

ANNUAL REPORT

ON THE STATE OF THE CZECH DISINFORMATION SCENE IN 2021



EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY _____

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The European Values Centre for Security Policy publishes the third Annual Report on the State of the Czech Disinformation Scene. This very detailed report is always published in retrospect and describes the most important events that happened on the Czech disinformation scene in the past year. The report includes:

- an updated list of active and relevant disinformation websites
- basic statistics of activities and traffic on individual sites
- breakdown into groups based on the content produced
- the most important Czech and foreign cases discussed on the disinformation scene in the past year
- trends that have changed or affected the disinformation environment in the past year
- a list of the most active disinformers among politicians

Since the topic is the Czech disinformation scene and since the report is very long (more than 160 pages), we publish it only in Czech. However, we provide a summary and main conclusions in English to make them available to foreign audience as well. Should you be interested in some particular part of this report, please write an e-mail to the analyst, who is in charge of publishing the annual report: veronika.kratka.spalkova@europeanvalues.cz.

In the long term, the core of the Czech disinformation scene consists of about 40 active disinformation websites. This number fluctuates slightly, because the network of disinformation websites is variable, some sites disappear and are replaced by new ones. In the past years, the number of websites oscillated around 40, however due to the COVID-19 pandemic, unusually many new disinformation websites sprung into existence in 2020. That is why the list for 2020 consisted of 51 active disinformation websites. The number decreased year-on-year and the current list for 2021 consists of 46 disinformation websites. These sites differ from each other in the way they operate – some are more sophisticated, creating their own content and deliberately manipulating information, others serve as a platform for some Czech politicians, economists, and other public figures. Finally, there are so called aggregators, their sole raison d'être is to collect already created content and spread it further. In the same way, the possible motivations of disinformers differs as well, some are driven by their extreme ideological stances resulting from their own inability to succeed in a democratic and capitalistic system, for others it constitutes an elaborate business plan.¹

¹ In its study, the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) suggests to split disinformers in three categories based on their motivation: 1) Esotericists and preachers – websites with a clear ideological profile, whose operators are completely convinced of their truth, 2) Healers – websites focused primarily on topics concerning health and lifestyle, and 3) Businessmen – websites focused on spreading conspiracy theories and disinformation not out of an ideological conviction, but rather in an effort to make profit (Syrovátka 2020).



Apart from the difference listed above, the websites also vary in the frequency of articles published and in the number of visitors.

Common denominators are mainly a flagrant disregard for journalists' code of ethics² and no effort whatsoever to provide objective journalism. It is common that individual websites conceal their ownership and financial structures, to prevent the reader from knowing, who oversees the site and who funds it. All the websites also insinuate that mainstream and public-service media cannot be trusted and only the websites themselves are able to uncover the truth and are willing to share it with the public.

SUMMARY

- Currently, the Czech disinformation scene is comprised of **46 active relevant pro-Kremlin disinformation websites**, which means there are **6 fewer** than in 2020.
- **In 2021**, the monitored disinformation websites published **altogether 195 238 articles, on average 16 720 articles per month** (in 2020, there were 195 853 articles published altogether, so in comparison to last year, the average number of articles published in a month on the Czech disinformation scene has decreased by 51).
- Czech disinformation scene is characterized by the fact that active politicians themselves are frequent contributors on disinformation websites, be it politicians in office or without a mandate. **This trend did continue in 2021, however the trend of year-on-year decrease of articles with politicians listed as authors also held on.** The number of articles with politicians listed as authors published on the monitored websites in 2021 actually decreased by 1087 compared to 2020 (in 2020 there were 6905 such articles published, whereas in 2021, there were only 5818).
- We described the disappearance of the website Vlastenecké noviny in the previous annual report. This site has been permanently shut down by a court order. It belonged (together with the website Parlamentní listy) to the two most popular sites among politicians. **The disappearance of this website caused a drop in the number of articles listing politicians as authors already in 2020, in 2021 we saw this trend continuing.** Politicians who used Vlastenecké noviny to publish their own opinions and thoughts did not replace it with a different website when it disappeared.
- At the end of 2021, two disinformation websites run by the same company – **Eportál and Europortál – shut down** after a drop in ad revenue. A statement appeared on the websites at the end of the year. According to this statement, the reason for the end of operation was **a drop in ad revenue and insufficient financial contributions from readers.**

2 Syndikát novinářů ČR, z. s. (Journalists' Syndicate of the Czech Republic) 2021. „Etický kodex (Code of Ethics).“ Syndikát novinářů ČR, z. s., accessed June 6th 2021. <https://syndikat-novinaru-cr-z-s.webnode.cz/etika/kodex/>



- Some Czech politicians are very proactive towards the disinformation scene, they voluntarily provide interviews to disinformation websites, most frequently to Parlamentní listy or to Sputnik. **Tomio Okamura provided the most interviews** in 2021, **35 in total**, that is one more than in 2020. Six out of the ten biggest contributors in terms of providing interviews were members of the political party SPD.
- The **second** most active politician in terms of interviews provided to Sputnik and Parlamentní listy in 2021 was **Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková**. This is probably due to the fact that she replaced **Václav Klaus Jr.** in April 2021 as leader of the political party Trikolóra. Václav Klaus Jr. placed **8th** with eleven interviews.
- From the current government coalition (which formed after the election in October 2021), **the most active politician with nine interviews for Parlamentní listy was the Pirat Party MEP Mikuláš Peksa**.
- Prominent targets of disinformation websites in 2021 remain just as in 2019 and 2020 the Czech security information services (BIS) and public-service media.
- A new player in the hard core of the Czech disinformation scene is a website created in 2020, **CZ 24 News**, its average monthly traffic exceeded **5 million visits per month**. The average amount of articles published in a month also rose significantly to on average 1179 articles per month.

CONCLUSIONS

- The current list of relevant disinformation websites consists of 46 sites, which is 6 fewer than in 2020, however 5 more than in 2019. Until 2020, the number of disinformation websites was more or less stable, oscillating year-on-year only by low single-digit numbers. The rise by 11 websites between 2019 and 2020 was caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In our last annual report, we wrote: “it can be assumed that the number of websites will either decrease in the next years or it will remain at a new ‘stable’ number. There is most likely no new trend of long-term year-on-year increase.” The year 2021 confirmed this prediction, the number of websites has decreased again. Since some websites struggle with financial problems, it can be assumed that the number of websites will decrease even further in the next year, but it will not be a significant drop by more than low single-digit numbers.
- For the first time since 2019 did the activity of monitored disinformation websites decrease and there has been a slight decline in the total number of articles published in 2021. On average, the disinformation scene published 51 fewer articles per month.
- Just like in 2019 and 2020, the BIS and public-service media have been targeted by the Czech disinformers. The Czech cases of the past year are very diverse but at the same time very specific in character and they show, what exactly is most important or sensitive for this scene and indirectly also for the foreign powers since the Czech



disinformation scene often serves their interests. We have written in the last Annual Report on the State of the Czech Disinformation Scene that this is “a trend which continues for some years now and it is unlikely this will change in the near future.” This prediction has also proved true in 2021, the BIS as well as public-service media remain targets of the disinformers.

- The BIS and its director Michal Koudelka were under attack by the disinformation scene, just as in the two previous years. In 2021, this stance was inspired mostly by the case of Vrbětice, in which BIS had played a key role.
- As for the international cases, there were two directly linked to the US: 1) The Capitol insurrection and 2) the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. It is not typical of the Czech disinformation scene to address topics related to the US, unless those are of global significance. It has been confirmed that the main propaganda lines are set by the Russian propaganda and the Czech disinformation websites follow suit, because the domestic developments as well as foreign-policy developments of the US are important and easy to grasp for Russia. The Kremlin uses these events to undermine the US democracy and to convince other Western states that the domestic developments in the US point to trouble.
- Trends developing on the disinformation scene in 2021 show, that the operation of disinformation websites in Czechia professionalizes. Some websites invest in their appearance and aim to imitate big mainstream and often foreign media houses. The quality of published texts and translations has risen, and the websites are able to adapt considerably faster to new topics. At the same time, the disinformers succeeded in communicating directly with their readers and convince part of them to transplant their internet behaviour into the real world as well (demonstrations, harassment of doctors, slandering workers in vaccination centres, not complying with protective measures etc.).
- Between 2019 and 2020, the number of articles published on disinformation websites with politicians listed as authors has decreased considerably. In the previous Annual Report on the State of the Czech Disinformation Scene in 2020 we wrote that “it is probably not a long-lasting trend which would continue in coming years, because the year 2020 was unique due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the disappearance of one of the most popular disinformation websites Vlastenecké noviny. It is therefore likely that the number of articles listing politicians as authors will increase again in the coming years.” This prediction has not been proved true, the number of such articles in 2021 was even smaller than in 2020. We assumed that the politicians who used the shut-down website Vlastenecké noviny would replace it with a new website. That did not occur, currently politicians use mostly Parlamentní listy and it is likely to stay that way in the future as well.



- We placed Jaroslav Polanský, the editorial director of Parlamentní listy among the top 5 disinformers (excluding politicians). Parlamentní listy are a long-time favourite and the most read Czech disinformation website. Jaroslav Polanský replaced David Formánek in the top 5 list, who was put on it in 2020 because he created disinformation narratives about covid and vaccines against covid. However, his disinformation projects are no longer very successful, one website stopped working and the other has lost traffic. The average number of visits per month decreased by more than 300 000 year-on-year.





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