

The role of the Kremlin's influence and disinformation in the Czech presidential elections



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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.

The Czech President has very limited executive powers and his main role is to represent the country ceremonially. That might imply that presidential elections occur without too much drama. But the attention of domestic and foreign media as well as higher second-round turnout of the presidential election than in last year's parliamentary suggests something different.

Now we know that Miloš Zeman will remain the Czech President for the next 5 years. His race to the top stirred many people's emotions and divided Czech society in ways unseen since the end of communism. It also showed that the Czech democratic system remains vulnerable to foreign influence and is not entirely transparent.

Miloš Zeman served his previous term as a [loyal ally of the Russian Federation](#). With his frequent statements and state visits to Moscow, he went against the previous government's policy and tried to pull the country East. He [denied](#) the presence of Russian military in the separatist regions in Ukraine and called the illegal annexation of Crimea a "[fait accompli](#)". For that, he garnered plaudits from Russian state-owned media, which use him as a tool for legitimization of Vladimir Putin's regime. Even domestically, he refers positively to homegrown extremists and disinformators.

Disinformation campaigns targeting Zeman's opponent

In the second round, Zeman stood against Jiří Drahoš, a scientist with no experience in national politics but with clear pro-Euroatlantic views and a resolution to keep the Czech Republic in the West. According to most polls, the run-off vote should have been extremely close – Drahoš eventually lost by less than 3 % of the votes (around 150 000 votes). One of the influencing factors was a very extensive disinformation campaign portraying Drahoš as a former collaborator with the StB (Czech secret police during the era of communism), a supporter of unrestricted immigration, and even a paedophile. These false reports appeared on disinformation outlets, social media, in chain e-mails, and even in mailbox flyers.

The Czech disinformation community has been working hard to promote Mr. Zeman, presenting him as the only defender of the Czech nation and Czech sovereignty. In comparison with his opponent, these outlets mentioned Miloš Zeman in a neutral or positive tone. The role such disinformation played during the elections could have been decisive, considering that the disinformation outlets appeared to be a relatively important source of "information" on elections for the public. This is well-illustrated by a [big data research](#) according to which the disinformation outlet Novarepublika.cz ranked eighth in terms of the amount of published content on the election.

However, among the various accusation, the artificial connection between Jiří Drahoš and immigration was conceivably the most decisive. Disinformation outlets have been fear-mongering with scares of a possible influx of immigrants and Muslim extremists in the last few years, consequently, anti-immigration rhetoric took root in the country. That is the reason for Jiří Drahoš being dubbed a "welcomer" ("vítač" in Czech) by his opponents for supporting a call *Scientists against fear and indifference*, in which Czech scientists warned against xenophobia in connection with the migrant crisis. Not surprisingly, immigration was the most emotional topic, reaching extreme positions such as that by voting for Mr. Drahoš you are voting for the genocide of the Czech nation. In spite of the fact that Drahoš and Zeman have a similar conservative position when it comes to immigration, e.g. they both oppose the system of mandatory quotas and are against accepting economic migrants. What is

more, the civic association *Friends of Miloš Zeman*, headed by the presidential chancellor Vratislav Mynář and his de facto chief-advisor Martin Nejedlý began a smear campaign through advertisements and billboards saying: “Stop Immigrants and Drahoš. This Country Belongs to Us! Vote for Zeman!”. However, it was paid by a company with links to a [Chinese company](#) called Eurasia Development Group Limited.

Rumours connecting Jiří Drahoš to the communist Secret Security (StB) has also appeared in various versions with some even claiming that Mr. Drahoš was a target of the StB because of alleged homosexual paedophilia. Coincidentally, homophobic rumours about Emmanuel Macron were also spread during the 2017 French presidential elections in order to sway the vote.

Additionally, three main false claims have been disseminated about Drahoš’s stance toward the EU.

- Firstly, that he would block a referendum on “Czexit” because he considers the Czechs incapable of deciding their geopolitical fate.
- Secondly, disinformation outlets claim that he would accept the euro immediately.
- Thirdly, that he received a considerable amount of money from abroad (especially from Germany,) making him an obedient puppet of foreign interests.

Another very strong narrative was the imaginary division between (capital) “Prague” and “the rest of the country,” a sentiment nurtured by President Zeman throughout his first term. Jiří Drahoš was condemned for “being the candidate of elites” who are not working but sitting in Prague’s cafés all day. On the other hand, Zeman, who spend last three decades in Czech politics, was presented as the people’s candidate.

Furthermore, Drahoš was associated with The Club of Rome and the Freemasons, both linked to theories of international conspiracy and plans for a “New World Order.” Paradoxically, it was Mr. Zeman, not Drahoš, who helped found the Club of Rome.

Lastly, there was an effort to undermine Drahoš’s moral integrity by calling him a deceitful for wearing dioptr-free glasses. Also, his scientific work and academic achievements were questioned, as false accusations of stealing inventions from his academic colleagues to patent surfaced.

Table of trending articles from the Facebook pages

(Source: blbec.online)

Source of disinformation	Claims	Number of shares
Pro-Vlast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drahoš wants to accept immigrants • Drahoš will adopt the euro • Drahoš will deny people referendum on Czexit • He will refuse referenda on important issues • He is supported by a number of Czech lobbyists • Candidate of the establishment • Against the Czech national interests 	26 940
Slovanská jednota	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drahoš is a candidate of foreign interests • Drahoš is a candidate of elites and money • Zeman will protect the homeland 	5 038
Zprávy.cz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (picture of praying Muslims with a question: Zeman or Drahoš?) • Zeman prevented the influx of immigrants to the country (not addressed directly) 	3 917
Zprávy.cz	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not trust the media claiming that Zeman is old and ill • Thanks to Zeman Czech is a safe country • Jiří Drahoš will promote quick adoption of the euro • (not directly said) Jiří Drahoš is open to mandatory quotas for refugees • Jiří Drahoš will be loyal to his dubious sponsors 	3 344

Table of the most shared articles with a disinformation/manipulative content on disinformation outlets in the first 24 hours after publishing

(Data from [The Beacon Project's](#) >versus< ICT tool)

Source	Claims	Number of Shares ¹
Parlamentní listy	Zeman is the only defender of the Czech national interests	13 020
Parlamentní listy	Drahoš is a puppet who won't speak for himself	12 104
Aeronet	Drahoš looks towards the West which (unlike Russia) wants to destroy Czech industry	9 045
Parlamentní listy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drahoš would deny people to hold a referendum on "Czexit" because he considers the Czechs to lack the intellect to decide such important questions • Drahoš is a candidate of the non-working Prague • Thanks to Mr. Zeman there are almost no Muslim immigrants in the country • The Czech Television is biased against Zeman • Miloš Zeman is the only defender of the Czech sovereignty 	8 771
Parlamentní listy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Campaign for Drahoš's election resembles old (communist) times • Drahoš denies his real opinion about immigration to get rid of his nickname the "welcomer" (vítač in Czech) • Drahoš's voters are arrogant and intolerant of Zeman's voters 	5 619

¹ Analysis of the entire elections period

Zeman's de facto chief advisor and campaign manager funded by Russian money

Perhaps the elections' most alarming aspect is the direct connection between Miloš Zeman and Russia, manifested in Zeman's economic advisor Martin Nejedlý. His position is quite unusual since he does not have a contract with the President's Office, nor does he hold a [security clearance](#). Nonetheless, Nejedlý works in the Prague Castle and even travelled with the President to Moscow, where he [participated](#) in the meeting of the two leaders instead of the Czech Ambassador.

Nejedlý's background remains unknown to the public. He used to work in Russia for many years, but refuses to discuss his activities abroad. He also worked as the head of the Russian energy company Lukoil's Czech branch. Already as the president's economic advisor, he was charged with selling oil from strategic reserves, but Lukoil [paid](#) his fine, 32,6 million CZK. That allowed him to remain at Zeman's side and continue wielding his influence, enabling Russian companies to get strategic business deals in the Czech Republic, especially in the energy sector.

Shady financing of Zeman's campaign

Nejedlý was also one of the leaders of Zeman's campaign, which showed high signs of opacity from the very beginning. In spite of the Czech highways being flooded by billboards with Zeman's face, the President kept denying that he leads any campaign and said that any promotion had been done by his supporters and not his staff. However, when he travelled outside Prague to campaign in person, his trips were paid by the regional authorities.

Since all the candidates had to disclose who donated to their campaigns, we know that Zeman received over 11 million CZK from the *Friends of Miloš Zeman* club, but its individual sponsors were still unknown. The members of the organization were frequently asked by the media where the money for Zeman's campaign came from, without success. One of the members is Senator Jan Veleba from the Party of Civic Rights, which was previously named the Party of Civic Rights – Zeman's People. He also denied that he knew the money's origins and after several questions during a television interview on that topic, he left the studio.

Zeman only provided the list of sponsors during the last television debate on the eve of the elections, giving civil society and the media little time to investigate them. Regardless, Zeman did not dispel concerns about his campaign's transparency, because many of the sponsoring companies showed loss according to their annual reports. Moreover, amongst the sponsors, there were also advocates who helped Zeman's Chancellor, who often cooperates with Nejedlý, with his controversial purchase of a suspiciously cheap villa in Prague. It is crystal clear that in many cases Mr. Zeman did not reveal the real donor, but only a middleman. What is more, he has bypassed the electoral law by using Friends of Miloš Zeman association to pay for his campaign. Therefore, numerous observers such as the [Transparency International](#) or the anti-corruption NGO [Rekonstrukce státu](#) evaluated the campaign as (probably deliberately) non-transparent.

For this reason, there was an [open call](#) against the dark money signed by former diplomats and related experts who have put pressure on the Czech government to ask the Czech intelligence for information on the financing in order to preserve the democratic transparency of the elections.

To conclude, there are four notable aspects of Zeman's re-election:

- 1. Massive disinformation campaign was orchestrated by the pro-Zeman and pro-Kremlin disinformation community of several dozen disinformation-creating websites in order to demobilize some of the voters who would have voted for Jiří Drahoš.**
- 2. Extensive disinformation campaign was organized by unknown entities through direct-email chains. Its extent and sources remain unknown.**
- 3. The de facto campaign manager of President Zeman, Martin Nejedlý, whose personal debt was paid off by the Moscow headquarters of Lukoil, orchestrated the campaign funding in a way that it is still not known who really provided the majority of campaign funding for President Zeman**
- 4. Disclosed funding of his campaign and also the third-party which organized smearing billboard & advertisement campaign against Jiří Drahoš [have links to China](#).**

Moscow and its operatives can celebrate. Zeman's shady assistants and the non-transparent campaign did not cost him anything. The Kremlin managed to keep a great ally in the Prague Castle and Zeman can continue to undermine the sanction regime against Russia for the next five years. Also, the disinformation spread during the campaign expanded divisions in Czech society, providing a fruitful ground for Zeman, who loves to abuse these cleavages to gain more attention and support. Zeman has already called for a referendum on the Czech Republic leaving EU and NATO – and given the far-right and far-left support Zeman has, it is possible that he will keep pushing such agenda.

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