

ANNUAL REPORT

ON THE STATE OF THE CZECH DISINFORMATION SCENE FOR 2022



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REPORT

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 and China. 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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SUMMARY

- In 2022, the Czech disinformation scene included **39 active relevant pro-Kremlin disinformation sites**, which is 7 fewer than in 2021. This is a continuation of the trend from last year, when the number of disinformation sites in our list also decreased compared to 2020, in particular by 6.
- In 2022, all monitored disinformation sites **published a total of 126,826 articles**, which is on average 10,569 articles per month (in 2021, a total of 195,238 articles were published, so the average number of articles published per month on the Czech disinformation scene decreased by 5,701 articles compared to the previous year). This is the largest year-on-year decrease in the number of articles since 2019, with the average monthly number of articles in 2021 being only 51 fewer than in 2020. This also reflects the aforementioned decline in the number of disinformation sites.
- In 2022, median of monthly traffic of the disinformation sites was **68,780 visits, which is a decrease of 56,080 visits compared to the preceding period** (in 2021, the total number of visits per month for sites on the 2022 list was 124,860). The biggest drops of several million visits occurred on the CZ24 News and Sputnik sites.
- In 2022, the trend of reducing the number of interviews given by politicians to disinformation sites continued. In the past, politicians gave interviews mainly to Parlamentní listy and Czech Sputnik sites. Since last year, however, Sputnik has been blocked on the territory of the European Union, is very inactive and interviews no longer appear there (we discuss the changes on Sputnik in more detail in the Trends section). The number of interviews given by politicians to the Parlamentní listy site has also been steadily decreasing.
- Some Czech disinformation sites are very active on social media. The number of their followers varies widely, but to some extent it reflects how much the sites themselves are read. The most successful post in terms of interactions received on a disinformation site's Facebook page is a video featuring Vladimir Putin; it appeared on **Sputnik's account** and received over **40,000** interactions.



TRENDS

- 1) **Disinformation sites as a tool for communication related to protests** – As in 2021, the trend of using **disinformation sites as a tool for communication related to anti-government protests** continued even in 2022. Disinformation sites were used to **convene demonstrations, and also provided media space to organizers and reported directly on the events of the protests**, thereby increasing their reach. The focus was mainly on topics related to the war in Ukraine, migration, the energy crisis and the economic situation. Compared to 2021, there was a decrease in interest in topics related to the covid-19 pandemic.
- 2) **Appearance of disinformation narratives in the political mainstream** – In 2022, especially in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, **narratives from disinformation sites started to appear in the Czech political mainstream**. These narratives mainly suggested that the *government/state cares much more about Ukrainians than about its own citizens, arms supply only prolongs the conflict and prevents peace negotiations and ending the war, that there is no war in Ukraine and that the one responsible for the war is not Russia but NATO/West/EU/Ukraine*. These narratives were disseminated mainly by the **SPD, KSČM and ANO** MEPs.
- 3) **Criminal prosecution of disinformers** – The trend of disinformation sites responding to the prosecution of some disinformers also continued. While in 2021 they were responding to the conviction of the Vlastenecké noviny website operator Radek Velička, in 2022 they were responding to the conviction of **Patrik Tušíl, Tomáš Čermák** and **Jana Peterková**. This trend overlapped with one of the main themes of the Czech disinformation scene in 2022, namely the topic of alleged censorship and restriction of freedom of speech, which is further discussed separately.
- 4) **Developments on the Russian propaganda channel Sputnik following the outbreak of the Russian invasion of Ukraine** – The impact of the temporary **blockage of disinformation sites was most noticeable on the Czech version of the Russian channel Sputnik**. As the website falls directly under the Russian intelligence agency, i.e. it is directly funded by the Russian government, **it was eventually blocked at the EU level**. The **blockage affected the Sputnik website both in terms of content and form**. The number of articles thematically focused directly on the Czech Republic and Slovakia decreased, as did the frequency of interviews and opinion articles. The proportion of articles directly adopted from Russian channels which were at least partially machine-translated has increased. The celebrity, health and science and technology sections were discontinued. The name of **Vladimir Franta**, who was the only Czech Sputnik's reporter, no longer appears under articles.
- 5) **Temporary blockage of some disinformation sites** – In 2022, in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, **on the basis of a government recommendation and consultations with the state security forces, eight selected disinformation sites were temporarily blocked by the CZ.NIC association**, which operates the registry of domain names registered under the domain CZ. Other Czech internet operators, such as mobile operators, have also started to join the blockage of disinformation sites. Although a number of sites subsequently resumed their activities, some of them ceased their activities altogether. Sites temporarily blocked by the CZ.NIC association were Voxpopuliblog.cz, Exanpro.cz, Svobodnenoviny.eu and Nwoo.org. In 2021, the closure of the disinformation sites was caused by a decline in advertising revenue and insufficient financial contributions from readers (Eportál and Euportál) or court orders (Vlastenecké noviny).



THE MOST DISCUSSED CASES THAT APPEARED ON THE CZECH DISINFORMATION SCENE IN 2022

- 1) Alleged censorship and alleged restriction of freedom of speech** - The topic of alleged censorship and alleged restriction of freedom of speech has been a long-standing one on the Czech disinformation scene. For example, in 2021, this topic was mainly associated with measures and vaccinations against covid-19. In 2022, **the importance of the topic increased significantly in response to the government's recommendation to block some pro-Kremlin disinformation sites**, on the basis of which the administrator of the national internet domain, the CZ.NIC association, decided to temporarily block eight selected disinformation sites. In addition to the CZ.NIC association, the government, in particular the Minister of the Interior Vít Rakušan, have also been targeted by disinformation sites. **In 2022, the disinformation scene also focused on the establishment of a government commissioner for media and disinformation and the disinformation act.** Events in Russia and Hungary, countries where freedom of speech is actually restricted, were ignored in this regard.
- 2) Energy crisis** - The energy crisis has become one of the main topics on the Czech disinformation scene since autumn 2021, and **since February 2022 it has been mentioned more frequently in connection with the Russian invasion of Ukraine**, as the invasion led to a further rise in energy prices and other negative impacts on the economy, along with a rise in the cost of living. Disinformation sites blamed the energy crisis primarily on the Czech government and the European Union, with the disinformation scene spreading a number of pro-Kremlin narratives during the crisis, such as that energy security in Europe cannot be ensured without energy from Russia or that the only solution to the crisis is to **accede to the Kremlin's demands and agree on direct gas supplies from Russia and payments in rubles**. There have also been allegations that **the United States sabotaged the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines**, or **the Great Reset conspiracy theory** claiming that the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine were instigated by the world elites in order to establish a new world order.
- 3) Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war** - In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Czech disinformation scene adopted a number of earlier pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives, which it then kept tailoring to the dynamic development of the war in Ukraine, or supplemented or combined them with narratives that emerged during the war. The two months leading up to the invasion were also crucial. During this time, narratives **blaming the West and Ukraine for tensions on the Russian-Ukrainian border and legitimizing Russian claims against the West** were disseminated. After the invasion began, the most frequent narratives were the ones **justifying Russian aggression and denying Russian war crimes in Ukraine, and those aimed at demoralizing and discouraging the public from supporting Ukraine.**
- 4) The Czech government's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing conflict** - Due to its stance on the invasion and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Czech government began to be attacked by the Czech disinformation scene. **The government was accused mainly of allegedly favoring the interests of Ukraine over the interests of the Czech Republic or of fueling the conflict.** The disinformation scene mainly spread pro-Kremlin narratives opposing sanctions against Russia and Belarus or military support for Ukraine. **War refugees from Ukraine** were also hit by disinformation, as



a number of disinformation narratives were spread about them, including narratives related to those used during the Syrian refugee crisis.

- 5) **Covid-19** - In 2021, the covid-19 pandemic was the most important topic on the Czech disinformation scene. Although it remained one of the most important topics in 2022, **the invasion of Ukraine caused a significant drop in interest in the disinformation narratives related to covid-19**, with interest in the topic of coronavirus as such dropping to about a fifth, and interest in the topic of Western vaccines dropping to almost a tenth compared to 2021. In 2022, a number of disinformation channels whose main goal was to spread disinformation related to covid-19 **have fully or partially shifted their focus to the invasion of Ukraine.**



CONCLUSIONS

- The number of relevant Czech disinformation sites has been declining year-on-year for two years in a row. The highest number was witnessed in 2020, with several new disinformation projects being created with focus on disinformation related to the coronavirus pandemic. Some of these projects were unsuccessful and therefore were gradually terminated. At the moment, the number of disinformation sites on our list is the lowest since 2019.
- Since the number of disinformation sites was reduced, their activity, including the total number of published articles, has also decreased.
- The activity of politicians on disinformation sites has dropped significantly. Compared to previous years, politicians now give significantly fewer interviews to disinformation sites and also contribute less to disinformation sites, i.e. the number of articles published on disinformation sites signed by relevant active politicians is decreasing. This is related to the fact that disinformation has started to appear in the political mainstream and many politicians no longer need disinformation sites to spread disinformation, misinformation and manipulation. This is also one of the most visible trends observed in the past year.
- Despite the fact that the topic of the covid-19 pandemic has largely been completely replaced by topics related to Russian invasion of Ukraine, some narratives are still present. The most common is misinformation related to coronavirus vaccines.
- In the past year, the disinformation scene has been completely dominated by the topic of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Although in the immediate aftermath of the invasion the disinformers reacted rather lukewarmly, after a few days they took a clear position siding with the Russian Federation and beginning to adopt disinformation narratives from Russian political leaders and official Russian propaganda media. They then directed a specific disinformation campaign against Ukrainian refugees who had fled to the Czech Republic to escape the war.
- The trend of using disinformation sites as one of the communication channels for convening protests and urging people to take direct action (both to participate in protests and to show hostility towards Ukrainian refugees, etc.) continued. Subsequently, disinformation sites also served as communication platforms where ongoing and past protests were intensively reported, often with manipulations regarding the number of participants and other aspects of the protests.
- The blockage of some Czech disinformation sites by the Czech domain provider at the request of the government caused a slight shake-up of the entire disinformation scene. The temporary blockage resulted in a transformation of this environment, as some disinformation sites were forced to move to other, international, domains,



which, however, resulted in the loss of some of their readers, while some withdrew from the websites altogether and moved their activities to social media.

- Social media used by Czech disinformation sites are dominated by Facebook, as it is generally the most frequently used social network in the Czech Republic. However, Telegram and VKontakte, which are less regulated, are gaining in popularity. Some Czech disinformation sites are even active only here and do not use any other social platform.



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