

BALKANS WATCH REPORT

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# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CZECH EXPERIENCE IN FIGHTING DISINFORMATION FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS



EUROPEAN VALUES

Protecting Freedom

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## EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

European Values Center for Security Policy is a non-governmental, non-partisan institute defending freedom and sovereignty. We protect liberal democracy, the rule of law, and the transatlantic alliance of the Czech Republic. We help defend Europe especially from the malign influences of Russia, China, and Islamic extremists.

We envision a free, safe, and prosperous Czechia within a vibrant Central Europe that is an integral part of the transatlantic community and is based on a firm alliance with the USA.

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Czech civil society has become noticeably active in countering disinformation campaigns.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### GOVERNMENTAL DIMENSION

Although the current political scene in the Czech Republic is not entirely uniform, the overall national consensus is pro-Western. The country is acknowledging the existing disinformation menaces coming from the Kremlin. The latter is mentioned in various strategic documents and in the establishment of a special Unit for monitoring disinformation. These are becoming more vocal and active in raising awareness on the issue.

There are still many challenges to tackle. The situation in the Czech Republic requires a change of policy and approach, determined political will, and more specific actions for the experts to continue their work under the proper conditions. Practical actions should match the promising rhetoric coming from Prague.

Intelligence Services play a meaningful role in monitoring Russian influence and informing the public of hostile activities in the country. In Czechia, these services are becoming increasingly vocal about pro-Kremlin trends and narratives.

The global COVID-19 crisis and the political context of the Czech Republic exposed severe deficiencies in the Czech Government's Communication Strategy. Although the **National Security Audit (2016)** recommended a strategic communication system to be set up, so far very little has been done. The lack of a public information strategy is seriously affecting the democratic process in Czechia and should be urgently addressed.

### CIVIL SOCIETY DIMENSION

Czech civil society has become noticeably active in countering disinformation campaigns. A major step forward was the establishment of various think-tanks and NGOs to monitor and identify threats and promote research and critical thinking among citizens.

Public broadcasting made significant progress as well. There is no leading mainstream TV outlet explicitly represented as pro-Russian in the Czech media sphere. The Czech media landscape includes different platforms and initiatives related to fact-checking and investigative journalism.

Media literacy is a crucial tool in tackling disinformation campaigns. Different organizations and institutions are working on its promotion among the elderly, teachers, students, and citizens generally. Yet the lack of support, limited financial resources, and the level of public trust in comparison with Czechia's other actors are restraining CSOs' full capacities.

Civil society is a reliable partner in challenging disinformation, and instead of acting alone, it should start actively cooperating with the other partners across the country.

### PRIVATE SECTOR DIMENSION

Like in other EU countries, the Czech business sector has become a target of disinformation. Despite that, Czechia is increasingly aware of the importance of risk assessment and data analytics firms. They are a crucial resource in countering disinformation threats.

The Czech private sector is making progress and demonstrates a willingness to continue with an active engagement. Its main contributions consist of restricting ads from disinformation sites or promoting advertising education among professionals. The newly-established associations are providing enterprises with guidance and support for their companies to fight back against disinformation and to build resilience.

It is evident that the private sector remains considerably understudied. Social media should cooperate with local actors to tackle disinformation, and international organizations should encourage and support these efforts. The Western experience and practices can serve as a model from which we can draw lessons.



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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, disinformation campaigns<sup>1</sup> across Europe have become a clear threat to modern democracies, leaving no simple solutions to counter them effectively.

With the coronavirus pandemic, these activities have recently been on the rise. The deliberate spreading of falsehood is mainly orchestrated by Russia and its allies in the European context, with the objective to relativize and break information into pieces, so that the internal and societal trust within liberal democracies becomes agitated and disturbed.

The potential threats have been acknowledged at the EU level and concrete actions have been taken. The European Commissions' **Action Plan Against Disinformation**<sup>2</sup> calls for a unified, multi-stakeholder response to disinformation, including participation from governments, civil society and the private sector.<sup>3</sup>

The Czech Republic is no exception to these trends. Given the fact that the country is characterized by complex (historic) ties with Kremlin, the Czech experience represents a valuable source for the useful lessons that other countries could follow.<sup>4</sup> The spread of disinformation in the Czech Republic started to increase already in 2008 when the Bush administration planned to place part of its anti-ballistic missile defense in Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> However, until the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian hybrid warfare was not considered a major threat in the Czech Republic. Although the country's general national consensus is not pro-Kremlin, the individuals such as president Zeman who legitimize the Russian regime and its aggressive behavior make the fight harder.

This report analyses the Czech practices in countering disinformation campaigns, both from the governmental and non-governmental sphere, including the private sector. As part of the research, the author conducted interviews with experts from various Czech institutions and organizations. With the Czech lessons learned, the writer hopes to contribute with this work to the Western Balkan environment, i.e. Bosnia and Herzegovina – even with the differences in the political context and social fabric between the two countries.

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1 Frequently described as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth”, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>.

2 “Action Plan Against Disinformation”, The European Commission (COM), June 2019, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/factsheet\\_disinfo\\_elex\\_140619\\_final.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/factsheet_disinfo_elex_140619_final.pdf).

3 Annina Claesson, “Coming Together to Fight Fake News: Lessons from the European Approach to Disinformation”, April 2019, [https://csis-websiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/NewPerspectives/APRIL2019\\_Claesson.pdf](https://csis-websiteprod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fspublic/NewPerspectives/APRIL2019_Claesson.pdf).

4 Mariam Tsitsikashvili, “Comparing Lessons Learned from countering Russian Disinformation in Georgia and The Czech Republic”, Kremlin Watch Program, 2019, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/comparing-lessons-learned-from-countering-russian-disinformation-in-georgia-and-the-czech-republic.pdf>.

5 Ondrej Filipec, “Towards a Disinformation Resilient Society? The Experience of the Czech Republic”, *Cosmopolitan Civil societies An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no. 1 (March 2019) p.6.

## 1. POLITICAL ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICES ACTIVITIES

History teaches us that the influence of foreign powers is not a new phenomenon to sovereign states. Intending to reshape the thinking of the political community, such activities ultimately affect the policy determination process.

The first official recognition of the threat of online disinformation campaigns at the EU level came in 2015, as soon as the European Council in its Conclusions asked the High Representative to address the disinformation campaigns by Russia.<sup>6</sup> Following multiple disinformation campaigns in European elections and referendums, the EU established the **Action Plan against Disinformation** in 2018.<sup>7</sup> The Plan establishes a 4 pillar-based framework to address potential threats, including the one to enhance the capabilities of the EU's institutions. The latter consists of detecting, analyzing, and exposing disinformation.

Following all EU states, the Czech Republic joined in this call and answered with several truly sophisticated documents in which the country openly acknowledged the threats posed by foreign disinformation campaigns, notably Russian ones.

**The Security Strategy from 2015**<sup>8</sup> pointed out the hypothetical threat of hybrid warfare and disinformation although without the naming of the main actor – Russia.<sup>9</sup> Two years later, the country's approach changed, and Czechia has become more vocal. **The Defense Strategy from 2017**<sup>10</sup> underlined the Russian use of a set of hybrid campaigns against the member states of NATO and the EU, including targeted disinformation activities and cyber-attacks.<sup>11</sup>

In **The Long-Term Perspective for Defense 2030**,<sup>12</sup> the Czech Ministry of Defense acknowledges the importance of technology and media in the future and identifies the exploitation of information as an issue which is likely to grow.

Nevertheless, one of the most fundamental strategic documents was the result of the **National Security Audit (2016)**. The document raised several important questions, including whether the country has adequate legal capacity to counter these threats, and whether the country is capable of mobilizing and implementing tools to respond successfully.

The objective of the Audit was also to identify common features from a different security perspective and assess the degree of their severity through a new approach that combines the national and international context in which the Czech Republic finds itself.<sup>13</sup>

Conducted by more than 120 security experts, the Audit concluded that the threat posed by foreign influence

6 "Action Plan Against Disinformation", European Commission (COM) 36 final, Brussels, December 5, 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/eu-communication-disinformation-euco-05122018_en.pdf).

7 "What Is the EU's Action Plan Against Disinformation", The Millennial Source, November 18, 2020, <https://medium.com/curious/what-is-the-eus-action-plan-against-disinformation-996f4fed30ae>.

8 "Security Strategy of the Czech Republic", Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic, 2015, [https://www.army.cz/images/id\\_8001\\_9000/8503/Security\\_Strategy\\_2015.pdf](https://www.army.cz/images/id_8001_9000/8503/Security_Strategy_2015.pdf).

9 "Countries Compared: Czechia", European Values Center, Kremlin Watch Program Briefing, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/countries-compared-states/czechia/>.

10 "The Defense Strategy of The Czech Republic", The Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic, 1st Edition, Prague, 2017, <https://www.mocr.army.cz/assets/en/ministry-of-defence/strategy-and-doctrine/defencestrategy2017.pdf>.

11 European Values Center, "Countries Compared, Czechia".

12 "The Long Term Perspective for Defense 2030", Ministry of Defense of the Czech Republic, 2015, Prague, [https://www.army.cz/images/id\\_8001\\_9000/8503/THE\\_LONG\\_TERM\\_PERSPECTIVE\\_FOR\\_DEFENCE\\_2030.pdf](https://www.army.cz/images/id_8001_9000/8503/THE_LONG_TERM_PERSPECTIVE_FOR_DEFENCE_2030.pdf).

13 "National Security Audit", Ministerstvo Vnitřní České Republiky, 2016, Prague, <https://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/soubor/national-security-audit.aspx>.

has a significant impact on public opinion and decision-making at all levels of public administration.<sup>14</sup> It proposed concrete recommendations aimed at raising awareness of influence operations and improving resilience. Some of these are the creation of a system of education for public officials, and active media strategies for important democratic institutions.

Ultimately, the main result of the Audit is the founding of the **Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats** in 2016 within the Czech Ministry of the Interior. The Unit employs people who have already worked for the Ministry of the Interior so that their various contacts and know-how can be applied as effective operational tools. Experts will monitor, evaluate and detect challenges, and will deliver proposals for substantive and legislative solutions. It should be noted that the Unit is not a new law enforcement agency, nor an intelligence service. It should not spread any kind of propaganda but only rely on the expertise relating to the field of internal security.

### 1.1. Intelligence Services Approach

Due to an active engagement of the Kremlin's intelligence officers in the country, operating under diplomatic cover, Czech intelligence services have also acknowledged Russian threats developing through these channels.

In its **annual report from 2015**,<sup>15</sup> as well as in those of the following years, the Czech Security Information Service (BIS), warned of Russian hostile influence operations. The **latest annual report** of the Security Information Service for 2019,<sup>16</sup> recalls that Russian intelligence officers still play an important role in the country's actions. Kremlin intelligence officers are publicly identified as "those who supervise and control hostile activities, even when these activities are conducted by non-state entities".<sup>17</sup> The report recognizes that the Russian diplomatic mission in the Czech Republic is used as cover to help Russian foreign political interests and promote the Kremlin's policies. Although the report itself reveals that reducing Russian hostile activities is complicated due to the scale of the diplomatic mission on the Kremlin side, the fact that the Security Information Service is becoming progressively vocal, and is actively raising concerns on the matter, is an important step in tackling Russian activities in the country.

### 1.2. The way forward for the Czech Republic

Political acknowledgment is without a doubt increasing in Czechia. Even so, the reality on the ground demands more substantial operational measures. Various strategic documents are indeed appreciated, but without concrete actions, i.e. proper strategy implementation, they remain hypothetical.

What makes the situation in Czechia even more complex are the existing disinformation outlets that have proponents among the country's leading politicians. The Czech president Miloš Zeman is considered to be one of Russian's closest allies among European Union leaders, and a great admirer of the Kremlin's politics.<sup>18</sup> The collaboration of public actors with disinformation outlets has significant consequences for Czech society. Gradually, the trust in democratic institutions will be eroded, and politicians such as President Zeman will become true legitimators of disinformation platforms as well as the Kremlin regime. The result is the further distancing of the Czech Republic from the West.

The National Audit declared strategic communication as a tool of defense against potential threats coming

<sup>14</sup> Marketa Krejčí, "The ins and outs of the Czech disinformation community", November 8, 2017, <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2017/11/08/ins-outs-czech-disinformation-community/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2015", Security Information Service (BIS), 2015, <https://www.bis.cz/public/site/bis.cz/content/vyrocní-zpravy/en/ar2015en.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> "Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2019", Security Information Service (BIS), 2019, <https://www.bis.cz/annual-reports/annual-report-of-the-security-information-service-for-2019-c335a5b9.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Vladimir Soldatkin, Jan Lopatka, "On Kremlin visit, Czech president is among friends", Reuters, May 9, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-czech-idUSKBN0NU0NM20150509>.



from the Kremlin. Yet, the effort to increase the implementation of strategic communication in the state administration is yet to be fulfilled.<sup>19</sup> A Unit like the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats should be established in departments of other ministries. More coordinated inter-agency activities should be undertaken to start discussing and analyzing the disinformation phenomenon with the other sectors of Czech society. As one interviewee pointed out, the crisis made two things clear: first – how important strategic communication is, and second – that the Czech Government appears to lack a communication strategy.

## 2. LESSONS LEARNED FROM CZECH CIVIL SOCIETY AND MEDIA

### 2.1. Think-Tanks reinforcing the sovereignty of the Czech Republic

Civil society seems to be more effective and productive in debunking and challenging disinformation. Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the intensification of disinformation campaigns, Czech civil society has become remarkably active. Czechia's think-tanks play an important role in shaping public policy and public opinion in the country.

The **European Values Center for Security Policy** (EVC) established the Kremlin Watch program in 2015, which regularly fact-checks news reports originating in pro-Kremlin media; produces a weekly report on disinformation trends, and cooperates with foreign partners on many projects. The EVC is also focusing on policy development and encourages the state administration to push ahead towards tackling disinformation campaigns. Another prominent think-tank that serves as a notable resource in the field of security policy and studies is The **Prague Security Studies Institute** (PSSI). In 2014, PSSI launched an Initiative to raise awareness about pro-Russian disinformation. The organization is working on identifying and analyzing a range of security-related issues, publishing articles and reports on these topics, and organizing events and debates for both experts and the public.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the Association for International Affairs (AMO) has the main objectives of promoting research, critical thinking, and education in the field of international relations to increase awareness, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.<sup>21</sup> In October 2016 the AMO launched a Czech version of the Ukrainian web site **StopFake.org** to verify and challenge disinformation about the situation in Ukraine.

### 2.2. The Czech Media

The Czech media is relatively active in fact-checking and investigative journalism. The initiative **manipulatori.cz** is engaged in exposing hoaxes and manipulation of information, with the primary objective of spreading information about the content elaborated by other civil society actors on disinformation-related issues. Other similar websites debunking political disinformation are **Hoax.cz** and **Demagog.cz** which have built a reputation as the leading political fact-checking groups.

In 2018, a group of journalists seeking editorial independence from the dominant media groups founded a regional daily newspaper, **Deník N**. With the publisher of Slovakia's paper Deník N as its parent company, the newspaper contributes elaborated authorial texts, bringing up-to-date information set in a broader context and with deeper insight, also suitable for slower reading.

In terms of public broadcasting, the Czech Republic has made notable advances. There is no major mainstream TV outlet explicitly represented as anti-Western in the Czech media sphere and, the only directly Kremlin-

19 "Strategic Communication in the Czech Republic and Poland: Comparison of Perspectives and Practices", Prague Security Studies Institute, [https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8090\\_738-study-strategic-communication-in-czech-republic-and-poland.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8090_738-study-strategic-communication-in-czech-republic-and-poland.pdf).

20 "About PSSI", Prague Security Studies Institute, <https://www.pssi.cz/>.

21 "About AMO", Association for International Affairs, <https://www.amo.cz/en/>.

funded media outlet operating in the country is Sputnik.<sup>22</sup> As stressed by one interviewee, despite constant pressure, the public broadcasting services (Czech Radio and Czech Television) continue to serve the interest of the public, and should neither be in hands of oligarchs nor big business.

### 2.3. Enforcing Media Literacy and Promoting Critical Thinking

The disinformation crisis is also a crisis of media literacy. Czechia is advancing in that regard, and the academic sphere has become increasingly involved.

The **Department of Political Science** at Masaryk University in Brno is analyzing propaganda tactics through different projects offered to their students and providing training in media literacy.

The NGO **People in Need** has launched a project called “**One World in Schools**” (OWIS). The program provides teachers with an important educational framework for countering disinformation. Stimulating teaching methodology employs documentary films and activities to educate and empower the next generation of active citizens.<sup>23</sup>

The organization **ELPIDA** is actively supporting media literacy and education to help older people. It supports them to build confidence and to cope better with the challenges of today’s society. The organization promotes media literacy activities, often collaborating and sharing the experience with similar establishments, such as **TOL** – one of Central Europe’s leading journalism educators.

Another interesting initiative is the one inspired by the Baltic states, ‘**Czech ‘Elves**’. A volunteer group of men and women decided to track down the originators of disinformation online and map chain emails. They are focusing on monitoring and identifying main sources and creating a large database. This database is equally available to NGOs and state officials.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, as underlined by Ondřej Filip, there have also been valuable books written by experts on disinformation and propaganda. These are not fully academic but due to their popular style, a larger audience has been reached. In this way, the role of civil society and active individuals play an important role in the fight against disinformation and propaganda as they help to reveal and debunk the disinformation and contribute to media literacy at least within the selected segments.<sup>25</sup>

### 2.4. The Way Forward for Czech Civil Society

As one of the interviewees emphasized, the biggest problem for the non-governmental sector is the existing polarization of Czech society. The populist rhetoric coming from pro-Russian State officials is exacerbating the current situation in the country.<sup>26</sup>

The scope of CSOs’ work is restricted also because of their limited resources and the level of public trust they have in comparison to other Czech institutions and groups. The collaboration between the Government and NGOs should increase and become a top strategic priority for both sides.

CSOs should apply maximum effort in lobbying Government agencies to prioritize the matter in their work and develop long-term relationships. Once there is a sufficient level of cooperation, exchange, and support

22 “Comparing Lessons Learned from Countering Russian Disinformation in Georgia and the Czech Republic,” Kremlin Watch Program, European Values Center, 2019, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/comparing-lessons-learned-from-countering-russian-disinformation-in-georgia-and-the-czech-republic.pdf>.

23 “One World In Schools: Inspiring the Next Generation of Active Citizens,” People in Need, 2015, <https://resources.peopleinneed.cz/documents/761-owis-brochure.pdf>.

24 “Czech Elves,” Czech Elves, 2020, <https://cesti-elfove.cz/>.

25 Ondřej Filip, “Towards a Disinformation Resilient Society? The Experience of the Czech Republic,” *Cosmopolitan Civil societies An Interdisciplinary Journal* 11, no. 1 (March 2019), p.18.

26 Petr Krčál and Vladimír Naxera, “Populism as Rethoris strategy of Miloš Zeman,” University of West Bohemia, <https://ecpr.eu/Filestore/PaperProposal/86906ce2-de10-4146-a8cb-a84bf79a3c05.pdf>.

between different levels, the monitoring, and tackling of pro-Kremlin techniques and narratives will reach their full capacities.

As far as media literacy is concerned, some authors argue that policymakers have a bad habit of passing their responsibilities down to consumers instead of endorsing initiatives and taking specific actions to make changes. Without a mobilized political will and a specific strategy to transform a landscape of co-regulation, the Czech Government's "media literacy rhetoric" is slowly turning into a broken promise, and the CSOs' work remains restricted.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CZECH PRIVATE SECTOR

Social media is an excellent tool for businesses to connect with their customers online, share information about their products, and develop a brand reputation.<sup>28</sup>

The speed and facility of social media has vastly increased the size of target audiences.<sup>29</sup> However, new opportunities involve 'new types' of potential risks, and just like the other two sectors already mentioned in the report, the business sector has also become a target of disinformation.

The first worldwide attempt in which industries (including tech giants Google, Facebook and Twitter) agreed voluntarily to self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation<sup>30</sup> was the **EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation 2018**.<sup>31</sup>

Including five areas of competence, the primary objective of the Code is to increase the transparency and accountability of the online media landscape. To complement the code, the European Union's action plan introduced a monitoring body to oversee the implementation of the code's commitments.

Following the EU's attitude, the Czech Republic has demonstrated its will to protect its businesses from the often opaque digital advertising industry, and the country is making progress in this area. The disinformation in the private sector was long neglected and understudied, but there have been positive changes. Businesses are now joining governments, state institutions and civil society in recognizing the significance of these threats.

#### 3.1. One step at the time

Greater communication and collaboration between companies and civil society organizations is a key element to achieve progress in this field. Many projects, such as the Twitter group **Sleeping Giants** or the **Konspiratori** (although founded in Slovakia), were founded to discourage potential advertisers from intentionally or unintentionally supporting disinformation websites. Based on the publicly available guidelines, the board of experts decides which sites will be included in databases.<sup>32</sup>

Associations such as "**Nelež**" ("Do not lie") offer consultations and guidance for companies. They ensure

27 David Buckingham, "Fake news: is media literacy the answer?", January 24, 2017, <https://davidbuckingham.net/2017/01/12/fake-news-is-media-literacy-the-answer/>.

28 Lindsay Wojtula, "Not Just Governments Anymore: How Disinformation Impacts Private Companies", Prague Security Studies Institute, [https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8209\\_764-blog-private-companies-and-disinformation.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8209_764-blog-private-companies-and-disinformation.pdf).

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 European Commission, "EU Code of Practice on Disinformation", European Commission (COM), 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc\\_id=54454](https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/document.cfm?doc_id=54454).

32 Zuzana Veselkova, "Fighting Fake News, Disinformation and Hate in Czech Media", August 18, 2017, <https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/how-the-czech-republic-is-fighting-fake-news-disinformation-and-hate>.

that their clients' online announcements do not end up on sites spreading disinformation.<sup>33</sup> When they detect their ads on websites that share disinformation, they approach and inform companies about malign activities. Most firms are reacting positively to such practices. A distinct private actor is a Prague-based data company named **Semantic Visions**. The firm is using methods of data analysis and risk assessment to help with the identification of Czech language websites that propagate falsehoods. They work with firms whose clients include critical state institutions, non-profit organizations as well as leading corporations.<sup>34</sup>

### 3.2. The way forward for the Czech private sector

The Czech private sector has started to engage more in countering disinformation campaigns in the country. However, experts generally agree that the Czech environment lacks an effective methodology for measuring the impact of advertising campaigns on brand reputation.<sup>35</sup> According to Evgeny Morozov,<sup>36</sup> disinformation exists because of the business model he calls 'digital capitalism'. It exists because it is profitable.<sup>37</sup> He argues that the problem might not be the disinformation as such, but rather the speed and ease of its dissemination. Today's digital capitalism makes it extremely profitable to produce and circulate false – but 'click-worthy' – narratives.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, Czechia's private sector should adopt more effective practices from Western Europe. Innovative startups<sup>39</sup> specializing in this field, such as the **Logically app**, **Alto Analytics**, or **Trueinchain** can serve as models. Morozov calls for better government regulation, transparency, and ultimately for the break-up of the big data companies. Although this might seem an unlikely outcome, understanding the bigger picture is what will benefit countering disinformation.

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33 Filip Brokes, "Czech civil society fights back against fake news", June 10, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/czech-civil-society-fights-back-against-fake-news/a-53758412>.

34 "About Us", Semantic Vision, <https://semantic-visions.com/about-us/>.

35 "Dezinformace Jako Byznys: Perspektivy Stakeholderů a Cesty k Řešení", Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI), December 2020, [https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8390\\_studie-dezinformace-jako-byznys-cesty-k-reseni.pdf](https://www.pssi.cz/download//docs/8390_studie-dezinformace-jako-byznys-cesty-k-reseni.pdf).

36 Evgeny Morozov, "Moral panic over fake news hides the real enemy- the digital giants", January 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/08/blaming-fake-news-not-the-answer-democracy-crisis>.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Marcel Sanchez, "10 European startups fighting fake news and disinformation", EU-Startups, March 12, 2020, <https://www.eu-startups.com/2020/03/10-european-startups-fighting-fake-news-and-disinformation/>.



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## CONCLUSION

The concrete actions undertaken by the Czech Republic in each of the three dimensions demonstrate that the country, despite its turbulent historic narratives, current societal divisions, and political pressure, is using its capabilities to effectively counter disinformation campaigns and Russian influence. At the same time, the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, and an increase of disinformation activities serve as a reminder that further efforts are needed.

At the Governmental level, the Czech Republic is gradually recognizing the importance of politically acknowledging the threats posed by disinformation. Still, without the proper implementation of actions outlined in these strategic documents, as well as transparency, not much will change.

The absence of adequate strategic communication and the undermined collaboration between all three sectors hinder progress on the matter.

It is difficult to be optimistic about reaching an overall national pro-Western consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The complexity of the country's governance structure and a fragile state of democracy heighten existing tensions on the political scene. They are indeed the most powerful tool for the authoritarian political elites to maintain the status quo. The country should not neglect the reconciliation process which is, in the author's opinion, the first step towards a democratic society.

In terms of civil society engagement, Czechia is taking numerous actions. The country's experience is a reminder that visible results will often depend on the strong collaboration and partnership between the Government and non-governmental organizations.

The general picture of Bosnia and Herzegovina's CSOs matches the general picture of the entire country – fragmented, financially unsustainable, and institutionally weak. Nevertheless, the CSOs' role is gaining importance. These organizations will likely face many challenges, but despite that, we should keep in mind that civil society has the power to bring progressive change to the community.

Finally, the private sector deserves more attention, as part of the whole-of-society solution. With the concrete actions from Czechia and other European initiatives mentioned in this report, Bosnia and Herzegovina can draw valuable lessons. As Morozov underlined, we need to make online advertising less central to how we live, work, and communicate. We must delegate more decision-making powers to citizens rather than venal corporations, to build a world where tech giants could not monopolize problem-solving.

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