



JUNE 2023

POLICY BRIEF 04

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MAJOR PRO-KREMLIN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

AND THEIR TRANSMITTERS
IN POLAND, CZECHIA AND SLOVAKIA



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Major pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and their transmitters in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia

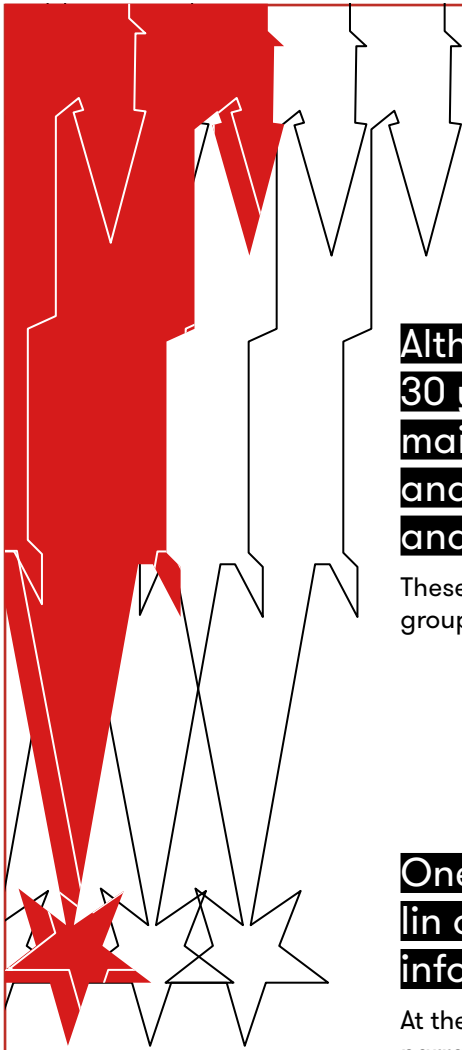
Authors: Andrei Yeliseyeu, Veronica Laputka

Czech and Slovak Contributors: Pavel Havlíček, Nikoleta Nemečková, Peter Dubóczy, Michaela Ružičková



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Although the fall of the Soviet Union ended over 30 years ago, the Kremlin to this day attempts to maintain its influence in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe via a network of both its own and local proxy actors.

These local actors range from fringe media outlets and social media groups and pages to politicians.

One of the primary tools adopted by the Kremlin and its proxies to exert influence is the use of information operations.

At the core of these operations lies the power of recurring disinformation narratives – essentially a means of disseminating Russia’s interpretation of a particular issue in a way that aligns it with Russia’s foreign and domestic policy objectives. These narratives serve as underlying messages which are conveyed through a variety of mediums, including written texts, powerful images, and impactful metaphors, all working together to spread Russia’s agenda and shape public opinion.

As we examine the political landscapes of Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia, we cannot help but notice the striking similarities both among crucial transmitters and pro-Kremlin narratives that are being disseminated.

The convergence of major narratives across various local disinformation-spreading media outlets should also not be perceived as random or coincidental; it is in fact the result of a calculated and methodical effort driven by a strategic rationale. The rather limited disinformation narrative playbook serves as a blueprint for shaping and manipulating public opinion with adjustment to the unique local context of each target country and the current situation, whether it be the Covid-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, energy crises, or other pertinent issues.

INTRODUCTION

More than 30 years after the fall of the Soviet Union and the USSR-controlled socialist bloc, Czechia, Poland, and Slovakia continue to be targeted by influence operations and pro-Kremlin propaganda. The GLOBSEC Trends polling of March 2022 showed that the Slovak population is particularly vulnerable in this regard. The study found that 37% of Slovak respondents considered Russia to be a strategic partner for their country, whereas the figures for Czechia and Poland were 6% and 2% respectively.¹ Still, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has opened the eyes of many Slovaks, the majority (62%) of whom perceive Russia as a threat, but the impact of years of information operations and the activities of malign domestic and foreign actors continue to influence public perceptions.²

Despite its considerable resilience, for several years now, Poland has been a primary target for Russian influence operations, with the conflict in Ukraine serving as a catalyst for an even greater intensification of these efforts. Notably, Poland has been hospitable to millions of Ukrainians fleeing the war and continues to actively support the Ukrainian authorities. Therefore, we have chosen Poland as a prime example for exploring the development of pro-Kremlin messaging in the region, both before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In our examination, we will focus on the case study of Sputnik Polska, tracing how pro-Kremlin messaging has evolved over time and across Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia. Through this analysis, we aim to shed light on the ways in which pro-Kremlin propaganda is being used to shape public opinion in the region.

WHAT IS A NARRATIVE?

Simply speaking, a narrative is a story, a spoken or written account of connected events. This term has over the years gained popularity in the fields of security and war studies and strategic communication. Academics have lately suggested the notions of “weaponised narratives”, “strategic narratives” and proposed a variety of definitions describing the manipulative uses of narratives. One recent article advances the “narrative weaponization” paradigm, which is understood as a “military-political offensive strategy that combines (dis)information and psychological and discursive

subversion operations with digitally enhanced storytelling in twenty-first-century geopolitics.”³ The same article suggests that the Kremlin’s coverage of global events and Russia-West relations took a more antagonistic turn following the events of 2014: “Russian counter-narratives, as geopolitical storytelling, have become intensified since the outbreak of the Crimean crisis and war in Donbas in Eastern Ukraine in 2013-14 – a multi-layered hybrid conflict fought by the Kremlin against Ukraine’s sovereign westwards move and the Euro-Atlantic liberal-democratic hegemony”.⁴

NARRATIVE AS AN INFLUENCE FACTOR IN INFORMATION OPERATIONS

In the context of influence operations, a narrative becomes a vehicle for spreading one’s interpretation of a certain topic so it fits the actor’s foreign or domestic policy goals. Here, a narrative refers to an underlying message that is conveyed through a range of mediums such as texts, images, and metaphors. Pro-Kremlin actors use certain pre-established narratives as templates for specific stories, which can be tailored to suit a specific target audience. A convergence of narratives spread in different states thus should not be mistaken for being sporadic or coincidental – it is driven by a systematic

effort and strategic rationale, including through written secret guidance memoranda distributed from the Kremlin to key government-controlled media outlets.⁵ Some narratives have been in use for centuries, with some dating back to the 19th century, such as the “Decaying West” narrative.⁶ The use of narratives is not static and can change over time based on current events and prevalent attitudes. Additionally, different narratives may be combined and adjusted to fit a particular situation.

1 Dominika Hajdu, Katarína Klingová and Jana Kazaz. GLOBSEC Trends 2022: CEE amid the war in Ukraine, 2022, 36, <https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2022.pdf>.

2 Katarína Klingová, Dominika Hajdu. New poll: Slovaks want Ukraine to win the war, not Russia, 2022, <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/press-releases/new-poll-slovaks-want-ukraine-win-war-not-russia>.

3 Andriy Tyushka, “Weaponizing narrative: Russia contesting EUrope’s liberal identity, power and hegemony,” Journal of Contemporary European Studies 30, no. 1 (January 2022): 116.

4 Ibid, p. 115.

5 Tyushka (2022), op. cit., p. 118.

6 “5 common pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/5-common-pro-kremlin-disinformation-narratives/>.

So, when speaking of Russian or pro-Kremlin narratives, normally a broader storytelling is meant which may include dozens of slightly modified claims. Some are hyperbolised and presented out of context. For instance, while reporting on the events in Ukraine pro-Kremlin media spread claims that the Ukrainian authorities were preparing “Hitlerjugend”, that Ukrainian military commanders wear the Swastika, that

Ukraine is suffering from neo-Nazi tendencies, and dozens of others which fall under the broader “Nazi Ukraine” disinformation narrative. Another example is a frequent “immoral Europe” narrative which likewise includes multiple disinformation claims such as the allegedly legalised pedophilia in European countries, wide-spread destruction of churches, repressions against Christian communities, etc.

THE TOOLS OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

The Kremlin's propaganda machine consists of various national and international actors which extend beyond media outlets and include “troll factories”, the Russian Orthodox Church, Russian cultural institutions such as Russkiy Mir Foundation and Rosstrudnichestvo, and many more. The Kremlin also relies on a plethora of local actors in countries across the world.

Particularly in Slovakia and Czechia, diverse domestic actors are instrumental in spreading the Kremlin's influence through the active adoption and further dissemination of pro-Kremlin narratives.

These include mainly various disinformation and fringe media or internet forums, many active since the annexation of Crimea to this day. The most prominent and long-standing ones are *Zem&Vek*; *Slobodný vysieláč*; and *InfoVojna* for Slovakia and *Sputnik CZ*, *Aeronet*, and *Parlamentní listy* for Czechia. The complete list can be found either on the websites of Slovak project *konšpiratori.sk*⁷ or the site of Czech non-governmental organisation *Nelež*⁸. Lately, we can also observe in Czechia the emergence of new manipulative websites covering regional topics, like *jihomoravskenovinky.cz*, *karlovarskenovinky.cz*, and *kralovehradeckenovinky.cz*, and so on. Polish audiences are likewise targeted by a dozen of fringe websites that remain fairly unpopular among the public. The most notable in this regard include a popular anti-establishment website *Najwyższy czas*, a weekly bringing together prominent anti-Western Polish figures *Mysł Polska*, right-wing website *Wprawo.pl*, and *Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny*. The only major state-owned Russian media functioning in the Polish language is *Sputnik Polska*, which is currently accessible through VPN services as its broadcasting was officially suspended in the EU in March 2022 over the systematic spread of disinformation.

As far as social media are concerned, Facebook clearly dominates in both Slovakia and Czechia. It comes as no surprise

that disinformation actors use it for promoting their activities.⁹ The public pages *Brat za brata* (Brother for brother), *Milujeme Rusko* (We Love Russia), *Armáda Ruskej Federácie* (Army of the Russian Federation), *Nechceme fašistickou vládou* (We Don't Want a Fascist Government), *Přátelé Ruska v České republice* (Friends of Russia in Czechia), and *Tv Šalingrad* are some examples, which are primarily bound together by the long-term communication of pro-Kremlin narratives based on the sharing of common content, the glorification of Russia and Slavism, or an anti-system and anti-Western attitude. Facebook and Twitter are actively used by real and fake social media accounts to spread pro-Kremlin disinformation messages in Poland too.

Telegram is also a safety net for many disinformation actors active on Facebook, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent blocking of disinformation websites in Czechia and Slovakia. Parliamentarian *Luboš Blaha*, considered by many as the most prominent disinformation former in Slovakia, has moved his activities to Telegram after his Facebook account with 175,000 followers was banned. At present his Telegram account has over 30,000 followers.¹⁰ Czech actors have not managed to gain the same audience on Telegram but considering the lenient moderation policies on the platform, its potential risk should not be overlooked but instead kept an eye on for the future, especially since many disinformation websites are moving their activities there after being blocked.

Last but not least, some local politicians also serve as pro-Kremlin disinformation spreaders. Due to personalisation of politics, individual politicians – rather than political parties – reach large audiences and generate massive amounts of interactions. Interestingly, both far-right and far-left politicians disseminate identical pro-Kremlin disinformation claims. Some of these politicians have become popular precisely on the basis of their disinformation dissemination, whether during the pandemic or even before in

7 Zoznam stránok - Konšpiratori.sk,” <https://konspiratori.sk/zoznam-stranok>.

8 “Seznam Webů - Nelež,” https://www.nelez.cz/?utm_campaign=NELEZ_update_black_novinari.

9 “Koľko Slovákov je na sociálnych sieťach v roku 2022?” <https://www.go4insight.com/post/ko%C4%BEko-slov%C3%A1kov-je-na-soci%C3%A1lnych-sie%C5%A5ach-v-roku-2022>.

10 Rastó Kužel, “Blahova volebná kampaň,” SME, March 20, 2023, <https://blog.sme.sk/rastokuzel/politika/blahova-volebna-kampan>.

relation to attacks and conspiracies about NATO, the EU or Western-oriented foreign policy in general.

Robert Fico, chairman of the Slovak SMER-SD party and a former prime minister, has over 200,000 followers on Facebook. Far-right Republika party's chairman Milan Uhrík and party member Milan Mazurek have over 160,000 and 185,000 followers respectively.¹¹ In Czechia, Tomio Okamura, leader of the SPD party, leads with over 392,000 followers on Facebook. Social media have also become a handy tool for other political figures who have recently been very vocal against the current government. Both Ladislav Vrábel who led the political movement Otevřeme Česko normálnímu životu (Open Czechia to Normal Life) for the 2021 parliamentary elections and Jindřich Rajchl who leads the PRO party are very active on social media and have used them in the past few months to mobilise tens of thousands of people

for protests against the current government, the sanctions on Russia and the sending of weapons to Ukraine. In Poland, activists of the far-right political party Confederation Liberty and Independence, including one of its founders Janusz Korwin-Mikke, propagate pro-Kremlin narratives.

The Czech information ecosystem has been afflicted by one additional toll of pro-Russian influence not popular in the neighbouring countries – **chain emails**. They typically target the older segment of the population who still rely on email over social media. Senders range from financially motivated individuals to those driven by personal beliefs. Despite a decline in the number of chain emails spreading manipulative and pro-Russian messages over the past few years, many are still circulating. To combat this, the Czech project Čeští elfové¹² maintains a database of these emails and debunks them.

THE CASE OF SPUTNIK

The Russian state-controlled news agency Sputnik has spearheaded the Kremlin's disinformation effort to exert its influence and worldview. Sputnik outlets were blocked across the EU after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but its audiences can still access them through VPN services. **Although Sputnik formally declares its narrative to be about "a multipolar world where each country has its own national interests, culture, history, traditions", in reality, it offers its audience a Kremlin-centric worldview and propaganda content aimed at smearing Ukraine, the EU, the US and the West as a whole.**

Many such narratives are found on a regular basis across various national media environments. The "Nazi/fascist" narrative, which is often exemplified through absurdist comparisons of Ukraine, the EU, and the US with Nazi Germany, is one of them. As one 2020 Sputnik article says, "The ruling regimes in the Baltic states, Warsaw and Kyiv, track their pedigree back to the pre-war regimes of Poland and the Baltic states, as well as to the Bandera regime in Ukraine. All these regimes were in league with Hitler."¹³

Many if not most news publications by Sputnik usually maintain standards of journalism and rarely contain explicit propaganda and misinformation, while propaganda and disinformation narratives are mostly found in the published op-eds and publications which contain guest commentary.

This is the case of Sputnik Polska. Its op-eds often portray Poland, as well as other EU countries, as Russophobic, retarded or extremely dependent on the US. The US, the so-called "Anglo-Saxons" and the West as a whole are often presented as aggressors ruled by powerful and often secret clans, which allegedly stand behind hostile actions and protest movements across the world.

The situation in the Czech Republic is markedly different. Before its website was blocked following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Sputnik CZ frequently churned out sensationalist headlines and disseminated blatant disinformation and propaganda. The Czech branch of Sputnik was founded in 2014 by Rossiya Segodnya, a state-owned Russian news agency. Despite portraying itself as a trustworthy and legitimate news outlet, it is widely regarded¹⁴ by experts as one of the most prominent purveyors of pro-Russian propaganda in the country.

When it comes to narrative strategies, the bulk of Sputnik CZ's output has adhered to the familiar pro-Russian playbook, which seeks to erode public backing for Czech membership in the EU and NATO. To that end, the outlet frequently employs tactics such as casting doubt on the credibility of Western allies, accusing them and Czechia of harbouring Russophobic sentiments, and so on. These messaging tactics are then tailored to suit the prevailing context, whether it's the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, or some other issue.

¹¹ Data obtained via CrowdTangle.

¹² "O nás - Čeští elfové," <https://cesti-elfove.cz/>.

¹³ Rostislav Ishchenko. Russophobia and anti-Semitism go hand in hand. Sputnik Belarus, 24 January 2020, <https://sputnik.by/columnists/20200124/1043778629/Rusofobiya-i-antisemitizm-idut-ruka-ob-ruku.html>

¹⁴ "RT a Sputniku nebyla povolena účast na konferenci o svobodě médií - Ministerstvo vnitra České republiky," <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/rt-a-sputniku-nebyla-povolena-ucast-na-konferenci-o-svobode-medii.aspx>.

Despite being officially blocked, Sputnik CZ has managed to continue operating. The Czech Ministry of Interior has identified its presence on Telegram, where it operates under the guise of the neČT24 channel¹⁵. During the recent presidential elections, this channel disseminated a number of falsehoods about one of the candidates, Petr Pavel. One example was a doctored video that appeared to show Pavel declaring his intention to involve Czechia in a conflict with Russia¹⁶.

Quite surprisingly, Sputnik has never managed to penetrate the Slovak information space. The closest it came was during 2017, when an agreement between The News Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) and Sputnik was concluded but soon afterwards TASR withdrew from the contract.¹⁷ However, because of the linguistic affinity between the Slovak and Czech audiences, the Slovak information space was exposed to the narratives spread by Sputnik CZ.

MAJOR PRE-WAR PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

This section of the paper focuses on the case of Sputnik Polska, since Poland has been at the forefront of the Russian information offensive from the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. One study, based on a systematic monitoring of materials published by Sputnik Polska from June 2019 to May

2020, summarised 12 major recurring disinformation narratives. Poland is consistently portrayed as a non-sovereign, Russophobic country which faces significant socio-economic problems and wages a „history war“ against Russia.¹⁸ The 12 major disinformation narratives are the following:

- 1** Poland is not a sovereign state. Its domestic and foreign policies are dependent on the US, EU, Germany, Israel or other foreign actors.
- 2** Poland is fully subordinated to the political will of the US. It is an American puppet-state and a „banana republic“. Polish domestic and foreign policy is grounded in the promotion of American goals in the Central and Eastern European region at the expense of Polish national interests.
- 3** Poland faces significant economic losses from its cooperation with the US. Due to Russophobia and complete subordination to the US, Polish authorities are willing to pay a high price for American gas and weapons.
- 4** The Russophobia of the Polish political elite drives Polish policies towards Russia. Polish Russophobes intend to hurt Russia in every possible situation.

¹⁵ Kristína Ciroková, „Zjistili jsme, kam zmizel ruský nástroj propagandy v Česku,“ Seznam zprávy, March 10, 2023, <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/porady-teren-video-patrali-jsme-po-tom-kam-zmizela-ruska-agentura-sputnik-227349>.

¹⁶ Jan Žabka, „Zmanipulované video s Pavlem: „Vstoupíme do války s Ruskem,“ Hlídací pes, January 22, 2023, <https://hlidacipes.org/zmanipulovane-video-s-pavlem-vstoupime-do-valky-s-ruskem/>.

¹⁷ „Slovensko v hľadáčiku ruských záujmov: Sputnik a TASR - Dennik N,“ <https://dennikn.sk/blog/723589/slovensko-v-hladaciku-ruskych-zaujmov-sputnik-a-tasr/>.

¹⁸ „Sputnik Polska. Propaganda narratives and cases“, EAST Center, September 2020, <https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sputnik-Polska-Propaganda.pdf>.

5

Poland actively cooperated with Nazi Germany prior to WWII. The two countries planned joint anti-Soviet actions. This makes Poland co-responsible for the outbreak of WWII.

6

WWII was a result of Nazi Germany actions as well as the irresponsible policies of the Western countries. They included the Munich Agreement, the partition of Czechoslovakia, and the West's refusal to cooperate with the USSR. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact did not pave the way for WWII.

7

Poland is waging a „historical“ war against Russia. It aims to adjust the history of the 20th century to the current anti-Russian political goals.

8

Russophobic Poland is strategically interested in the war in Ukraine because it is damaging for Russia.

9

The USSR liberated Poland from Nazi occupation and contributed to Poland's post-war restoration. Today, Poland refuses to appreciate Soviet assistance referring to the „Soviet occupation“.

10

The Polish authorities are implementing a consistent policy of destruction of Red Army monuments and cemeteries. They refuse to acknowledge the USSR's contribution to Poland's liberation from the Nazis.

11

The Polish authorities attempt to make Belarus and Ukraine Poland's vassals. Warsaw carries on imperialist policies.

12

Poland is an economic periphery of Europe. The Polish economy and energy sector are facing huge troubles.



Graph 1. Twelve major disinformation narratives in Sputnik Poland, 2019-2020.

These narratives question the extent of Poland's sovereignty, point to the alleged Russophobia and anti-Ukrainian policies of Poland, and criticise Polish perspectives on historical events.

Although the listed narratives were adapted to fit the Polish context, as has already been said, many of them have appeared in a slightly modified form in Czechia and Slovakia as well. The 'lost sovereignty' disinformation narrative which claims that the countries have become puppets of Brussels/Washington/NATO remains particularly popular. This was for instance showcased by the vast disinformation campaign launched prior to Slovakia's signing of the Defence Security Agreement (DSA) with the United States.¹⁹ More recently, loss of sovereignty featured in smear campaigns against Czech presidential candidate Petr Pavel who was falsely accused of planning to surrender the country to the will of the United States and NATO after being elected.²⁰

Also, similarly to Sputnik Polska, many Czech and Slovak fringe media outlets and other actors often link the current governments to alleged Russophobia and fascist practices and contrast them with the USSR's role in fighting Nazism during WWII. This was for instance showcased by the hoax spread by the Russian embassy in Slovakia about the alleged damaging of a Russian military cemetery in the Slovak village of Ladomírová which was in fact merely undergoing a renovation.²¹ The hoax aimed to highlight Russia's aid to Slovakia's fight against fascism and to accuse the current pro-Western government of disrespect for Slovak history and Russia's brotherly help. This implied Russophobia versus pan-Slavic brotherly help was also a part of the disinformation campaigns during the Covid-19 pandemic which tried to accuse the West of prejudice against the Russian Sputnik V vaccine.

¹⁹ "Žiadna strata suverenity: Ako to naozaj je s dohodou o obrannej spolupráci s USA - Infosecurity," <https://infosecurity.sk/podcast/ziadna-strata-suverenity-ako-to-naozaj-je-s-dohodou-o-obrannej-spolupraci-s-usa/>.

²⁰ Natália Tkáčová, Kristína Šefčíková, České prezidentské volby v online prostoru (2. kolo): Téma války na Ukrajině v předvolební debatě, Prague: Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), 2023, 6. <https://www.pssi.cz/publications/90-ceske-prezidentske-volby-v-online-prostoru-2-kolo-tema-valky-na-ukrajine-v-predvolebni-debate>.

²¹ Odbor komunikácie a prevencie Prezídia Policajného zboru SR, "Správa Policajného zboru o dezinformáciách na Slovensku v roku 2022," Bratislava: Prezídium Policajného zboru SR, 2023, 18-20. https://www.minv.sk/swift_data/source/images/sprava-o-dezinformaciach-sr-2022.pdf.

SPECIFIC CLAIMS – NARRATIVES – – META-NARRATIVES

Each narrative builds on multiple relevant claims, which we will demonstrate below with the Poland-related “lost sovereignty” disinformation narrative. Sputnik Polska often explains Polish actions which contradict the Kremlin’s views and policies as a result of Poland’s excessive dependence on

the US. The 2019-20 monitoring of Sputnik Polska suggested that claims about Poland’s subordination to the US and its puppet status were the most popular (i.e. frequent) among other major disinformation narratives. Several of many claims fitting this narrative are given below:

Poland’s foreign and domestic policies are entirely dependent on the US.

The Polish political establishment promotes American goals, Polish national security strategy was dictated by the US.

Polish foreign policy is the continuation of US policy in Central and Eastern Europe.

The US uses Poland for various “dirty” tasks such as anti-Russian provocations.

The US uses the “Polish” Three Seas Initiative to expand its power in Central and Eastern Europe.

At the same time, one can easily notice that the 12 above-mentioned narratives may be categorised within a few broader themes: „Lost sovereignty“ (narratives 1, 2, and 3), „Russophobia and anti-Russian actions“ (4 and 8), „Polish aggressiveness and imperialist intentions“ (11), „Economic difficulties“ (12), as well as history-related narratives (5, 6, 7, 9, and 10).

Speaking on a macro-level, one can argue that the 12 identified disinformation narratives fit the following two meta-narratives:

- Polish policies towards Ukraine and Russia are driven by Russophobia and Poland’s dependency on the US, which harm Poland’s genuine national interests. Anti-Russian policies of the Polish authorities cause large economic and political losses to Poland. Instead, Poland

could take a more pragmatic approach by reducing the US’s control, giving up Russophobia, and improving relations with Russia.

- Poland rewrites history by distorting facts and refuses to accept correct views on historical events. Poland has no moral right to accuse the USSR and Russia of Soviet invasion as it fell victim to dark chapters of its own history. If Poland had cooperated with the USSR in the 1930s, it could have avoided 20th century disasters. Poland is itself to blame for tragic events and owes a lot to the USSR for liberation from the Nazis and post-war economic assistance.

The extent of narrative classification (i.e., how broadly or narrowly to categorise them) depends on the practical necessities of a researcher or practitioner.

DISINFORMATION MESSAGING FOLLOWING THE 2022 RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

Since the wide-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 EUvsDisinfo, a flagship project of the European External Action Service aimed at combatting disinformation, has published a few dozen debunked cases concerning Poland. Their analysis suggests that the five broader disinformation themes identified from 2019-2020 Sputnik publications (“Lost sovereignty”, “Russophobia and anti-Russian actions”, “Polish aggres-

siveness and imperialist intentions”, “Economic difficulties”, and “history-related claims”) have largely remained unchanged.

Below a few relevant disinformation cases based on Sputnik Polska publications and featured by the EUvsDisinfo website are given for each of the five disinformation themes.

“Lost sovereignty”

“The Polish ruling class listens to “Popes” Biden and Johnson instead of Pope Frances”

19 April 2022²²

“The UK wants to use Poland as cannon fodder as it did in 1939”

10 June 2022²³

“Poland and Ukraine are the Anglo-Saxon puppets used to destabilise Europe”

16 June 2022²⁴

“Russophobia and anti-Russian actions”

“Destructive Russophobia is the official doctrine of Poland”

13 April 2022²⁵

“Russophobia has become completely obligatory for all Polish politicians”

17 June 2022²⁶

“Poland uses an imaginary Russian threat to justify its militarisation”

27 June 2022²⁷

22 “The Polish Ruling Class Listens to “Popes” Biden and Johnson Instead of Pope Francis - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-polish-ruling-class-listens-to-popes-biden-and-johnson-instead-of-pope-francis>.

23 “The UK Wants to Use Poland as Cannon Fodder As It Did in 1939 - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-uk-wants-to-use-poland-as-cannon-fodder-as-it-did-in-1939>.

24 “Poland and Ukraine are the Anglo-Saxon puppets used to destabilise Europe - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-and-ukraine-are-the-anglo-saxon-puppets-used-to-destabilise-europe>.

25 “Destructive Russophobia is the official doctrine of Poland - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/destructive-russophobia-is-the-official-doctrine-of-poland>.

26 “Russophobia has become completely obligatory for all Polish politicians - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russophobia-has-become-completely-obligatory-for-all-polish-politicians>.

27 “Poland uses an imaginary Russian threat to justify its militarisation - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-uses-an-imaginary-russian-threat-to-justify-its-militarisation>.

“Polish aggressiveness and imperialist intentions”

“Imperialist Poland wants to annex Western Ukraine”

31 March 2022²⁸

“Poland poses a threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine”

6 May 2022²⁹

“Poland started preparations for the incorporation of Western Ukraine”

15 December 2022³⁰

“Economic difficulties”

“Poles will be undernourished in their cold apartments because of anti-Russian hatred”

30 March 2022³¹

History-related claims

“Poland spreads monstrous lies about the Soviet liberation of this country”

27 October 2022³²

“The Polish Home Army tried to prevent peace in the areas liberated from the Nazis”

31 October 2022³³

Although the snapshot of published cases listed above does not allow one to make far-reaching conclusions, it is indicative of the recent changes in the Poland-related disinformation environment and Russian influence operations. **The analysis suggests that major country-specific disinformation themes and narratives tend to stay largely intact over time while their prioritisation and modification are more likely to be altered by the propaganda machine as it takes into account evolving events and changing regional context.**

Similar to the coverage of Sputnik Polska, the major pro-Kremlin narratives propagated by Czech and Slovak disinformation actors after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine remained largely the same as those spread before the Russian large-scale aggression. Messages about the alleged Russophobia of the current governments and the West as a whole as well as about the supposed loss of sovereignty have adapted to the war context and become part of the calls against sanctions on Russia and military aid for Ukraine.³⁴

²⁸ “Imperialist Poland wants to annex Western Ukraine - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/imperialist-poland-wants-to-annex-western-ukraine>.

²⁹ “Poland poses a threat to the territorial integrity of Ukraine - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-poses-a-threat-to-the-territorial-integrity-of-ukraine>.

³⁰ “Poland started preparations for the incorporation of Western Ukraine - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-started-preparations-for-the-incorporation-of-western-ukraine>.

³¹ “Poles will be undernourished in their cold apartments because of anti-Russian hatred - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poles-will-be-undernourished-in-their-cold-apartments-because-of-anti-russian-hatred>.

³² “Poland spreads monstrous lies about the Soviet liberation of this country - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/poland-spreads-monstrous-lies-about-the-soviet-liberation-of-this-country>.

³³ “The Polish Home Army tried to prevent peace in the areas liberated from the Nazis - EUvsDisinfo,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-polish-home-army-tried-to-prevent-peace-in-the-areas-liberated-from-the-nazis>.

³⁴ Kristína Šefčíková. Hostile Narrative Brief. War in Ukraine: A Year of Aggression. 2023. https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/10261_hostile-narrative-brief-war-in-ukraine-a-year-of-aggression-chapters-6-czech-republic.pdf.

The sanctions are portrayed as a dictate of Brussels, while the military supplies are presented as the extended arm of the United States. Furthermore, they are portrayed as unfair punishment of Russia and the Czech and Slovak population which is suffering from rising inflation and the risk of being dragged into the war. These messages have been showcased not only by the coverage of the fringe media but also during the recent protests in both Czechia and Slovakia. At the

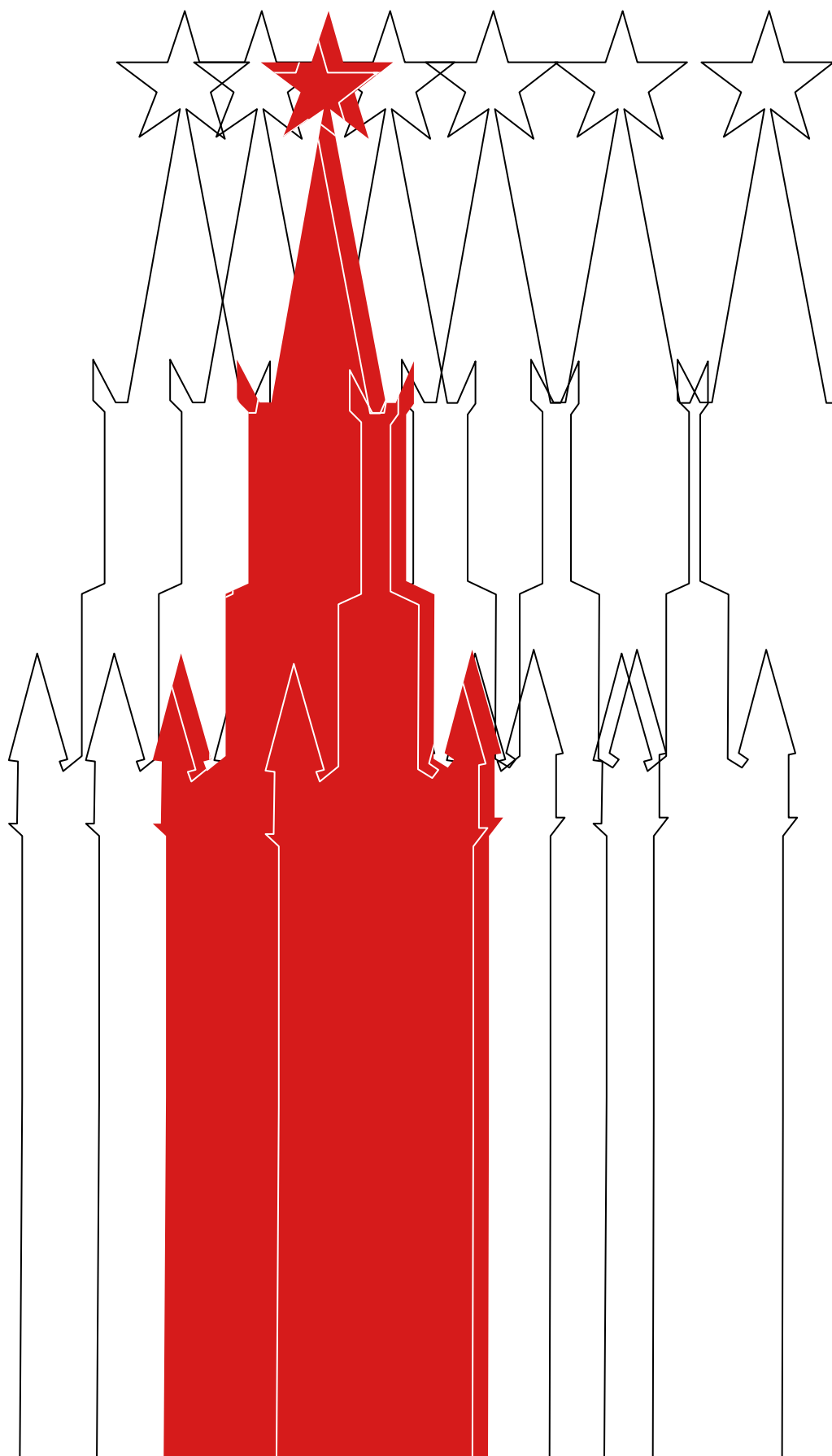
same time, Russia is still painted as the liberator of the Slavic peoples from fascism. This narrative has now been adapted to support Russia's interpretation of the war in Ukraine as a special mission to 'denazify' the country and divert the blame for the conflict. Instead the blame is put on the aggressive expansion of NATO towards the Russian borders – a false claim which has been circulating since years before the war in Ukraine.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The major pro-Kremlin disinformation themes in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia are largely the same and include, among others, 'lost sovereignty', 'Russophobic/fascist authorities' and 'Economic difficulties due to anti-Russian course' narratives. Country-specific disinformation narratives, such as 'Imperialism and aggressiveness' in the case of Poland, are also present. Moreover, the latter has seemingly taken the lead in the past year – one of the reasons might be the pro-Kremlin media intention to obfuscate Russia's invasion of Ukraine and portray Russia as a legitimate defender of Ukraine – and Belarus – from an allegedly aggressive Poland. The analysis also suggests that the main categories of disinformation transmitters and the online platforms they operate on are largely identical in the three countries.

The growing role of public figures and politicians in spreading disinformation is increasingly recognised. A greater involvement of public figures and influencers in raising public awareness and educating society on the issues of disinformation and malign information influences might be part of the societal response to this challenge. A greater attention from the state authorities and civil society in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia to the issue of media and information literacy is vital. The broad use of social media by disinformation-spreading actors demands more comprehensive regulation of the digital environment. The resilience of all three countries would benefit from stronger cooperation of relevant state agencies with civil society, better synergies with partners in the EU, as well as investment in monitoring and analytical capabilities.

³⁵ Jindřich Přívratský, Matěj Pastír, Veronika Krátka Špalková, Viktor Šerák, Zuzana Činčerová. Výroční zpráva o stavu české dezinformační scény za rok 2022. 2023. <https://europeanvalues.cz/cs/press-release-annual-report-on-the-state-of-the-czech-disinformation-scene-for-2022/>.



AUTHORS

Pavel Havlicek is Research Fellow at the Association for International Affairs (AMO). His research focus is on Eastern Europe, especially Ukraine and Russia, and the Eastern Partnership. He also deals with questions of security, disinformation and strategic communication as well as democratisation and civil society support in the CEE and post-Soviet space.

Nikoleta Nemečková is a Research Fellow at the Association for International Affairs (AMO) focusing on disinformation, media freedom, and strategic communication.

Pavína Janebová is the Research Director at the Association for International Affairs (AMO). She focuses on Czech foreign and European policy and Central European cooperation.

Andrei Yeliseyev is the Research Director of the EAST Center, a Warsaw-based think-tank focused on post-Soviet and East European studies.

Veronica Laputska is a Co-Founder of the EAST Center in Warsaw, Rethink. CEE GMF Fellow and Ph.D. Candidate at the GSSR, Polish Academy of Sciences. She focuses on democratization, elections, propaganda, and media studies.

Peter Dubóczy is the Director of Infosecurity.sk and a Research Fellow at the Adapt Institute. His research focuses on the issues of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese manipulative narratives in the Central and Eastern European region.

Michaela Ružičková is a Research Fellow at the Adapt Institute and a Ph.D. student at the Department of Political Science at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice. In her research, she focuses on disinformation, propaganda, and manipulative narratives about the green transition and climate policies.

ASSOCIATION FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS (AMO)

AMO is a non-governmental not-for-profit Prague-based organization founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.



+420 224 813 460



amo.cz



info@amo.cz



Žitná 608/27, 110 00 Praha 1



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This policy brief is published as a part of the project „Strengthening the Resilience of Czech, Slovak, and Polish Societies Prior to the 2024 European Parliament Elections“ supported by The European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). The project is a joint effort of five partners from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland: the Association for International Affairs (AMO, Czech Republic); Charles University (Czech Republic); the Student Section of the International Political Science Institute of Masaryk University (IIPS, Czech Republic); the ADAPT Institute (Slovakia); and the EAST Center (Poland).