

FROM PRAGUE TO BERLIN:

NAVIGATING THE DISINFORMATION WAR AGAINST RUSSIA

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The Czech-German session on disinformation which took place in the framework of the Resilient Europe Conference (Oct 8-10 2024 in Prague) facilitated the exchange of knowledge and provided a platform for developing actionable recommendations to combat disinformation. Session was organized by the Center for an Informed Society together with the European Academy Berlin and was supported by the Czech-German Fund for the Future.



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This session successfully promoted a renewal of the collaboration between Czech and German experts, also including the dimension of spillover of disinformation by including an Austrian and a Slovak perspective.

This led to the formulation of practical recommendations for both the Czech Republic and Germany, aiming to strengthen cooperation and resilience against disinformation by leveraging the experiences and best practices of both nations. While combating disinformation, the main takeaways mainly include full government commitment and mobilization of society, implementation of media and cyber literacy alongside better coordination between government bodies and civil society, and the prioritization of creating narratives that defend democratic values, pluralism, and free media—rather than focusing solely on debunking false information.

PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Keynote: **Olga Richterova** (Deputy Speaker of the Czech Parliament)

Tomas Lindner (Journalist Respekt)

Nikolai Klimeniouk (Journalist FAZ, NZZ)

Viktor Breiner (Analyst Infosec, SK)

Richard Herzinger (Columnist Welt)

Dietmar Pichler (Analyst AT)

Veronika Vichova (Analyst CIS CZ)

Moderation: **Nathalie Vogel** (Fellow IWP, DE/US)



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COMMON CONCERNS

Russian disinformation has been a concern since 2014, targeting political institutions, migration policies, the EU, and environmental issues like the Green Deal.

- Both Czechia and Germany are increasingly worried about the persistence of disinformation, affecting not only the public but also political sectors and civil society.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified disinformation efforts, particularly in Czechia, where attacks on pro-Ukraine support have been tied to socio-economic issues and migration concerns.
- Russian disinformation is widespread across platforms such as social media (Facebook, YouTube, Telegram), chain emails, and mainstream outlets, often fueled by conspiracy theories about tragic events like floods and shootings.
- The general public in both countries is often indifferent to disinformation despite its damaging effects on trust in institutions. War fatigue and frustration over complex issues contribute to this indifference.

KEY FINDINGS

The political culture of both countries differs, and so does the perception of the threat. While the Czech Republic detected the rise of hybrid operations fairly early, Germany took more time to realize the scope of the challenge it was facing.

Yet, **Czech cultural elites** were naturally leaning towards an idealized ‘German model’ and initially espoused their idea of engagement of Russia. Czech intellectuals often mirror German intellectuals. Germany is held in high esteem in these circles, and it first was assumed that Germany’s strategy in handling the Russian factor was correct.

Czech political elites however identified the danger earlier than **German political elites**, even if no substantial actions ensued because of domestic economic contingencies involving an energy dependency and major issues related to oligarchy. **German cultural elites** were more inclined to espouse the agenda of engaging Russia and later became more receptive to pacifist narratives. They were slow to accept the idea of Russia as a belligerent.

Both countries faced the same challenges posed by disinformation during the **COVID crisis** and the attack on Ukraine. The narratives of hostile actors were similar. Pro Kremlin elements of language were conveyed by the same channels: Social-media, fringe media, fake sites. They involved the same vectors associated with either state controlled Russian media or direct Kremlin affiliates.

Their respective target audiences were also identical: allegedly disenfranchised part of the electorate. Similarly, the elements of languages of the Kremlin also reappeared in the argumentation of far right and far left political parties, exacerbating the domestic political discourse.

They also episodically transpired in the narratives of regular democratic parties which were trying to regain a lost electorate. The emergence **of the anti-vaxx movement** and the promotion of conspiracy theories could be traced back to Russian measures of subversion. Smear campaigns against politicians and cyber-attacks became frequent and they were very difficult to investigate.



We note a total synchronicity of events and a similarity of actors' profiles involved in malign influence in both countries. Both Czechia and Germany face a massive problem of **elite capture and strategic corruption but also a massive penetration of the third sector**.

In Czechia, a diametral political shift had happened already prior to the change of government in 2021, with **numerous Russian operations having been detected on Czech soil**, for instance, the cases of Vrbětice and Vlachovice, in the Zlín District. Czech political elites became more vocal in calling for measures to counter Russian hybrid operations. Yet, it is the war against Ukraine that marked the difference in approach of the threat stemming from the Kremlin with a resolute policy of deterrence and Prague becoming the engine of opposition to the Kremlin and a more hesitating stance in Berlin.

Ukraine Factor in the German and in the Czech language space

The perception of Ukraine in Germany was heavily influenced by a scholarship that questions the very existence of Ukraine as nation state, and a pro-Russian political approach of government and parliamentary actors. A spillover effect can also be noted in Austria where the Ukraine discourse is heavily influenced by both intellectuals and academics, who convey a Russophile stance.

Neither the Austrian nor the German public do reflect nearly enough on the extent to which their home-countries have been the subject of penetration by Russian malign entities. Fake news on social media is one thing, but even democratic parties count **numerous pro-Russian advocates who push the Kremlin agenda in the public discourse**. Established media are also fed with Kremlin propaganda.

In German-speaking countries, **once-reputable newspapers such as the Swiss Weltwoche and the Berliner Zeitung are now in the hands of publishers close to the Kremlin**. The situation in Austria can be viewed as worse as domestic political entities, although committed to EU integration, hide behind neutrality to practice political equidistance and evolve in a large media echo chamber.

Shift in perception 2014-2022

The German view of Ukraine and the entire East is shaped by Germany's past as an empire: German public opinion was merely misled to believe that there were no countries there, no nations actual nations but territories, quasi empty lands, possession of the Russian empire.

The term 'granary' sums it up. It was Russian property, and the German crime was to try to take over this property. Both Russian and German historical narrative described it as an attempted robbery. These elements of language often appeared in German political rhetoric. H. Schmidt: 'Ukraine is not a nation'. Steinmeier (speech in Volgograd, 2015): 'Germany has brought incredible suffering to all of Russia and parts of the USSR that now belong to Belarus and Ukraine'. The appeal by 60 intellectuals and academics in 2014: 'USA, EU and Russia argue over Ukraine, it is a war against Russia'.

Ukraine gained shape and substance in the eyes of part of the German public opinion only in 2022 when the country was able to defend itself and prove to be a functioning state. Consequently, Ukrainian voices were demonstratively added to public discourse. It helped clear the public discourse of Russian revisionism.

In the Czech Republic, no narrative denying statehood ever prevailed, but a wave of **disinformation claiming that the Ukrainian refugees were taking advantage of social benefits** was detected after

Feb. 2022. Russia-friendly fringes of the political spectrum are criticizing the efforts of the Czech Presidency to coordinate arms deliveries to Ukraine. This propaganda aims at demoralizing the supporters of Ukraine and gaining support for an hypothetical, not clearly defined peace deal in favor of the Russian Federation.

Lack of concerted political action against disinformation

Even with the establishment of East StratCom, and Hybrid CoE as well as NATO structures, and the promulgation of Digital Services Act, Russia remains a successful malign actor in both Czechia and Germany. **Russian disinformation benefits from a lack of concerted governmental coordination against hybrid threats.**

The repercussions are especially obvious in the German language space but also to some extent in the Czech Republic, although NGOs have filled the gap starting very early on. As we have seen campaigns of disinformation use similar vectors and loopholes in both Czechia and Germany. **The case of Peter Bystron and Vox of Europe proves that there is a need for a well-oiled mechanism domestically and a transnational coordination of efforts to combat these campaigns.**

SPILL-OVER EFFECT: THE CASE OF AUSTRIA AND SLOVAKIA

Slovakia

The Slovak government has shifted from a strong pro-EU stance to a more uncertain and shaky position on EU matters and disinformation. Russian influence plays a key role, with disinformation used as part of a hybrid warfare strategy that includes establishing disinformation networks and manipulating public opinion.

Following the Kuciak murder case (a Slovak journalist), Russian propaganda efforts surged, influencing elections and public discourse. A recent election saw the victory of a pro-Russian candidate, with many voters remaining still undecided shortly before the election. This outcome highlights the disinformation's impact on the political landscape.

Slovak Policymakers are currently grappling with the complexities of hybrid warfare. They are facing a significant challenge in fully understanding and effectively countering the scope of malign influence. This struggle illustrates an ongoing battle between political parties in the fight against the Kremlin's influence.

Austria

Austria faces similar disinformation challenges, often complicated by claims of neutrality, which are used to justify maintaining close ties with autocratic regimes like Russia and China. Both established media and anonymous trolls spread disinformation, with pro-Russian lobbyists even appearing on public TV platforms. Austrian media has given a stage to pro-Kremlin influencers and journalists, raising concerns about providing disinformation a legitimate platform. Experts in academia and the media subtly push Kremlin-aligned viewpoints, further complicating the country's struggle with disinformation.



Warning from Slovakia

From an information warfare point of view, as of 2024 **Slovakia is considered as having been lost to Russian influence**. Russian disinformation is meanwhile part of the public discourse, it abounds in official and social media. All initiatives put in place by the prior government have failed. The reason is that none of the known winning strategies, such as the multi-stakeholder approach could be put in place, as there was no political will to do so. The current government has discontinued even these sparsely defined initiatives.

THE WAY FORWARD

Fighting disinformation requires a **holistic approach**. As a rule, for a successful fight against disinformation, the complete endorsement of the government, as well as the readiness to commit resources, are necessary. Progress has been made by both Germany and Czechia but they are not sufficient.

A second prerequisite is the **mobilization of all parts of society**. Decision makers are still ignorant of the threat posed by Russian disinformation. Political representatives for instance must be able to do outreach to their constituents to sensitize them to the dangers citizens are exposed to. Decision-makers first need to be educated by professionals who, on a regular basis, will clearly update them to the threat posed by Russian operations in a very concrete manner. Attempts at demolishing trust in governments should be countered in the field by trust building measures in the framework of governmentally coordinated StratCom measures.

The Baltic model as well as the strategies put in place in Finland (media literacy, cyber literacy) appear to be the best solution and should be duplicated. The Swedish preparedness approach and the coordination of government bodies with civil society has also proven efficient. While pre- and debunking appear to make sense, it has proven more useful for democracies to formulate their own narratives defending democratic values, pluralism and free media. It needs to 'occupy the field'. A coordinated strategic communication aka 'Create your own narrative' is more efficient than the debunking of disinformation.





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