repulse Russian influence in the country, serves as a loyal Putin ally in the Russian media space and openly mocks the work of Czech intelligence agencies.<sup>43</sup> In the parliamentary election set for October 2017, the Czech security community does not expect major interference. Front-runner Andrej Babiš (ANO party chairman) is not a pro-Kremlin figure, his foreign-policy stance is unstable given the fact that he has not focused too much or has not been interested in international affairs so far. The other key parties (ČSSD, ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09) with relevant coalition potential are clearly or slightly pro-West, so there is no winning scenario for the interest of the Kremlin. Nevertheless, Andrej Babiš’s Russia policy is not too predictable, he could align his views with those of Miloš Zeman if he won the presidential election in January 2018. While tolerating Zeman’s pro-Putin stances, Babiš could be swayed by the pro-Western and anti-Kremlin views of his own defence minister and effective leading foreign policy figure within ANO, Martin Stropnický. Moreover, Babiš’s political approach (centralised leadership, business-oriented, pragmatic policies) can make his government a target of strong attempts by the Kremlin and the business interests around him to extend their economic influence, which is indicated by the fact that Babiš has already called for lifting of Western sanctions against Russia.

The openly pro-Kremlin voices are present within the Communist Party (KSČM) and the far-right “Freedom and Direct Democracy” party, a political party run by Tomio Okamura, a known populist who attends the regular pro-Kremlin international gatherings.<sup>44</sup> Both have very limited chance of joining the governing coalition as their policies and politics are non – mainstream, but they have relevant

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/audit-narodni-bezpecnosti-151410/>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.europeanvalues.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Kremlin-Hostile-Disinformation-Operations.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> [osf.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/reklama-na-konspiracnich-dezinf-webech-web.pdf](http://osf.cz/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/reklama-na-konspiracnich-dezinf-webech-web.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> <http://hlidacipes.org/na-ruske-ambasade-v-praze-je-vic-ruskych-spionu-nez-ceskych-diplomatu-v-moskve/>

<sup>41</sup> <http://hlidacipes.org/ruska-ambasada-v-praze-je-stale-pri-sile-aktualne-zde-pusobi-129-lidi-nejvice-ze-vsech-ambasad/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://euobserver.com/opinion/133789>

<sup>43</sup> [kremlinwatch.eu/data](http://kremlinwatch.eu/data)

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.zimbio.com/photos/Tomio+Okamura/European+Right+Wing+Parties+Hold+Conference/oJyI4MT5wkN>

social influence. If a major interference in October parliamentary election happened, it would most probably be scrutinized by the relatively strong Czech expert and media community, which is aware of such a threat.

Russia has already interfered in the presidential campaign (elections set for January 2018), as in late 2016 the chief advisor (Martin Nejedlý) to Kremlin-preferred candidate Miloš Zeman received over EUR 1 million from the Moscow headquarters of Lukoil to cover his own debt so he could stay around president Zeman and practically run his campaign, as he did in 2013 when he joined after having worked in Moscow for more than a decade.<sup>45</sup>

### Czech scenario assessment

- **Major Russian meddling in the October parliamentary elections is not expected by the wider expert community for two reasons:**
  - First, Russia does not have a preferred party it could support to get enter the governing coalition: the chances for Kremlin-linked Communist Party or the far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy are rather slim as they are considerably ostracized for their policies and standings.
  - Second, if a major interference in the October parliamentary election happened, it would most probably endanger the **major Russian objective, that is helping President Zeman stay in office for his second presidential term (2018-2023)**, because the public's awareness of the interference would probably hold over to the presidential campaign in the fall of 2017.
- **As we have seen in Western elections, an effective way of supporting the Kremlin-preferred candidate is to directly attack his/her main opponent.<sup>46</sup> That is why we can expect efforts discrediting and disseminating disinformation on Zeman's key challengers – Jiří Drahoš and Michal Horáček in the presidential election in January 2018. If any of those two challengers won, it is expected that they would openly confront the pro-Kremlin community in the Czech Republic, as they are both highly critical of Zeman's actions. Kremlin-inspired Czech disinformation efforts are almost completely united behind President Zeman and will probably play the role of creator and offer a platform to massive disinformation and smear campaigns against Zeman's challengers.**
- **Bot activities are probably not going to be used massively as Twitter has limited political and social impact in Czech politics, most of the action is done on Facebook, which makes it harder for automated bots and fake profiles to operate on a large scale.**

### *Paradise in Crimea*

**Austria would be in the middle when it comes to the vulnerability of their elections given the country's geopolitically and historically "neutral status,"** which can be characterised by elite connections: the Russian elite conducts high-level diplomatic talks, business deals with the top Austrian political or business decision-makers. The long-term Russian political investment seems to have yielded the first significant results with the five-year long "cooperation agreement" signed between the United Russia party and the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) in December 2016. Moreover, the far-right party seemed to be the frontrunner of the snap parliamentary election in October 2017

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<sup>45</sup> <http://www.info.cz/nazory/deset-nezodpovezenych-otazek-o-ruskem-vlivu-v-cesku-komentar-jakuba-jandy-14066.html>

<sup>46</sup> [www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/framework-guide-tools-counterering-hostile-foreign-electoral-interference/](http://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/framework-guide-tools-counterering-hostile-foreign-electoral-interference/)

throughout 2016, however the party is currently competing with the Social Democrats for 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the polls after Sebastian Kurz took over the party and shifted its approach more to the right.<sup>47</sup>

The FPÖ is more than a “Trojan Horse” as its pro-Russian sympathies are clear and obvious, and the party leaders do not try to hide it. The party is a loyal ally of Russia for several reasons. The FPÖ delegated its foreign policy speaker, Johannes Hübner as an independent “European observer” to legitimize the Crimean annexation referendum in 2014.<sup>48</sup> Since then, party officials observed separatist elections, and party-leader Heinz-Christian Strache is among the loudest European politicians to demand the end of the anti-Russian sanctions regime to make Crimea a “holiday paradise” for Europe.<sup>49</sup> The party’s general geopolitical orientation is also in line with the Kremlin’s interest regarding a weaker Transatlantic community. Despite Austrian neutrality, Strache would support a European army to steer clear from the US-dominated NATO, and to create a “strong continental Europe” in a possible “free trade zone with Russia.”<sup>50</sup> Consequently, the Kremlin would clearly benefit from a Eurosceptic, anti-immigration and anti-Islam Austrian government echoing the Russian narratives about a weak, liberal European elite destined to “destroy” the Christian civilization through the alleged open-doors immigration policy.

However, the Kremlin’s ability to directly influence the Austrian elections has several limitations. The Political Capital Institute in cooperation with Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes (DÖW) has pointed out in several analysis that no successful attempts to promote the Russian “illiberal values’ can be observed so far,” and the overwhelming majority of Austrians (70%) hold a negative or rather negative geopolitical view of Russia, which is not helped by the cultural distance between the two countries.<sup>51</sup> A very limited pro-Russian new media and civil society exists in Austria as well, but their audience mostly comprised of the Russian diaspora living in Austria or the far-right subculture, so their impact is severely limited on the domestic political discourse, politics. For example, the Suworow Institute in Vienna organized talks supporting the separatists in Eastern Ukraine, reaching mostly far-right, Christian-fundamentalist audiences including the Identitarian Movement following Alexander Dugin’s Eurasian ideology mainly known in neo-Nazi circles.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the main channel of influence in Austria is rather the business-oriented, pragmatic approach of Russia, which has many supporters in mainstream parties and the business community alike.

As a result, Austria can expect pro-Russian views represented either directly by the FPÖ or through other mainstream political or economic actors who have advocated before, for example, for lifting European sanctions against Russia. Still, only a few pro-Russian NGOs, fringe media outlets are present in the Austrian public space with very limited outreach. Russian meddling in the Austrian election would more likely happen through the German pro-Russian actors already activated in the German elections a month earlier. German and Austrian pro-Russian civil society, media show several organizational, personal overlaps, therefore, German-speaking pro-Russian media, bot-nets, the large Russian diaspora living in Germany could all act as a pro-Russian message amplifier for the FPÖ during the Austrian elections.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/austria-calls-october-election-far-right-fpo-could-enter-government/>, <https://neuwal.com/wahlumfragen/>

<sup>48</sup> <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.hu/2014/03/pro-russian-extremists-observe.html>

<sup>49</sup> <https://de.sputniknews.com/wirtschaft/20170425315499968-krim-oesterreich-forum-sanktionen/>

<sup>50</sup> [http://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5175411/Strache\\_Atomwaffen-sollten-Teil-einer-EUArmee-sein](http://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5175411/Strache_Atomwaffen-sollten-Teil-einer-EUArmee-sein)

<sup>51</sup> [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_AT\\_20170428.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_AT_20170428.pdf),  
[http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC\\_reactionary\\_values\\_CEE\\_20160727.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/wp-content/uploads/PC_reactionary_values_CEE_20160727.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> [http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC\\_NED\\_country\\_study\\_AT\\_20170428.pdf](http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_AT_20170428.pdf)

## Austrian scenario assessment

- The meddling could take shape in the form of cooperation between German and Austrian pro-Russian political, civic, media actors aiming to influence elections in both countries. One such prime example is the Alternative Für Deutschland (AfD) party aligning itself with the FPÖ in Freiberg to “demand the end of anti-Russian politics” under the auspices of Alexander Yushchenko, the deputy-chairman of the Duma’s Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>53</sup>
- Electronic election meddling, automated botnet support for FPÖ might come primarily from Germany as a spillover effect of the German election. However, hacking, leaks of Austrian mainstream parties are unlikely given the Kremlin’s important, widespread political and economic networks in Austrian mainstream politics.
- After the elections, especially if FPÖ became a governing force (most likely in coalition with the ÖVP), Russia would do its best to extend its economic influence in Austria via incentivizing key decision-makers.

### *Who shot himself in the foot?*

Despite the Hungarian government voting for the sanctions against Russia, fulfilling its obligations in NATO, as well as supporting Ukraine’s territorial sovereignty,<sup>54</sup> Viktor Orbán has repeatedly claimed “we have shoot ourselves in the foot with the sanctions” against Russia,<sup>55</sup> and in his speech in January 2017 he praised the Kremlin for withstanding the “the Western attempts of isolation, regime change.”<sup>56</sup> According to the Vulnerability Index of Globsec Institute, compiled in cooperation with Political Capital and European Values, Hungary is the most vulnerable to subversive Russian influence precisely because of the elite’s deliberate pro-Russian turn after 2010, when Fidesz-KDNP won its first parliamentary supermajority and the pro-Russian far-right Jobbik party got first into the National Assembly. Moreover, the pro-Russian government’s dominance in the media and the hostile attacks on the NGO sector following the Kremlin’s playbook that could uncover malevolent Russian influence practices are also increasing the vulnerability of Hungary.

In Hungary, there is almost no information warfare because there is practically no opponent in the mainstream to fight, and pro-Russian disinformation comes directly from government-organized media. Hungary is the least expected to experience election meddling given the strong pro-Russian stance of the ruling Hungarian Fidesz-KDNP, and its main challenger, the far-right Jobbik is also pro-Russian. Russia has reason to believe that they practically cannot lose the geopolitical game in Hungary. Regardless, the Orbán cabinet can count on Russian support in the form of energy deals and promises for extending economic ties, as it happened during the 2014 general election.

Right before the 2014 election, President Putin had not only sealed a deal with PM Orbán on the construction of the Paks 2 nuclear power plant built by Rosatom and financed by a EUR 10 billion Russian loan, the long-term gas price was also renegotiated with Gazprom, thus allowing Fidesz to keep its biggest campaign promise on the household utility price cuts.<sup>57</sup> PM Orbán later reiterated that the household utility cuts’ fate depends on the relation of Hungary with Russia,<sup>58</sup> which is even more

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.fpoe.at/artikel/afd-und-partner-fordern-ende-antirussischer-politik/>

<sup>54</sup> <http://www.fidesz.hu/hirek/2016-11-24/magyarorszag-tamogatja-ukrajna-eu-tagsagat/>

<sup>55</sup> [http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20140815\\_orban\\_az\\_orszorszag\\_elleni\\_szankciokkal\\_labon\\_lottuk\\_magunkat](http://mandiner.hu/cikk/20140815_orban_az_orszorszag_elleni_szankciokkal_labon_lottuk_magunkat)

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.miniszterelnok.hu/orban-viktor-beszede-lamfalussy-lectures-szakmai-konferencian/>

<sup>57</sup> [https://cz.boell.org/sites/default/files/diverging\\_voices-converging\\_policies.pdf](https://cz.boell.org/sites/default/files/diverging_voices-converging_policies.pdf),

<http://www.fidesz.hu/hirek/2014-01-25/harom-lepesben-folytatodik-a-rezsicsokkentés/>

<sup>58</sup> <https://mno.hu/belfold/orban-viktor-a-rezsicsokkentés-lete-mulik-ezen-1271308>

significant given the government's possible plans to introduce a new round of cost cuts before the 2018 elections – but they will most likely do so only if they feel the threat of losing the election.<sup>59</sup>

A new media network of approximately 100 locally operated, Hungarian-speaking, Russia-linked disinformation sites, social media accounts is also present in Hungary, selling pro-Kremlin narratives within the more attractive, tabloid conspiracy package that also contains lifestyle news, promotion of “alternative medicine” (e.g. homeopathy”) and alike.<sup>60</sup> Since the mainstream is dominated overwhelmingly by government-organized media, and the government is strongly pushing pro-Kremlin narratives, (the public television even launched a Russian-speaking news hour on the main state channel in 2015 without considerable demand for it in Hungary) the government has nothing to fear regarding the Kremlin's disinformation activities.<sup>61</sup> Instead, Russian disinformation is expected to amplify the government's domestic propaganda against its possible rivals as it happened with the anti-migration, anti-George Soros campaign. The Kremlin's narrative is directly using the Hungarian PM's conspiracy theory quoting Viktor Orbán on Russia Today about George Soros, a Hungarian-born American billionaire and human rights philanthropist “driving the invasion” of mass migration into Europe.<sup>62</sup> <sup>63</sup> This narrative partially comes from Russia, thus creating an echo chamber between Hungarian government-organized media and the Kremlin-controlled media outlets.

Given the far-right Jobbik's pro-Russian stance, and the weakness of the divided leftist-liberal opposition, there is little chance they will become a significant target of a Russian disinformation campaign apart from the regular opposition bashing already present on these pro-Russian sites. Besides, the far-right Jobbik party is firmly in the grip of the Kremlin, the party cannot even rid itself from its former head of the foreign policy cabinet, current Jobbik MEP Béla Kovács, who has been under a criminal investigation for spying in favour of Russia against the EU since 2014.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, Russian meddling into Hungarian affairs has its cultural and attitudinal limitations. In Hungarian society, the historical narrative is traditionally reserved towards Russia due to the 1848 and 1956 revolutions having been crushed by the Czarist and then by Soviet Russia. Without the presence of a significant Russian diaspora or Orthodox community Hungary lacks organic grassroots pro-Russian organizations or a deeper bond to Russian culture, religion and language. The new “cultural bonds” between Russia and Hungary (e.g. via Russkiy Mir and support to the Orthodox Church) are mostly top-down, indicating that the Hungarian government's intention is to strengthen bilateral relations

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<sup>59</sup> [http://tenytar.blog.hu/2017/05/02/mi\\_lesz\\_a\\_2018-as\\_valasztas\\_csodafegyvere\\_a\\_nyugdijasokra\\_fog\\_utazni\\_a\\_fidesz?full\\_commentlist=1?desktop](http://tenytar.blog.hu/2017/05/02/mi_lesz_a_2018-as_valasztas_csodafegyvere_a_nyugdijasokra_fog_utazni_a_fidesz?full_commentlist=1?desktop)

<sup>60</sup> <https://vs.hu/kozelet/osszes/bivalybasznadi-alhivallalkozok-es-oroszorszag-magyar-hangjai-0407>

<sup>61</sup> <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2016/07/13/a-legnepszerubb-orosz-osszeeskuves-elmeletek-a-magyar-kormanyparti-sajtoban/>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/332387-soros-putin-russia-threat-migrants/>

<sup>63</sup> That being said, the Kremlin has already demonstrated its willingness to mount an information attack on the Hungarian government in 2014. In heat of the Crimean crisis, the main pro-Russian mouthpiece in Hungary, the anonym hidfo.ru (Bridgehead in English) accused the Orbán cabinet of illegally arming the Ukrainian army with T-72 tanks. Similarly, to the Lisa case in Germany, the article published on this by that time unknown site was quickly picked up by the Russian Foreign Ministry demanding an explanation from the Hungarian government. Although the news turned to be a fabricated one, investigative journalists revealed that the site shortly after the incident transferred to a Russian domain is both directly, and indirectly connected to the Russian intelligence services. <https://sputniknews.com/politics/20140815192053875-Russia-Says-Weapons-Supplies-to-Ukraine-by-EU-Countries-Violate/>, <https://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2014/08/28/putyin-uzenofuzete-a-hidfo-net-es-a-kommunistabaratszelsojobboldal/>

<sup>64</sup>

[http://index.hu/belfold/2017/08/02/meg\\_nem\\_tartak\\_kovacs\\_bela\\_ele\\_bizonyitekot\\_arrol\\_hogy\\_kemkedett\\_volna/](http://index.hu/belfold/2017/08/02/meg_nem_tartak_kovacs_bela_ele_bizonyitekot_arrol_hogy_kemkedett_volna/)

through these gestures and Moscow's willingness to extend its soft power influence in Hungary – a country that is more important for Russia than its size would suggest – at the same time. Accordingly, the Hungarian population is one of the most Western-oriented one in the region. The latest Eurobarometer survey revealed Hungarians (46%) trust the European Union more than their own government,<sup>65</sup> and the relative majority (39%) considers Hungary a part of the West with only a friction (5%) favouring an Eastern geopolitical orientation according to the Globsec Trends 2017 survey.<sup>66</sup>

### Hungarian scenario assessment

- **Disinformation activity is likely to further the Hungarian government's anti-NGO, anti-opposition, anti-Brussels, anti-migration agenda through mainstream channels and "alternative media."**
- **Automated propaganda through botnets is not expected because Twitter is only marginally used in Hungary.**
- **Regular pro-Russian disinformation will mainly target Hungarian NGOs, opposition players.**

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<sup>65</sup> [http://index.hu/kulfold/eurologus/2017/08/02/jobban\\_bizunk\\_az\\_eu-ban\\_mint\\_a\\_kormanyban/](http://index.hu/kulfold/eurologus/2017/08/02/jobban_bizunk_az_eu-ban_mint_a_kormanyban/)

<sup>66</sup> <http://globsec.org/globsec2017/news/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-and-signs-of-hope-from-central-and-eastern-europe>



## Swallows make summer?

We can envision both the best and the worst possible outcome for the Kremlin in the general elections in the Czech Republic, Austria and Hungary. Apparently, even the best-case scenario is dependent on the German election's outcome, namely whether the "hawkish" foreign policy of Angela Merkel in line with the Greens' approach will continue as part of renewed, even more forceful French-German tandem.

If the current anti-Russian foreign policy of the Czech leadership changed, a new Austrian cabinet involving FPÖ took office, together with PM Orbán's illiberalism, would certainly make the region a more dangerous place, bringing about more conflicts within the European Union. A new political cleavage could emerge with one side composed of the soft or strong "Putin versterhers" in Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, and another composed of the geographically isolated "hawks" in Poland, and Romania. This new pro-Russian block could most certainly form some sort of political counterbalance to more hawkish states when it comes to Ukraine's integration into European structures, and, to the continued implementation of the Minsk agreement for example by possibly deploying UN peacekeepers as President Putin has recently proposed.<sup>67</sup> The most worrying aspect of this scenario is not the relative changes in the European geopolitical status quo, but rather the fate of the sanctions. Many experts fear that the rhetorical anti-sanctions stances of many European leaders, parties could turn into the literal demise of the sanctions regime. One swallow does not make summer, but a group of swallows can. Many countries would gladly follow suit if there is a group of pioneers ready to take the leap.

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-putin-un-peacekeepers-merkel-border-osce/28729481.html>