UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL: THE KREMLIN'S LEVERAGE IN THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2

CZECH REPUBLIC 7
- Introduction 7
- The Role of the Russian Embassy 7
- The Cultural Sphere and Non-Governmental Organizations 8
- The Political Sphere 9
- The Extremist Sphere and Paramilitary Groups 10
- The Media and Information Space 11
- The Economic and Financial Domain 12
- Conclusion 13
- Bibliography 14

HUNGARY 15
- Introduction 15
- The Role of the Russian Embassy 15
- The Cultural Sphere 16
- NGOs, GONGOs, Policy Community and Academia 16
- The Political Sphere and Extremism 17
- The Media and Information Space 18
- The Economic and Financial Domain 19
- Conclusion 20
- Bibliography 21

POLAND 22
- Introduction 22
- The Role of the Russian Embassy 22
- Research Institutes and Academia 22
- The Political Sphere 23
- The Media and Information Space 24
- The Cultural Sphere 24
- The Economic and Financial Domain 25
- Conclusion 26
- Bibliography 26

SLOVAKIA 27
- Introduction 27
- The Role of the Russian Embassy 27
- The Cultural Sphere 27
- The Political Sphere 28
- Paramilitary organisations 28
- The Media and Information Space 29
- The Economic and Financial Domain 30
- Conclusion 31
- Bibliography 31

CONCLUSION 33

INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of months, Russian interference in the internal affairs of other countries has become a highly discussed topic. Whether it was the influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the US presidential election, or handing over a secret strategy document to Bulgaria´s opposition party in the run-up to the presidential elections – which included recommendations for planting fake news or promoting exaggerated polling – there has been an alarming amount of evidence of Russian-led efforts to fragment, and weaken transatlantic unity. Using overt as well as covert activities, Russia has, on multiple occasions, demonstrated both the capacity, and the willingness to use such instruments. By becoming more risk-averse, the Kremlin shows a sustained effort to undermine public faith in democratic processes, portraying the West as hypocritical, and ultimately sending the political, and business environment in a direction that will be more accommodating to Moscow's foreign policy objectives.

The Visegrad countries – the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary – have in the last three years, since the annexation of Crimea and the Russian-led destabilization of Ukraine, appeared at the forefront of pro-Russian propaganda, and the Kremlin's multifaceted influence campaigns. This development has been even more worrying given that the Visegrad region's young democracies do not have such a deeply rooted democratic-governance political culture as their Western counterparts. Confronted by a recent wave of populism and illiberal tendencies, which are often more closely associated with the current Hungarian and Polish governments but are observable across the whole region, these vulnerabilities are exploited by internal, as well as external players.

However, a crucial question is whether the Kremlin's influence in the internal affairs of these four countries is as grave as is often suggested, or if the Kremlin's involvement is overstated and inflated by the media. The primary goal of this publication is therefore to try to answer this question, and gain valuable insight into the variety of the Kremlin's influence activities in Central Europe. It focuses on the differences and similarities in the approaches and strategies of Russia's influence tools among individual Visegrad countries, in order to understand the myriad of tools and methods upon which the Russian government can rely upon. Furthermore, it seeks to assess the reach, as well as impact, of such activities.

The text is divided into four country reports written by four leading think tanks that have joined forces to examine the Kremlin's use of its "soft power toolbox" in greater depth. Each partner organization – the Prague Security Studies Institute (Czech Republic), the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (Hungary), the Centre for International Relations (Poland), and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (Slovakia) – have thoroughly examined several distinct, but closely interrelated, areas in their respective countries: the political sphere and extremism, the cultural sector, academia and research institutes, the media and information space, and the economic and financial domain.

The foremost goal of this publication is to shed more light into the Kremlin's subversive influence in the region, not to provide an exhaustive list of all the existing links that lead to the Kremlin and its local allies. New facts and connections are brought to light every day, and this paper should be an inspiration and provide a basis for further research in this highly understudied area.

Each country report was the sole responsibility of each partner organization, and they present their unique view on the topic.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CZECH REPUBLIC

Given the Slavic roots of Czech society and four decades of Soviet rule, there are residual positive attitudes toward Russia among certain segments of the population. However, while some hold pro-Moscow views simply out of conviction, most are influenced by a deliberate Russian strategy advanced by those with close business and personal ties to the Kremlin.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

– With fifty-five accredited diplomats (ninety-two including spouses) in 2017, the diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation is disproportionately larger than the diplomatic missions of the Czech Republic's Western allies. Through both overt and covert activities, the Embassy plays a pivotal role in the Kremlin's influence operations.

– The Czech Republic is believed to be a regional hub for Russian intelligence. Czech security experts assess that intelligence personnel represent around one-third of the Embassy staff in addition to those without diplomatic cover.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

– Numerous Czech NGOs and cultural organizations hold favourable positions towards Russia and, wittingly or unwittingly, spread Kremlin-manufactured or inspired disinformation and other distorted narratives. In most cases, however, direct Kremlin involvement and financial support has not been demonstrated.

– Several pro-Russian NGOs, such as the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, take part in pan-Slavic congresses which serve as networking opportunities and further integration within the pro-Kremlin informal 'club' of NGOs.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE AND EXTREMISM

– Examples of the Kremlin's influence can be found across the entire political spectrum. The most consistent supporter of Russia among Czech political parties is, however, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia.

– Several MPs have travelled to the Donbass and/or Crimea since 2014 on so-called 'observation missions', thus breaching Ukrainian law and causing diplomatic disputes.

– Among the most vocal advocates of the Kremlin's interests are two prominent figures: the current Czech President Miloš Zeman, and ex-president Václav Klaus. Both are known for their close links to the Russian business community and have repeatedly participated in the annual Rhodes Forum, "Dialogue of Civilizations", organized by the Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin.

– President Zeman has repeatedly called for the lifting of economic sanctions against Russia and promoted friendly relations and closer economic cooperation. Among his closest allies and supporters are such figures as Martin Nejedlý or Zdeněk Zbytek, entrepreneurs with well-established ties to Russian businessmen and diplomats who have consistently lobbied for Russian business interests in the Czech Republic.

– Traces of support can be seen among extremists and paramilitary groups as well, yet only a few go beyond the ideological support. The only exception is the extremist political movement Řád národa (Order of the Nation) headquartered in a villa that belongs to the Russian Embassy.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

– There are forty to fifty platforms that actively spread pro-Russian disinformation and Kremlin-inspired narratives in the Czech Republic, most of them active since 2014. Only the Czech version of the international outlet Sputnik is financed by the Russian government, other media outlets claim no allegiance to Kremlin.

– Outlet Parlamentní listy (Parliamentary Letters) has become by far the most successful of the disinformation platforms, attracting attention by emotionally-charged articles with catchy titles. Pro-Russian and anti-Western articles prevail within its content. The outlet has strong links and unique access to President Miloš Zeman.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

– Despite relatively small, yet not unimportant, bilateral trade and FDI, many of the Kremlin's business operations are likely obscured through an extensive web of foreign subsidiaries. The official data, therefore, hardly captures the full picture of Russian economic influence in the country.

– Russia has ongoing interest in keeping its leverage over the Czech nuclear energy sector. The subsidiary of state-owned nuclear agency Rosatom, TVEL, is the sole supplier of nuclear fuel (at least until 2020) for both the Temelín and Dukovany power plants. In line with the State Energy Concept, the new tender for the Dukovany power plant is being prepared and Rosatom is likely to be a serious contender.

HUNGARY

Compared to other Visegrad countries, the substance of subversive messages, the focus of actors, and their distribution across the political-cultural field, differs in Hungary since it is neither a Slavic country, nor does it have any substantial Leftist-Communist political traditions.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

– Russia has the largest diplomatic mission in Hungary with forty-eight accredited diplomats (seventy-four including spouses) in 2017. The Embassy maintains an active relationship with Hungarian-Russian friendship societies, cultural societies, and Hungarian universities. Exhibitions, cultural events, and anniversaries are organized in line with the Kremlin's narrative.

– There are proven links between the Russian Embassy's staff and far-right groups and individuals (e.g. Hungarian National Movement) in addition to pro-Kremlin journalists of the printed press.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE, ACADEMIA AND RESEARCH INSTITUTES

– A series of organizations promote Russian culture and seek to strengthen bilateral ties. Specifically, the Russkiy Mir Foundation has become more active in recent years and opened new centers in Pecs and Debrecen, resulting in an intensified relationship between Russia and Southern and Eastern Hungary.

– Pro-Russian grassroots organizations hardly exist at this point in time, partly because the Hungarian civil society is inherently weak.

– The Hungarian government has encouraged and supported pro-Russian organizations since 2010, creating an impression that this change was elevated to an official government policy level. Among the NGOs are actors which receive state funding and take part in sharing the pro-Russian agenda.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE AND EXTREMISM

– The pro-Russian narrative in Hungary is no longer spearheaded by the extremist parties, but instead by mainstream governmental parties. In the last seven years, the governing party Fidesz has been pushing a new narrative, and adopted a more favourable stance towards Russia, especially with regards to Russo-Hungarian economic ties.

– The most well-known far-right party with pro-Russian orientation is Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary, currently the second largest party in Hungary. It maintains active relations with Russia, from which it previously received financial support as well. Instrumental in this relationship was Bela Kovacs, a proven Russian intelligence operative. However, Russia and Jobbik have grown distant in recent months as Fidesz, has become a more relevant partner for Russian authorities.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

– Hungary is characterized by a specific phenomenon: the presence of pro-Russian disinformation in the mainstream media, primarily in channels either state-owned or influenced by the government. The state news agency MTI, for example, has referred to the separatists in Eastern Ukraine as a legitimate state and blamed the United States for the *en masse* death of civilians in Syria.

– There are 80–100 websites in Hungary spreading the pro-Kremlin narratives, most with limited reach. Around 6–10 of these can be considered to have legitimate influence. In terms of content, a very small segment is tailored to the Hungarian audience.

– Channels offering 'alternative news' are significantly more popular than direct channels from Russia or other openly pro-Russian sites.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

– Bilateral economic ties are limited, with foreign trade peaking at 6,44 % in 2008, and since 2014 have been on steady decline.

– Russia's economic presence in Hungary is generally not significant with one major exception: the nuclear power plant Paks 2 project. Investment in this project accounts for around 10 % of the Hungarian GDP, with 80% of the costs covered by the Russian Vnesheconombank. It is assumed that the project will increase Hungary's dependence on Russian nuclear technology and financial support, which may translate into political leverage.

POLAND

In terms of Russian influence and vulnerability to the Kremlin's soft power tools, Poland represents a distinctive case among Central and Eastern European states. Despite the fact that it shares the experience of being Moscow's satellite during the communist times, just like the other V4 states, Poland's specifically traumatising and negative historical experience with Russia has united the Polish political class around a consensus to reduce, rather than foster, new dependencies on Russia.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

– The diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation in Poland, with its sixty-five accredited diplomats (118 including spouses) in 2017, is one of the largest in the country. To compare, there are just forty German accredited diplomats, and seventy-seven American accredited diplomats.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

– The Polish political landscape is dominated by the former anti-communist opposition and lacks any major party or key figure that would advocate, on a nationwide level, for a closer relationship with the current Russian leadership.

– Russian influence is most visible amongst various radical movements and associations. Apart from an anti-establishment sentiment, they share anti-American (or anti-Western) and anti-Ukrainian sentiments, connected with the historical memories of the Wołyń massacre. By emphasizing a more nationalistic attitude, marginal political groupings may indirectly support the Kremlin's goal of sowing greater divisions within Polish society.

– Among the openly pro-Russian organisations, the pro-Russian party Zmiana (Change) plays a central role. The party is led by Mateusz Piskorski, who was arrested in 2016 on espionage charges. He has also been involved in a transnational network of anti-Western and pro-Russian activists, and taken part in propagandistic actions aimed at legitimizing the Kremlin's policies including "election monitoring missions" in an occupied Crimea.

– More politically significant organizations, such as Kukiz'15 or Kresy, cannot be described as consistently pro-Russian. However, many of their positions, most importantly those against Ukraine, are in line with the Kremlin's interests and narratives.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE, ACADEMIA AND THINK-TANKS

– Russian state-affiliated institutions, such as Russkiy Mir or the Russian Center for Science and Culture, which is a part of Rossotrudnichestvo (the Russian federal agency promoting Russia's positive image abroad), promote Russian culture and organize trips to Russia for Polish academics and teachers. Their presence and influence in Poland is limited however, as a result of the strongly pro-Western orientation of Polish elites, historical memory within society, the lack of a significant Russian minority, or the autocephalous status of the Orthodox Church in Poland.

– The think-tank field lacks significant actors with ties to Russia, except for the European Center for Geopolitical Analysis (ECAG), which is closely linked to the openly pro-Russian party Zmiana. The ECAG was believed to be one of the key organizations responsible for recruiting members of the election observation missions for the Russian-backed separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine.

– In the field of academia, recent years brought some highly publicized cases of scholars openly praising Russian authorities for their actions during the Ukraine crisis, or for defending "true Christian values".

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

– Russian media plays a relatively minor role in Poland, but there have been attempts to boost its presence.

– Many Internet-based sources presenting anti-Western, anti-Ukrainian, and less often openly pro-Russian agendas are often institutionally weak, but with a growing audience.

– Pro-Kremlin circles often seek to fuel the already existing tensions within Poland, and its relations with its neighbors, particularly Ukraine and Lithuania.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

– Trade relations with Russia have, in recent years, been severely harmed by the Russian economic recession, sanctions, as well as falling oil prices. In 2016, Russia was the 8th largest recipient of Polish exports and the 3rd largest exporter to Poland. FDI from Russia in 2015 accounted for just 0,2 % of the total FDI stock in Poland.

– The Polish political class has been wary for years of creating economic dependencies on Russia, and thus potentially hostile acquisition attempts concerning the oil company Lotos Group or the chemical group Azoty never came to pass. Nevertheless, there are two areas which are particularly vulnerable. First, Poland is dependent on Russia's energy resources, mainly natural gas. Second, Russia plays a significant role in the Polish agricultural sector.

SLOVAKIA

The Pan-Slavic concept and cultural proximity of the Slovak and Russian nations were highlighted in the 19th century, and used for strengthening the Slovak position in their claims for national sovereignty. This legacy partly explains the positive sentiments of certain segments of Slovak society towards Russia, which Russia has attempted to exploit in its "influence activities."

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

– There have been twenty-three accredited Russian diplomats (thirty-two including spouses) in the Slovak Republic in 2017. The number might seem low in comparison with other Visegrad countries but it is given by Slovakia's difference in size – to put it into context, there are twenty-six American and only fourteen German diplomats.

– The Russian Embassy in Slovakia is the main contact point of pro-Kremlin activities. It organizes various memorial and cultural events, holds conferences, and purposefully shares media content made by conspiratorial media sources.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

– A handful of NGOs and associations spread both Russian culture and ideas of cooperation between Slovakia and Russia. They often use rhetoric based on pan-Slavism and anti-EU or anti-NATO sentiments. They serve as platforms for spreading conspiracies and pro-Russian demagogy.

– An illustrative case is the Slovak-Russian Society headed by the former Prime Minister, Ján Čarnogurský, who has become a strong promoter of the Russian regime and pro-Kremlin narratives, even those based on fabricated facts.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

– Ambivalence in the attitudes of the key Slovak politicians towards Russia, and the inconsistency of Slovak political strategy have been characteristic features of Slovak foreign policy toward Russia in recent years. On a number of occasions, Prime Minister Robert Fico, who on the official level supports sanctions, advocated for strengthening Slovak-Russian ties and positive attitude towards Putin's policy.

– The People's party Our Slovakia, headed by Marian Kotleba, espouses extremist ideology, presents itself as anti-EU and pro-Kremlin, and maintains ties with paramilitary organisations. Leaked emails of a Belarus-born writer and pro-Russian ideologue, Alexander Usovsky, suggest Kotleba's links to Russian oligarchs and financial support coming from Russia.

PARAMILITARY GROUPS

– Slovakia have in recent years experienced a growth in influence of pro-Russian paramilitary groups. Some of them are aligned with pro-Russian ideology and others even have Russian economic support. For example, Slovak Conscripts have cooperated with the Russian ultra conservative and nationalistic organization, Narodny Sobor (National Council).

– Several members of Slovak paramilitary groups have joined the conflict in the Donbass within the pro-Russian militants' units, highlighting the radicalizing potential of such forces.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

– Similarly to the Czech Republic, Slovakia has seen an upsurge in pro-Russian disinformation since 2014. According to the Slovak initiative Konspiratori.sk, there are around 108 Slovak and Czech servers that spread untrustworthy content. Despite their pro-Russian orientation, none of them claim allegiance to the Kremlin and only informal links exist.

– The Kremlin's hand goes beyond the Internet. In 2016, the Press Agency of the Slovak Republic, headed by Jaroslav Rezník, who has recently become the director of the public service Radio and TV Station, signed a contract with the Kremlin-owned Sputnik. The contract was soon terminated due to the pressure from the media and civil society.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

– Mutual trade between Russia and Slovakia is not very significant – in the first half of 2015, Russia's import share was just 6 % and their export share only 2,3 %. Claims about possible massive damage to the Slovak economy caused by sanctions against Russia are therefore not substantiated.

– Signs of the usage of economic and financial tools of Russian influence in Slovakia could be discovered by tracking connections between members of the Slovak governmental party SMER-SD (Direction – Social Democrats) with influential business figures with ties to Russia.

CZECH REPUBLIC

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INTRODUCTION

Given the Slavic roots of Czech society and four decades of Soviet rule, there are residual positive attitudes toward Russia among certain segments of the population. That said, it is important to differentiate between pro-Russian sympathies and open voicing of Kremlin narratives, a trend which has increased significantly over the past several years. While some hold pro-Moscow views simply out of conviction, most are influenced by a deliberate Russian strategy advanced by those with close business and personal ties to the Kremlin. It is this strategic Russian undertaking that warrants closer investigation.

Russia's activities aimed to influence and shape public opinion and policy decision-making have long been ignored in the Czech Republic, but that, at long last, is beginning to change, especially with regard to recent parliamentary and upcoming presidential elections (taking place in October 2017 and January 2018, respectively). The critical nature of this problem has been acknowledged by the Czech government which has initiated the first steps to countering Russia's subversive operations. Among other measures, it established the Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats under the Ministry of Interior in 2017.

Nonetheless in the public policy sphere, this category of hybrid warfare has been often narrowed to a problem of disinformation outlets and propaganda. This overlooks the fact that information warfare is only component part of a much larger and more insidious story. Indeed, links to Kremlin in the Czech Republic penetrate many other spheres of Czech life, including the highest levels of political decision-making.

The purpose of this report is to provide a more comprehensive picture of Russia's influence activities in the Czech Republic. It identifies important areas in which links to Russia are most visible and seeks to illuminate the ways in which Russian proxies operate and the implications of their activities for Czech politics and society.

The report first delves into the activities of the outsized Russian Embassy and its Centre for Russian Science and Culture as they are both major platforms for the spreading of Russia's influence in the country. It next describes how recent developments have polarized relations within the Russian minority in the Czech Republic and examines the two cultural institutions that are the most vocal and aggressive in prosecuting the proliferation of Kremlin world views and disinformation. This is followed by the exploration of Moscow's links to political arena, focusing on prominent politicians and mainstream political parties as well as more extremist and fringe movements. The challenge represented by emerging paramilitary groups is also discussed. The section which follows summarizes the key findings related to the media and the disinformation campaign. Finally, the report assesses Russia's links to the Czech business and economic community which is a coveted dimension of the Kremlin's toolbox.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

As of June 2017, ninety-two (fifty-five without spouses) Russian diplomats were accredited in the Czech Republic, making the diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation the largest by far in the Czech Republic. It is disproportionally larger than the diplomatic missions of the country's Western allies. For example, the United States has fifty-six accredited diplomats (thirty-three without spouses) and Germany, the Czech Republic's main trading partner, only thirty-one (twenty-one without spouses). Most of the Russian diplomats are assigned to the embassy in Prague, with around one hundred and twenty staff members (diplomats and technical staff). The remainder reside in the Russian consulates in Karlovy Vary and Brno, with 6 and 5 diplomats, respectively.

Through its overt and covert activities, the Russian embassy plays a pivotal role in orchestrating Kremlin influence attempts within the country. Many of the embassy's activities appear to fall within the tasks and competencies of normal diplomatic representation, but a closer look permits one to identify steady efforts to influence Czech public discourse in order to disseminate disinformation, sow confusion and distrust towards the western democratic institutions and mainstream media, and ultimately consolidate Moscow's geopolitical agenda.

In the public policy arena, a critical hub has been the Russian Centre for Science and Culture, affiliated with the embassy. Active since 1971, the Centre has been developing and cultivating ties with Czech civil society and academia. Presently, the Centre serves as the local representation of Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian federal agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs established in 2008 to administer foreign aid and promote "an objective image of contemporary Russia" abroad (Ruské středisko vědy a kultury v Praze, 2016).

The Centre has been particularly active in the academic sphere. It regularly organizes presentations at Czech universities and high schools, hosts seminars for teachers and holds public lectures and other events on its premises (Ruské středisko vědy a kultury v Praze, 2017). In 2016, for instance, the Centre organized a well-attended public discussion with

Russian Duma member and Stalin admirer Nikolay Starikov, one of the most controversial Kremlin's figures and a driving force behind anti-liberal discourse in Russia.

Moreover, the Centre is mandated to develop close ties with associations and groups that tend to have pro-Russian worldviews in order to gain their advocacy and trust. It has also voiced its strong support for disinformation outlets that regularly traffic in misleading information. The Centre's Director, Leonid Gamza, even praised the "loyalty of the so-called alternative media" to Russia in December 2016 (Diplomatické noviny).

Regrettably, no matter how controversial, malevolent and disruptive these activities are in reality, they still fall within the boundaries of the Czech legal system. It tends to be other Embassy's operations (e.g. espionage, technology theft etc.) that directly contravene the security interests of the Czech state. The Czech Republic has long been believed to be a regional hub for the Russian security services. To their credit, the Czech intelligence services having been consistently issuing stern warnings about these menacing activities for many years (BIS).

Between 2011 and 2015, the Czech authorities expelled 11 employees of the Russian Embassy in Prague and its consulate in Brno, consisting of members of the diplomatic community, administrative staff and a deputy of military attaché. In 2012 alone, 5 diplomats lost their visas for "security reasons" (Slonková, 2015). Czech security experts assess that around one third of the Embassy staff is working for the Russian intelligence services, in addition to operatives without diplomatic cover (Břešťan, 2017).

THE CULTURAL SPHERE AND NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Numerous Czech NGOs and cultural organizations hold favourable positions towards Russia and, wittingly or unwittingly, spread Kremlin-manufactured disinformation and other distorted narratives. Nevertheless, their motives for allegiance to the Kremlin differ. Some have direct links to Russian diplomats or entities, while others' ideological orientation is anchored in Slavic empathy, combined with considerable disdain for Western liberal values. In many cases a combination of both factors is in play. The majority of pro-Russian-oriented organisations are small in size with regional influence, but a couple of them have greater reach. Among the most energetic are the Bohemian-Moravian Pan-Slavic Congress (ČMSS) and the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies (ISSS) whose activities are described below.

The ČMSS has been active since 2009 and aims to unite Slavic national minorities in the Czech Republic. It is headed by Zdeněk Opatřil, who co-owns a tourist agency that organizes trips to Russia and other post-Soviet countries. Besides his economic interest in the region, he is known for pro-Slavic sympathies and unconcealed support for pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine. In 2015, Opatřil accompanied Senator Jaroslav Doubrava to occupied Crimea where they met with the Prime Minister of the Republic of Crimea, Sergey Aksyonov.

ČMSS concentrates on the global Pan-Slavic scene and has participated in a number of gatherings on this subject held in Moscow, most recently in May 2017 (Zelenka, Soukup, 2017). These Pan-Slavic congresses serve as a networking platform for further integration within the pro-Kremlin alliance of NGOs, alternative media outlets and potential pro-Kremlin opinion leaders. They are usually well-attended, with over 400 participants from various Slavic countries including Transnistria or the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. The main goal of these forums is, according to Anton Shekhovtsov, an expert on Russian influence and extremism, to convey narratives that participants can take back to their respective countries and weave them into the domestic media.[1] According to Czech portal Aktualne.cz, part of the costs for Czech participants was also paid by the Russian side (Zelenka, Soukup, 2017).

The ISSS presents itself as a think tank and was officially registered in 2013. Its Director, Radmila Zemanová-Kopecká, is a frequent participant at anti-Western and pro-Russian rallies and a former member of the SPOZ party that was created to support president Miloš Zeman (no family relation). A journalist by profession, Zemanová publishes articles and commentaries on media platforms often spreading disinformation such as Parlamentní listy (Parliamentary Letters) and SmartNews, or provides interviews to Kremlin-owned Sputnik News.

The ISSS came under public scrutiny in February 2014 when it organized a seminar in the Czech parliament entitled "Myths about Russia." The conference took place under the auspices of Soňa Marková, a Communist party MP. In 2016, the ISSS organized another such seminar in the Czech parliament entitled "Myths about Russia: What is Truth and What is a Lie about Russia?" Both events were promoting Kremlin-inspired narratives on high-level official meetings.

One of the organizations with more visible links to Russia is the Youth Time International Movement (YTIM) that was launched in 2010 and currently resides in Prague. It is a youth branch of the Rhodes Forum, "Dialogue of Civilisations", which is presented as an "alternative international discussion platform." It was established by Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin, until recently a sanctioned, powerful ally of Vladimir Putin that also served as the CEO of Russian Railways until 2016. The YTIM is responsible for organizing events for young people worldwide. Among its flagship programs are roundtable discussions, leadership development initiatives and summer schools. In the Czech Republic, the movement, however, maintains a rather low profile, rarely entering the public debate.

[1] From personal communication

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Evidence of support for the Kremlin's interests or Russia-originated narratives can be found across the political spectrum, specifically, within the ruling Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the ANO (Yes) 2011 movement, the opposition Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and the Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy party as well as in the Presidential office itself.[2]

The most visible and consistent supporter of Russia among Czech political parties is the communist party, until the 2017 elections the third strongest party in Czech Parliament. As the name indicates, this support dates back to pre-1989. Some of KSČM members openly support Kremlin policy positions in the Czech Republic and retain close ties to Russian elites as well as pro-Russian separatists in Donbas. That said, institutional or whole-of-party support for the Russian government, as is the case with the KSČM, is rather rare.

Some of the most vocal advocates of pro-Russian interests are ex-President Václav Klaus and President Miloš Zeman, prominent figures in the Czech politics since the Velvet Revolution (both previously serving as prime ministers and long-term leaders of strong Czech parties). Both men are known for their close links to the Russian business community, especially to the oil company Lukoil, and have repeatedly participated in the annual Rhodes Forum, "Dialogue of Civilisations", organized by the Russian oligarch Vladimir Yakunin. Indeed, President Zeman is the only current EU Head of State that regularly takes part in this Moscow-sponsored gathering.

Václav Klaus, while he was still the Czech President, repeatedly and secretly met with the President of Lukoil, Vagi Aleksperov, when the Russian company announced its expansion to the Czech Republic (Respekt, 2010). According to media reports, the publishing of several books by Klaus was also allegedly funded by Lukoil (Respekt, 2010). In 2007, Klaus was awarded Pushkin Medal by Vladimir Putin for his efforts in building positive Czech-Russian relations. In 2016, he joined the supervisory board of a newly established Berlin-based research institute of the Dialogue of Civilisations, co-founded by Yakunin.

Current president Miloš Zeman repeatedly called for the lifting of sanctions against Russia and is among the most prominent supporters of Czech disinformation outlets, indirectly supporting some of the conspiracy theories produced by these media sources.[3] Zeman's preferences for Kremlin were allegedly fostered during his successful political comeback in the presidential elections of 2013, when his campaign was financially allegedly backed by Martin Nejedlý and Zdeněk Zbytek, entrepreneurs with well-established contacts in Russia.

Zdeněk Zbytek, a Czech millionaire and former manager of the pro-Zeman SPOZ party, has been under scrutiny by the Czech Security Information Services (BIS) for his dubious contacts in Russia (Chaloupska, 2009). He used to have offices in the building next to, and owned by, the Russian Embassy in Prague and still possesses an Embassy-owned villa under a lease. Zbytek is a frequent visitor to Dialogue of Civilisations and the president of the non-governmental association Club Russia that lobbies for closer economic ties with Russia.

Martin Nejedlý, one of the principal donors to the SPOZ party as well as Zeman's presidential campaign, is considered to be the most influential advisor of President Zeman (Neovlivní, 2015). For ten years Nejedlý has done business in Russia and cooperated with Lukoil for which he negotiated technological transfers to the Czech Republic (Klímová, Kmenta, 2012). He is also a former head of Lukoil Aviation Czech, co-owned by him and Lukoil. While Nejedlý was still representing this company, which was, at the time, facing a legal dispute with the Czech state over 27,5 million CZK, he sat next to President Zeman during his meeting with Vladimir Putin in 2015. Recently, the legal dispute was settled by Lukoil injecting 180 million CZK to Lukoil Aviation Czech.

In the last couple of years, several parliamentarians and officials from various political parties have travelled to the occupied Crimean Peninsula or separatist-controlled areas of Donbas. The first such visit took place in March 2014, when Milan Šarapatka (then a member of Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy party), Stanislav Berkovec (ANO) and Miloslav Soušek (former MP of ČSSD), travelled to Crimea to oversee, and thus indirectly legitimize, the false referendum on status of Crimea. What was, according to Soušek, a routine monitoring mission was, in fact, an action organized by a Brussel-based NGO, the Eurasian Organization for Democracy and Election (EODE), headed by Luc Michel, a former member of a Neo-Nazi group and current leader of Belgian extremist far-right Parti Communautaire National-Européen that maintains strong links to Russian media (Štefániková, 2014).

In September 2015, Crimea was also visited by Senator Jaroslav Doubrava (a former member of the KSČM, currently the North Bohemians), who was accompanied by the head of the ČMSS, Zdeněk Opatřil, and a controversial Czech-based Russian figure, Sergey Komkov. In March 2017, another visit was conducted by Jaroslav Holík from the Freedom and Direct Democracy party (Všeslovanský výbor, 2015). Donbas areas controlled by the separatists were likewise visited by two KSČM MPs, Zdeněk Ondráček and Stanislav Mackovík, in January 2016 (iDNES, 2016).

The significance of these visits should not be underestimated since they are used to legitimise the annexation of Crimea and separatist-controlled regimes in Donbas. Although they were presented as private events to the Czech public, Russian and local media reported them to be official Czech delegations. In every case, Czech parliamentarians met with high-level local representatives, took part in press conferences and gave interviews to Russian-controlled media.

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[2] The text was written before Czech Parliamentary elections that took place in October 2017. For that reason, it does not reflect new composition of the Parliament but refers to the years 2013–2017.

[3] For example, in 2017 Zeman gave interview to Slovak conspiracy website Hlavne Spravy where he warned against the craziness of Brussels and their immigration policies which also gives space to Slovak neo-nazis.

As a justification for their visits, they usually cited seeking an update on the status of Ukraine. Ondráček and Mackovík claimed to have secured proof of atrocities committed by Ukrainian soldiers (KSČM Svitavy, 2016). The visits clearly undermine the official position of the Czech government and could result in severe political and diplomatic consequences. Interestingly, none of this activity elicited a significant response by Czech authorities, despite some of the visitors represented the ruling party ANO, or the third largest party KSČM.

The visit by KSČM's MP, Ondráček, is even more alarming given his membership in the parliamentary committee overseeing the Security Information Service (BIS). Beside his visit to Donbas, he took part in another event breaching official Czech foreign policy protocol – an opening of an alleged consular office of Donetsk People's Republic in the Czech Republic in September 2016. The Czech Republic has never acknowledged the existence of the Republic and in June 2017 a court order instructed the 'consular office' to terminate its operations (ČT24, 2017). Ironically, BIS in its 2016 report pointed to and warned against Russian disinformation initiatives targeting Czech citizens.

THE EXTREMIST SPHERE AND PARAMILITARY GROUPS

Among the fiercest supporters of pro-Russian narratives are several extremist groups and individuals with limited impact on the political debate. They are mostly active on social media and online and occasionally organize rallies and protests. One such example is a pro-Russian activist and former MP, Jiří Vyvadil, who established a Facebook group "Jiří Vyvadil's Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic" with approximately 8,000 members and is a contributor to the disinformation outlet Parlamentní listy. His ability to rally people around his cause is, however, limited. When he organized a demonstration against the US Military Convoy Passage through the Czech Republic in 2015, the event ended up a fiasco with only a handful of people showing up (iDNES, 2015).

Among the more disciplined pro-Russian groups are Czech far-right parties, such as National Democracy (ND) or Worker's Social Democratic Party (DSSS). ND is led by Adam B. Bartoš who is known for his xenophobic and anti-Semitic views and has participated at several receptions and events organized by the Russian Embassy in Prague. In 2014, shortly after the annexation of Crimea, he came to the Embassy with a letter to support "Russian efforts to establish order and stability in Ukraine".

Moreover, his publishing house put out a book, "The Great War of Continents", by Alexander Dugin, a contemporary Russian Eurasianist philosopher whose thoughts are said to have influenced Putin's world view. ND also tried to join forces with the paramilitary group, Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve, but due to internal disputes within this group, the cooperation envisioned did not materialize. DSSS, which among its members has several persons known for their sympathies to neo-Nazism, has also been known for its fondness for Russia. Its leader Tomáš Vandas has frequently criticized the West and has called for lifting of sanctions against Russia.

In recent years, both ND and DSSS have joined international institutions that are closely linked to pro-Kremlin political parties and criticise their Western counterparts. DSSS joined the far-right European political party, Alliance for Peace and Freedom (APF), an umbrella movement established in the European Parliament in 2015, and Vandas was even sworn into its leadership.

In 2015, the APF and its members participated in the first International Russian Conservative Forum organized in Saint Petersburg by the pro-Kremlin party Family (Rodina), which was founded in 2003 by hard-line Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin (Shekhovtsov, 2015). The Forums brought together many far-right fringe parties from all around Europe to discuss current global affairs and common strategies. They cast light on the mechanism through which information radicalisation of far-right parties happens. The ideas stemming from such forums are then rather easily spread and integrated into the national discourse.

There are also several documented cases of direct Russian financial support for extremist groups or pro-Russian activists. The money travels through various financial gambits, using several intermediaries that are then difficult to track back to its original source. One illustrative case study of Russian financial support for subversive forces in the Central Europe is connected with the name of Alexander Usovsky, a Belarus-born writer and pro-Russian ideologue. According to leaked messages, exposed by Ukrainian hackers Cyber Hunta and Cyber Alliance, Usovsky had throughout 2014 and 2015 received money from people and businesses close to Konstantin Malofeev, a Russian billionaire previously accused of financing insurgents in Donbas and Crimea. Usovsky then channelled the money to several pro-Russian fringe groups in the Visegrad countries to finance subversive efforts and demonstrations (Higgins, 2017). In the Czech Republic, he provided financial support for the purchase of flags and other paraphernalia used during protests against NATO and later offered additional funds to buy cameras and post videos from the rally online (Máca, 2017). The Czech recipient of the money was Ladislav Kašuka, a Stalin admirer and security guard by profession, whom Russian media cited several times as a Czech journalist or expert. Kašuka also contributes to a disinformation outlet, the Czech Free Press (Máca, 2016).

Following the turbulent events since 2014, several countries in Europe have witnessed a growing number of paramilitary groups, voluntary semi-militarized units whose tactics, structures and training simulate those of the regular armies. While in countries like Estonia, Latvia and Poland, the rise of these groups is mostly driven by renewed fears over Russian expansionism, paramilitaries in the Czech Republic and Slovakia pursue different goals.

For example, the Paramilitary group National Militia (NM) prepares its members for partisan fighting against NATO and migrants. NM considers migrants, the Prague liberal intelligentsia, the US, EU and NATO their principal foes and they view themselves as allies of Putin's Russia. The unit is headed by the likes of Marek Obrtel, a former lieutenant colonel of Czech army and strong promoter of Czech exit from

NATO and EU, or Nela Lisková, the founder of the above-mentioned consular office of Donetsk People's Republic.

NM claims to have around 2,500 members all around the country, yet such numbers are hard to verify and informed journalists have questioned them. The group is also active on social media and it has gathered almost 16,000 followers on Facebook during its first 18 months of its existence.

The Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve was a paramilitary group started by the aforementioned Marek Obrtel in 2015. Similarly to NM, it was mobilizing its members against NATO and immigrants and was open about its pro-Russian orientation. The group was active in its early years, but suffered from internal disputes between its leaders and members which caused it to collapse.

The impact of the subversive activities of members of paramilitary groups should not be underestimated. Their combat training is combined with disinformation and hate speech. The handful of Czech citizens that have joined pro-Russian separatists in Donbas had been previously radicalized through national entities such as those mentioned. According to Ludvík Cimburek, advisor to the Chief of Staff of the Czech Armed Forces, members of such groups are adept at collaborating with the security services of non-allied nations (Echo24, 2015).

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the Czech Republic finds itself on the forefront of pro-Russian disinformation and propaganda. The Czech security services regularly warn about the insidious nature of these disinformation campaigns conducted by Kremlin in their annual reports. Around 40–50 Czech-language servers are active in spreading articles with manipulative content, in addition to 50–100 influential individuals that traffic in disinformation, as noted by the Ministry of Interior spokesman Jiří Korbel (Zelenka, Prchal, 2017). According to the Ministry, among the most influential are AC24, Svět kolem nás (The World Around Us), New World Order Opposition, Aeronet and Parlamentní listy (discussed in more detail later in the report).

Despite numerous efforts to expose these platforms, it is difficult to prove the link between the disinformation outlets and the Russian government or government-controlled entities, especially since many of these servers do not disclose their ownership and editorial staff or are registered abroad. Only the Czech language version of the international outlet Sputnik is directly financed by the Kremlin. All other websites claim no allegiance or links to the Russian government.

There are also several Czech-based media in Russian that spread pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives and manipulative content that primarily target the Russian-speaking community. The most influential among them are Prague Telegraf, Prague Express and Artěk. Artěk was previously subsidized by the Czech Ministry of Culture, but that support was suspended as in 2015 following protests from some members of the Russian minority and Czech historians. The magazine is headed by Alexander Barabanov, a Russian businessman who is known as an admirer of Vladimir Putin, and publicly calls the government in Kyiv fascist and committing genocide in Donbas (Neovlivní, 2017). These Russian-language media outlets contribute to the growing polarization within the Russian minority in the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic is among the favourite destinations for Russian nationals travelling to the EU for business and education purposes. Around 35,000 Russian nationals currently live in the Czech Republic, with the majority concentrated in Prague and Karlovy Vary, a spa city in the western part of the country. Even though the attempted radicalisation of Russian minorities has become a frequently used tool by Moscow to stir up tensions in regional countries, the Czech Republic has not, to date, experienced anything of that kind. Quite the contrary, the Russian minority itself has been increasingly polarized or estranged by the annexation of Crimea, the unrelenting war in the Donbas, as well as the coordinated propaganda campaigns that accompanied these events.

According to the 2015 and 2016 governmental reports about the situation of minorities in the Czech Republic, divisions within the Russian minority have grown substantially, with the main dividing line running between Russian nationals with Czech citizenship (constituting most of Russians who immigrated to the country in earlier decades) and those without citizenship (i.e. Russians who came to the Czech Republic in the past few years) (Zpráva o situaci národnostních menšin, 2015, 2016). The reports named several elements of Russian propaganda that have driven these growing divisions within the Russian minority in the Czech Republic, such as activities of pro-Russian and anti-Western NGOs, notably the Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic, the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, the Youth Time International Movement, as well as disinformation and conspiracy outlets like Aeronet and Haló noviny (Hello Newspaper).

Within this diverse community of disinformation purveyors, one particular server – Parlamentní listy (PL, its confusing name stands for Parliamentary Letters, even though it has no association with the Czech Parliament) – stands out. PL was established in 2003 and unlike strongly conspiracy websites that reach limited number of viewers, it has found a more successful business model based on sensationalism and a mixture of relevant information and disinformation. It has allowed PL to reach wider audiences so that it currently ranks among the ten most popular media platforms in the Czech Republic, attracting 500,000 to 800,000 unique viewers each month. In terms of numbers, this is, by far, the most successful of the disinformation platforms.

PL has built its reputation as a medium giving voice to all kinds of opinions, be they radical or liberal, pro-Western or pro-Russian. Such "balance", however, appears only on the surface as, according to a content analysis from 2015, pro-Russian and anti-Western articles clearly prevailed (Urban, 2015). PL capitalizes on controversial issues, publishes emotionally-charged articles with catchy titles and taps into people's antipathies and distrust towards the mainstream media (Urban, 2015). The veracity of the information is not priority of PL and it regularly publishes articles containing fake information and conspiracies.

In addition, PL has fondness for, and strong links, to President Zeman. In 2015, the publishing house Olympia, operated by the owner of PL and Senator Ivo Valenta, published a book "Tahle země je naše" (This Country Is Ours), consisting of a collection of 25 interviews with Miloš Zeman. It was authored by Zeman's spokesman Jiří Ovčáček and PL's journalist Radim Panenka, former member of the extremist National Party.

This, and other, positive gestures seem to have been reciprocated. According to a Czech investigative journalist Ondřej Kundra, PL has unique access to the President. Panenka, for example, accompanies President Zeman during his travels and is one of the few journalists that have conducted in-depth interviews with the Czech President (Zelenka, 2016). It is also evident that PL is one of the few media that the Czech president, with strong disdain for mainstream media, is willing to work with.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

To gain a comprehensive picture of the Moscow's levers of influence in the Czech Republic, economic and financial portfolio cannot be overlooked. From the perspective of trade, in 2016 Czech exports to Russia accounted for 1,9 % of total exports. However, as more than 30 % of Czech exports are destined for the German market and some of these goods may be re-exported to Russia, the real market share is probably higher (Businessinfo, 2017). In light of the sanctions regime and drop in commodity prices, this figure has fallen from 3,8 % in 2012.

Imports from Russia represented 1,6 % of the total in 2016, whereas four years earlier these imports made up 5,2 %, mostly in the form of oil and gas. To put these numbers into context, Russia has always been an important trading partner outside the EU, but never a vital one – European Union market accounts for more than three quarters of total Czech foreign trade.

Moreover, the official level of foreign direct investment (FDI) coming from Russia is understood to be relatively modest in comparison to other countries. Nonetheless, in 2010 the former head of the Czech Intelligence Service (UZSI) Karel Randák observed that *"some of the biggest Russian companies operate through a dizzying web of shell companies nominally owned and operated by the Czechs, but actually controlled by Moscow"* (Feifer, 2010). In 2017, some 13, 000 companies were owned by Russian businessmen but the Randák remark suggests that the official data hardly captures the full picture of Russian economic influence in the country (Novinky, 2017).

Similarly, the Czech Intelligence Service (BIS) highlighted in its 2015 annual report that Russia continued to focus, among other priorities, strengthening its position in Czech power engineering sector." (BIS, Annual Reports). A year earlier, the report specifically mentioned that Russian natural gas giant Gazprom was making efforts to exert control over the transit, storage and trade of natural gas in Central Europe (BIS, Annual Reports). Even though Gazprom and its daughter company Vemex are currently withdrawing from the Czech market due to substantial losses, these cases show how the Kremlin has tried to make use of both open and covert business, social and political influence to promote Russian economic and financial interests in the Czech Republic of the wrong sort.

In the energy sector, the Czech Republic depends on oil deliveries from Russia for some two-thirds of its annual needs and practically all consumed gas originates in Russia. The country lacks major oil resources domestically and the Druzhba pipeline, bringing Russian oil via Ukraine and Slovakia, has historically been of critical importance in this respect. It has experienced interruptions and reduced flows in recent years, however, thus challenging the reputation of Russia as a reliable energy supplier. One such disruption, which was explained away as a technical problem by Moscow, occurred following official discussions on placing an American radar installation in the Czech Republic in 2008. However, thanks to diversification of transport routes, purchasing of hydrocarbons on international markets and building additional gas storage facilities, oil and gas supplies into the Czech Republic are considered to be secured.

Until recently, one of the key Russian private companies that managed to form and cultivate important ties with a number of Czech politicians was Lukoil. Most important have been its links to Miroslav Šlouf, a former close aide of President Zeman. Šlouf's company, Slavia Consulting, brokered an agreement with Lukoil Aviation Czech to supply oil to Prague's airport at the time when a co-owner of this company was the notorious Nejedlý. These Russian-inspired networks of contacts represent a profound security risk to the country. Moscow excels at identifying modalities to get to allied decision-makers in the region. Interestingly, the Czech government at times showed awareness that Lukoil's influence needed to be countered. In 2006, for example, the government intervened to prevent the sale of Conoco Phillip's 16.3% stake in the biggest oil refinery Česká rafinérská to Lukoil. Although Lukoil was once fairly prominent in the Czech oil market, especially after purchasing some 44 gas stations throughout the country, it has reduced its presence as a result of its decision in 2014 to slim down its assets in Central and Eastern Europe.

Russia's state-owned Gazprom holds a majority ownership stake in the Czech gas company Vemex through its German subsidiary Gazprom Germania GmbH. Founded in 2006, it builded up its market share through selling gas to exclusively large- and medium-sized customers, but also managed to tap into the retail and household sector. With a market share of 12.5 % in 2014 (Annual Report Vemex, 2014), it was also a leader in the field of introducing compressed natural gas (CNG) filling stations. Its founder and former director, Vladimir Ermakov, is believed to be one of best connected Russian businessmen in the Czech Republic, who has, over the years, forged relationships with high-level government officials (Slonková, 2016). Yermakov is currently in charge of the Russian-Czech Mixed Trade Chamber, designed to promote Russian business interests in the Czech Republic. In March 2013, Gazprom Germania signed a deal with privately-owned Moravian Oil Company (MND) for the joint construction of an underground gas storage facility in Dambořice (south Moravia). It is now in operation and has the capacity to store 448 million cubic meters of gas, one of the largest of its kind in the Czech Republic. However, Vemex and Gazprom have recently started withdrawing from the Czech market in consequence of significant losses.

Russia also seeks to consolidate its control over Czech nuclear sector, in which it has historically maintained strong presence. In August 2009, a tender process for the construction of two additional units at Temelín nuclear complex was launched. Although the tender was cancelled in 2014, partly due to the conflict in Ukraine, it attracted bids from three candidates suppliers – the French firm Areva, America's Westinghouse and a consortium MIR.1200, comprised of Škoda JS and two subsidiaries of the state-owned nuclear group Rosatom, specifically Atomstrojexport and OKB Gidropress.[4] Škoda JS, a Czech-based nuclear engineering and supply firm, is majority-owned by Russia's OMZ, in which Gazprombank has held a controlling share, since 2004.[5] In terms of financing, Rosatom offered 100% coverage of project costs (over 10 billion USD) through its JSC Rusatom Overseas subsidiary. Westinghouse, for its part, was prepared to arrange a U.S. Exim Bank credit to cover 50 % of the project cost. Moscow's subsidized financing terms simply could not be offered by any Western country, which created a significant advantage in tender process.

Another Rosatom's subsidiary, TVEL, is the sole supplier of nuclear fuel to both existing nuclear power plants in Temelín and Dukovany with an exclusive contract until 2020. It is worth noting that in 2012 Rosatom opened its representative office in Prague and in 2014 established the firm Rosatom Central Europe. These factors should be kept in mind as the Czech government is reissuing the tender for the expansion of the Dukovany nuclear power plant and Rosatom is among top contenders.

Russia maintains its presence also in the Czech banking sector though it is predominantly owned by foreign owners domiciled in the European Union. In 2012, the state-owned Sberbank officially entered the market by acquiring Austrian Volksbank International, expressing an intention to consolidate its position in the European market (for a brief time the bank allegedly provided services to customers with artificial passports of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, which signals state control over the bank's operations).

The bank which has caused the most controversy is the First Czech-Russian Bank (FCRB). Founded in 1996 as a Czech-Russian joint venture with the assistance of now-defunct Czech IPB bank, its original objective was to service foreign trade turnover and investment projects in Russia and the Czech Republic. In 2008, FCRB's subsidiary, European-Russian Bank (ERB), was the first private bank to secure a banking licence in the Czech Republic, hence it could operate in the EU market (following two prior attempts at procuring a licence). Consistent with Moscow's agenda in supporting far right European parties, in November 2014, Marine Le Pen's National Front Party received a 9 million EUR loan from the FCRB (after being declined by French banks). The FCRB was declared bankrupt and taken over by Russia's deposit-insurance agency in 2016 (Kroet, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The Czech Republic is an important hub for Russia in Central Europe. Due to its strategic location in the heart of Europe as well as its favourable political climate, it has for years been one of the favourite destinations for Russians seeking to conduct business in Europe. As a result, Russians are frequent foreign owners of Czech companies and several influential Russian businessmen have well-established links to important Czech political figures right up to the Presidency. Yet Russian influence in the country goes beyond the business sphere and penetrates all parts of the society.

In particular, the Czech Republic is known for the high number of Russian espionage operatives on its soil, as the Russian Embassy in Prague allegedly serves as Moscow's regional base. The Russian Embassy has been involved in number of subversive activities, such as hosting controversial meetings and public discussions or renting its premises to groups and individuals that are instrumental in spreading Russia's soft-power influence throughout the Czech Republic. It has for example provided a lease to the Czech President's close friend Zdeněk Zbytek.

In the Czech political orbit, pro-Russian narratives and connections to Moscow are to be found across the entire ideological spectrum. With the exception of the Communist party, however, the Kremlin has sought to exert its influence at a more individual level rather than winning the support of a whole party, an effort that would be costly and visible. Russia's influence on political decision-making has been very apparent primarily because two of the country's most prominent political figures – current and former presidents Miloš Zeman and Václav Klaus (respectively) have served as vocal supporters of pro-Russian world views. In both cases, their pro-Kremlin leanings can be only partly explained by their ideological background. Business incentives have been crucial to this recruitment effort by Moscow. Several examples cited in this study help illuminate how Russian narratives, ideas and targeted interests have penetrated and taken hold in the Czech space, even in the absence of direct financial or organizational support. For the ideological indoctrination of pro-Kremlin organizations, like the Bohemian-Moravian Pan-Slavic Congress or the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies, and pro-Russian media outlets Kremlin has effectively utilized intermediaries, Embassy activities, corruption and other economic tools. It is thus important to

[4] Note: Atomstrojexport is a daughter company of Russia's ZAO Atomstroyexport. The Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation holds a 78.5 percent stake in the latter. The consortium offered the project MIR 1200 with 1,1198 mW capacity.

[5] OMZ also acquired the Brno-based Cheten EThengineering in 2007. In April 2015, the company went into liquidation.

bear in mind that Russian influence does not necessarily have to come in a form of direct support or request to spread its narratives but rather in a subliminal manner – through a discussion and ideological inspiration.

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HUNGARY

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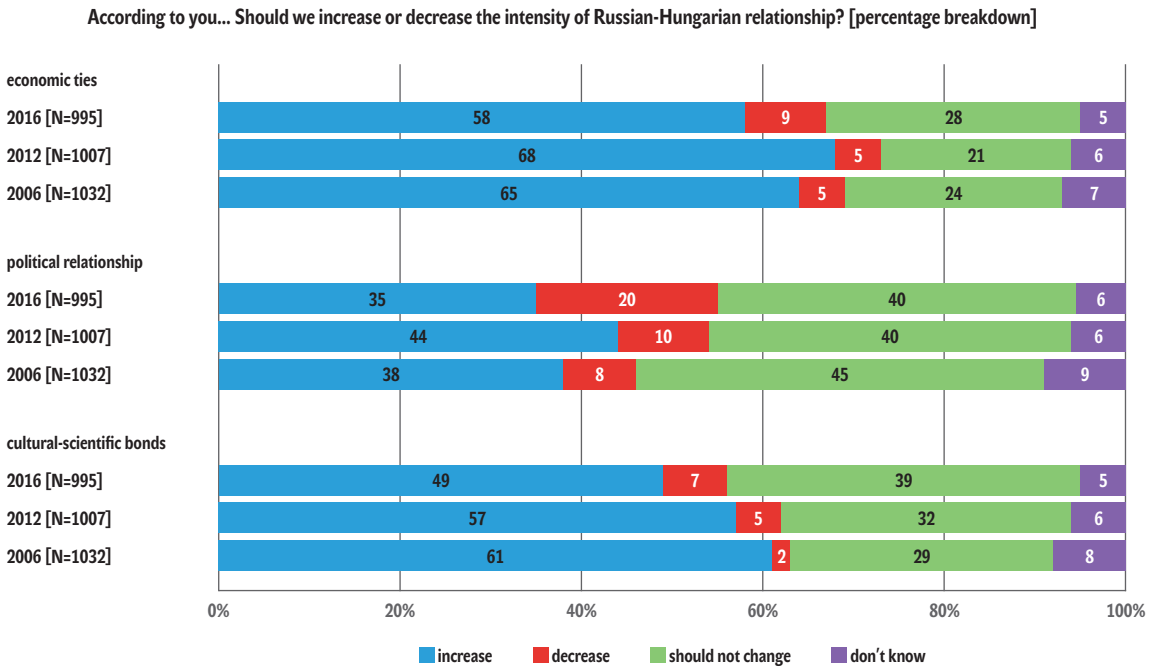
INTRODUCTION

The motivation for using Russian soft power in Hungary is in general similar to those in other Visegrad countries. However, the substance of subversive messages, the focus of actors, and their distribution across the politico-cultural field necessarily differs as Hungary is neither a Slavic country, nor does it have any substantial Leftist-Communist political traditions (contrary, for example, to the Czech Republic or Bulgaria). The socio-historical context of Hungary as an operation field for soft power is just as much instrumentalized by Russia as in neighbouring countries.

Firstly, one must note that Russian classical soft power is not the strongest political tool in Hungary, when we interpret "soft power" as mainly public diplomacy and mainstream cultural events. Particularly, the often openly pro-Kremlin stance of the public media and, alternative news pages play a much more dominant role in accessing a larger audience, and brings results that are more concrete.

Within Hungary, sentiments towards Russia vary considerably, according to the sectors of the relations. While two-thirds of the respondents supported the strengthening of economic ties, only one-third wished more political engagement. In general openness towards Russia increased significantly between 2006 and 2012, and has decreased afterwards. There are a multitude of reasons for this, but Russia was a hotly debated domestic policy issue both in 2007–2009 an after 2014. Sentiments overall are likely to be related to political preferences.

Figure 1: Opinion polls on Russian relations, 2006–16



THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

Russia has the largest diplomatic mission in Hungary with seventy-four accredited diplomats (fifty without spouses). Besides the Embassy based in Budapest, a General Consulate is operating with two accredited diplomats in the city of Debrecen.

The Embassy maintains an active relationship with the Hungarian-Russian friendship societies, cultural societies, and with those Hungarian universities where Russian departments are operating. Exhibitions, cultural events, and anniversaries are organized in line with the Russian narrative. Both the Embassy, and the General Consulate[6] operate small photo

[6] Photos on Russia placed in the inforation cabinet of the General Consulate in Debrece http://www.debrecen.mid.ru/photo_hn.html (downloaded 19 April, 2017)

exhibitors in cabinets in front of their buildings covering topics such as the Russian presence in Syria, "Civil war in Ukraine", or the "return of Crimea to Russia" supporting the Kremlin's narrative (Index.hu, 2015).

The Russian Embassy has the most active presence at events covering foreign, and security policy, organized by non-governmental organisations. Many Russian diplomats speak fluent Hungarian, studied at Moscow State Institute of International Relations or with bilateral grants in Hungarian Higher Education institutions. Russian diplomats are visiting all events covering NATO, or Russia related issues. Russian diplomats, unlike any other diplomats, never register to the events in advance and in most cases refrain from making statements, or ask questions. Based on our experience, Russian diplomats are seeking personal contacts, and often invite representatives of these organisations to informal lunch meetings.

Although we have no information on Russian diplomats ever engaging those experts, or organisations countering Russian propaganda directly, we are aware that since the Bőny killing[7], Embassy staff has had an active connection with those organisations, including those on the far right, which are spreading Russian propaganda or utilizing Russian narratives.

Russian diplomats also maintain active contacts with pro-Kremlin journalists of the printed press. One of the most well-known examples is the interview of István Lovas, a columnist of Magyar Hírlap (Hungarian News), with Vladimir Sergeev, the Russian ambassador to Hungary (Lovas, 2016). However, the Embassy itself is rather inactive. Unlike in other V4 countries, the Russian Embassy in Budapest almost never organizes public events.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

Historically, the presence of Russian culture in Hungary had been strengthened during the years of Communism by the state. Russian was introduced as an obligatory foreign language, and politically acceptable pieces of Russian literature were widely read. Youth exchange, and other forms of day-to-day cooperation existed for four decades. At the same time, Russian cultural rapprochement immediately disappeared after the fall of the Iron Curtain. What remained was mostly the mindset of fragmented models of individual behaviour. The following paragraphs list three Russian cultural organisations existing in today's Hungary and briefly describe their activities, lastly the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church is mentioned.

Hungarian-Russian Cultural and Friendship Society has a long history since its inception in 1946. Its president is István Rózsa. It has its sister-society in Moscow, the Russian-Hungarian Friendship Society, presided by Yuri Polyakov, the editor in chief of Literaturnaya Gazeta, a well-known literary figure in Russia. The society is not visibly active in Budapest, it seems to maintain a relatively close circle at its events, where it gives out yearly awards to those who promote the Russian-Hungarian relations (Magyar Orosz Művelődési és Baráti Társaság).

The Russian Cultural Centre and the Russian ballet theatre are open to the public. In comparison, classical venues of soft power by Russia are not competitive with Western representatives when it comes to films, exhibitions or art performance; classically, they offer programs for Russians living in Budapest (Orosz Kulturalis Kozpont).

Russkiy Mir foundation became a bit more active in the recent years in Hungary. Beyond Budapest it has opened Russian Cultural and Educational Centres in Pécs, and recently in April 2017 in Debrecen. Since the opening of the Russian Consulate General in Debrecen, relationships have rapidly intensified between Russia and Eastern Hungary. Beyond the political, and business relationship, the Russian Studies Department of the University of Debrecen is an important partner in these developments, by co-organising conferences or hosting the Centre financed by Russkiy Mir.

The Russian Orthodox Church is present in Hungary, and the last meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, head of the ruling party Fidesz, gave a significant boost to the church reconstruction, as the Hungarian government adopted a decree (1034/2017. (II. 1.)) supporting the initiative financially with 7,7 million EUR. Politically speaking, this church is not active and contains very few faithful members (Magyar Ortodox Egyházmegye).

NGOS, GONGOS, POLICY COMMUNITY AND ACADEMIA

The Hungarian civil society is inherently weak, and is one of the most fragile within the region. Various explanations for that exist, such as the extreme individualism of Hungarian citizens as a heritage of the pre-1989 era, brain drain of opinion leaders, very rudimentary culture of donations, discouragement by local authorities, and low number of successes. In addition, recently there has been a trend of stigmatization of civil organizations as foreign agents. This leads us to the point that pro-Russian grassroots organizations hardly exist at this point in time.

The Hungarian Ministry of Human Resources' National Cooperation Fund, and several other public grants offer financial support for NGOs. Here we look at actors which receive state funding, and at the same time, share some pro-Russian agenda. In certain cases, this certainly is involuntary, or not with the direct intention to support the Russian cause. Other GONGOs, close to the government, are more likely to coalesce consciously with the pro-Russian agenda – the so-called Opening to the East – of the government. It must be noted that the government encouraged and supported pro-Russian societies since 2010 – i.e. since the return of Viktor Orbán to power – which offered an impression that it was elevated to official government policy level.

[7] A police officer was shot dead on the 26th October, 2016 in the village of Bőny during a raid on a house suspected of containing illegal weapons. 76-year-old István Győrkös fired on two officers, killing one. Győrkös had long lasting relations with Russian services. As the leader of a major neo-nazi group he has founded hidfo.net, a pro-Russian news portal, that was taken over by Russians previously.

Out of these societies, the Lakitelek Folk High School (which is a type of a community college, but without official accreditation) stands out. Once a respectful organization of the regime change era in 1989, the Lakitelek School was often at the centre of opposition movements and meetings. Meaning, it was an active institution in channelling the anti-Soviet sentiment to politically acceptable opposition positions. The head of the institute is Sándor Lezsák, Fidesz MP (formerly Hungarian Democratic Forum MP, the major conservative party driving regime change), and deputy speaker of the House. It underwent a period of insignificance, but has recently returned as one of the platforms for a more pro-Eastern Hungarian position. The school offers a place where the historical perspective of "coming from the East" are investigated, now with one politically loaded Russia-oriented Commission. The institute started in March 2013 with an "Opening to the East" policy. It has 12 other likewise bodies devoted for different investigations. In this Commission the well-known pro-Russian faces of the government, such as Ernő Keskeny (former ambassador to Moscow, currently ambassador to Kyiv) or Szilárd Kiss (infamous case of a diplomat and alleged criminal, who held an attaché post at the Hungarian Embassy in Moscow despite failing to pass the security screening) gave presentations. While Lakitelek remains a hub for a multitude of discussions on Hungarian ethnicity and history, this single Commission was instrumentalized politically to give a certain social background to the official Hungarian foreign policy of the time. All in all, the out-reach of Lakitelek School is far from substantial, despite the massive resources channelled there by the government.

Another society of Russian cultural influence is a publishing house Arktos Media. As the previously mentioned Political Capital study on weaponization of culture stated "Arktos is the main publisher of the works of Eurasianist ideologist Alexander Dugin," which means that up-to-date Kremlin ideologists are accessible on the Hungarian book market (Political Capital, 2016).

THE POLITICAL SPHERE AND EXTREMISM

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, connections of the Hungarian political parties with their Russian counterparts were significantly weakened. With regards to the political left, the remaining hard-core communists, primarily the Worker's Party of Gyula Thürmer carried on the former Soviet message. For the first decade after the regime change, however, no major political party endorsed openly pro-Russian views. The Worker's Party remained marginal, and never passed the parliamentary threshold.

Mainly two distinct sentiments manifested at that time, and are today very much mixed across the political spectrum in the 2000 s. One could identify these on the extreme right-wing and extreme left-wing. The revisionist narrative of far-right movements seeding discord between Hungary, and its neighbours is an extremely useful tool in the hands of Russian soft power, and thus the attempt to ignite ethnic tensions in Central-Europe. When Hungary expressed its wish for the autonomy of Hungarians living in the Transcarpathian part of Ukraine in spring 2014, it supported the Russian concerns for minorities in Ukraine in the beginning of the crisis. The alleged support behind these extreme right groups lead to their modernization through 1) their increased online presence 2) mass production of merchandise (from T-shirts and key-rings to calendars) 3) printing revisionist literature 4) instrumentalizing the relationship to Hungarian minorities in neighbouring countries through nostalgic feelings (so called *Tündérkert*-vízió).

The dominant discourse pushed by the far-left for reframing the Kádár-years (general secretary of the Communist Party after 1956) into a nostalgic, "everything was better in the old times" feeling. This was not particularly difficult during the economic hardships of the nineties, however the voice weakened around and after the accession to the EU. Yet, the image of the "kádári kisember" (loosely translated as "average satisfied citizens of the Kádár-era") remained with us, and is still an important frame around which many debates were fought.

Far-right parties started to establish connections with Moscow as well. The most well-known is Jobbik, the Movement for a Better Hungary, currently the second biggest party of Hungary. Jobbik has a strong pro-Russian orientation, it maintains active relations with Russia, received financial support from Moscow, and recognizes the annexation of Crimea. The party was founded in 2003, but its robust development started under its second chairman Gabor Vona, who took over the leadership in 2006. The foreign affairs of the party were managed by Béla Kovács, who joined Jobbik in December 2005, and became the close ally of Vona. He has become the founder, and chairman of the foreign affairs committee of Jobbik. Kovács, who had returned from Russia to Hungary in 2003 after spending about 15 years in the country together with his wife, a proven Russian intelligence operative, had excellent relations in Moscow. With his help, Jobbik received political support, and funding from the Kremlin.

By 2008 Kovacs moved his activities mainly to Brussels, and by 2010 he became a member of the European Parliament. He was extremely active in EU-Russia affairs, where he operated from an office in the Transcarpathia region of Ukraine, and participated as an EU election observer at the so-called referendum in Crimea. The Hungarian government has accused Kovács of spying for the Russian government against European Union institutions. In September 2014, the chief prosecutor asked the European Parliament to suspend the immunity of Kovács, so that he could be investigated. In recent months, distance between Russia and Jobbik grew significantly, as Fidesz become a more relevant partner for Russian authorities.

Additionally, the originally revisionist Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement does not seem to be immune to the influence of the far-right scene by Russian measures. The movement – a close ally of Jobbik – apparently supported the so-called Crimean referendum, and is regularly provoking neighbouring countries with Hungarian supremacist discourse. The leader of the movement recently became the Vice-president of Jobbik, and actively supports homophobic and anti-Islamic political initiatives.

The pro-Russian narrative in Hungary is no longer spearheaded by the extreme parties, but by mainstream governmental parties. In the last seven years, one of the strongest parties, Fidesz, has been pushing

a new set of rhetoric. After Putin's take of power, the activity of Russia in Hungary's political life has increased. From the governing parties, at first the Hungarian Socialist Party between 2002–2010 and from 2010 on Fidesz, took on a more pro-Russian stance, especially in regards to economic ties. In June 2012 PM Viktor Orbán nominated his close confidant, Péter Szijjártó to the position of State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and External Economic Relations at the Prime Minister's Office. Practically, Szijjártó became responsible for the foreign economic ties with countries outside the EU, an eminent policy field of the government under the label "Eastern opening". He launched an acute level of diplomacy, intensifying bilateral relations with Eastern countries. His nomination was also comprised of a centralization effort. In this new setting, most activities related to high-level decision-making were concentrated in the Prime Minister's Office, with lesser involvement from the ministerial levels. Annual bilateral meetings, usually held in January-early February between Viktor Orbán, and Vladimir Putin became the focal points of the relations since 2010.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

Hungary is characterized by a specific phenomenon regarding the channels of Russian disinformation narrative, namely that Russian disinformation often appears in the mainstream media too; primarily in channels, and newspapers that are either state-owned or influenced by the government. This is an important difference between Hungary and the other Visegrad countries.

Within mainstream media channels, the state news agency MTI is the most important, as it is the primary source of news for every Hungarian media outlet. In terms of content, MTI does not publish fake or fabricated news. However, it does gives room to such Russian opinions, either of leading politicians or of influential newspapers, which serve as channels of disinformation on multiple levels. This ranges from labelling separatists in Eastern Ukraine as if they were a legitimate state, to blaming the United States for the *en masse* death of civilians in Syria.

A number of major political dailies also contain articles that may qualify as parts of Russian disinformation. One of them is a pro-governmental, almost far-right, therefore relatively marginal newspaper Magyar Hírlap belongs to a controversial, pro-governmental oligarch. There are numerous authors (i.e. István Lovas, Gyula Máté T.) in the staff regularly publishing pieces of outright disinformation and anti-NATO, anti-EU propaganda. The background of the journalists is well-known, and many of them have close connections to Russia, and Russian ideologies, and the whole editorial staff shares the same political preferences.

In the staff of the other conservative, independent daily Magyar Nemzet (Hungarian Nation), which is often critical towards the government- there are a few journalists which are well known of their pro-Russian sentiments. Their leading foreign policy journalist, Gábor Stier, can be characterized as Russlandversteher[8], and is an informed expert on Russia from well before Moscow had started its coordinated disinformation operations. His publications constitute the perfect example of how hard it is to distinguish between honest convictions, and intentional disinformation operations. In addition, the semi-official, but extremely marginal newspaper of the government Magyar Idők (Hungarian Time) has also published several pro-Russian articles recently.

Regarding the channels of pro-Russian disinformation, currently there are about 80–100 websites in Hungary spreading the narratives of the Kremlin. However, the clear majority of them do not seem to have a serious impact. Out of them, there are around 6–10 propaganda websites which have legitimate influence. Not all of the hereby mentioned sites are active in the social media sphere, at least not directly. Due to the lack of Twitter culture, only Facebook has significant pro-Russian sites in Hungarian.

[8] The term is used for members of the elite or intelligentsia who gush with empathy for Russia and its president, Vladimir Putin.

Table 1: Major pro-Russian websites in Hungary, 2017

NAME	LIKES (May 2017)	LINK	NAME IN ENGLISH /DESCRIPTION
Valóság amit tudnod kell	50270	https://www.facebook.com/ValosagAmitTudnodKell/	Truth you should know – Alternative news channel
Napi Migráns	50000	Can't be reached currently. Website: http://napimigrans.com/	Daily Migrant – Alternative news channel
Vilaghelyzete.com Awakening the World. Every Heart Makes a Difference	30920	https://www.facebook.com/AWAKENINGtheWORLD/	State of the World – Alternative news channel
Kiállunk Oroszország mellett - Elutasítjuk a russzofóbiát	24487	https://www.facebook.com/kiallunk.oroszorszag.mellett/	Supporting Russia-Refusing Russophobia – Changed its name in 2017 to Supporting multi-polar world order-refusing democracy export. Facebook Movement
Orosz Hírek	16497	https://www.facebook.com/oroszhirek.hu/	News on Russia
Hídfő Net	14162	https://www.facebook.com/hidfo.net	Hidfő.ru – Kremlin managed channel, with proven (!) connections to the GRU.
Erdélyi Magyar Orosz Baráti Társaság - EMOBT	4853	https://www.facebook.com/russian.hungarian.friendship.transilvania/	Hungarian-Transylvanian -Russian Friendship Society – Facebook Movement
Független Kárpátaljáért Mozgalom - Movement for Independent Zakarpattia	4509	https://www.facebook.com/szabad.karpataljaert/	Movement for Independent Zakarpattia – Facebook Movement
Eurázsiai Népszövetség, Евразийский Лига	4282	https://www.facebook.com/eurazsiainepszovetseg/	Euroasian Alliance – Facebook Movement
Vlagyimir Putyin Tisztelői Magyarországon	2487	https://www.facebook.com/vladimirputinhungary/	Admirers of Vladimir Putin in Hungary – Facebook Movement
300.000 -en a NATO Ellen	2291	https://www.facebook.com/antinatohun/	300.000 people against NATO – Facebook Movement

Based on the list above we can infer that channels offering alternative news are significantly more popular than direct channels from Russia, or other openly pro-Russian sites. The common characteristics of these mostly Wordpress based news sites are that they don't have Impressum. Besides, they are often cross-referring to each other, and are often using the same content. Moreover, they are often making connections with the Russian social network VKontakte, which is unique in Hungary.

In terms of content, our research concluded thvwat Russian disinformation against Hungary produced surprisingly little content tailored specifically to the Hungarian audience. This is an important difference in comparison to Poland. Russian disinformers missed the opportunity to play off the anti-Romanian, anti-Slovak, nationalist-revisionist attitudes present in certain layers of Hungarian society. They also have not focused on inducing, or igniting tensions between the Hungarian, and Roma parts of the population.

The only exception was the active spreading of anti-migration content, in which pro-Russian disinformation channels actively participated together with Hungarian government-controlled media. Due to the already ongoing anti-migration campaign of the Hungarian government, anti-migration news spread by pro-Russian disinformation channels resonated very well among the Hungarian population.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

Traditional economic ties with Russia are relatively limited: total Russian-related investments (including FDI from locations other than Russia and internally registered assets of ultimate Russian owners) are estimated below 1,5 % of total GDP. Foreign trade peaked at 6,4 % of total turnover in 2008, and has been on steady decline since 2014 (reaching its all-time low in the 2000 s at 2,2 % in 2016). Hungary has had a relatively swift economic transformation, and an extensive privatization process including some major segments of the energy sector in the 1990 s. A few hostile takeover attempts in 2000, (Borsodchem-TVK assets were bought by Gazprom-related off-shore companies) and in 2009 (Surgutneftegaz bought 21,1 % of MOL shares from OMV) remained isolated cases, and were fought back by common corporate-state efforts.

During the 1990 s, Russian presence was concentrated around Medget Rakhimkulov, Gazprom's local representative. Controlling the financial flows from gas trade, he established a small foothold around the ÁÉB bank, and his family-based Kafijat Investment Holding. Rakhimkulov also established strong business relations within the Hungarian energy and banking sectors. The incoming Miller management ousted him from his positions, but was unable to get control over his assets outside the gas sector. Megdet Rakhimkulov was not a trusted member of the emerging Putin-establishment, but his Hungarian nexus, and local relations remained useful for many Russian and Hungarian businessmen. Roughly half of the total Russian-related investments, 8,5 % of the OTP Bank shares are in his family portfolio.

The 2000 s brought some duality into the relations: while normal corporate relations became more balanced, and business-like, Hungarian majors (Richter, EGIS, OTP, MOL) established their filials on the Russian market in a relatively standardized manner, political actors focused on a limited number of flagship projects. The construction of South Stream, the Malév-deal, the Paks 2 nuclear investment, and gas trade became considerable business issues where politics took the lead. The new model of Hungarian domestic politics also triggered a new set of instruments for Moscow's Hungary-policy, where FDI or the network of middle-men did not matter anymore. Especially since 2010 relations have become more top-down, based on the personal bargaining between the two leaders. Accordingly, the Joint Economic Committee, the highest bureaucratic

coordination level, had gradually lost its importance, and its functions were taken over by political bodies, and the Prime Minister's Office since mid-2000 s. Major decisions regarding the long-term gas supply contract (LTSC), and Paks nuclear extension project were already prepared in this new format. PM Viktor Orbán made repeated efforts to preserve his clientele, foreign minister Péter Szíjjártó as the single negotiation channel of Russian relations, with the aim to stop any kind of fragmentation.

The list of Russian economic interests in Hungary is rather limited with one major exception: the Paks 2 project. The investment accounts for around 10 % of Hungarian GDP, where 80 % of these costs are covered by a Russian budgetary credit-line provided by Vneshekonombank. The Paks-2 deal represents an unexpected turn regarding Hungary's energy dependence. The deal will increase Hungary's dependence both on Russian nuclear technology, and financial support, which raises many questions related to the future of the Hungarian-Russian political, and economic relations. It is highly doubtful, whether Hungary has to double its already huge nuclear capacity by the mid-2020 s, when the old Paks blocs will have to be decommissioned only a decade later. The deal creates a renewed long-term engagement with Russia where Moscow enjoys the benefits of its sectoral, managerial experience. The project's financing will additionally be a major burden on the forthcoming budgets, where it contains a high number of management and corruption risks. Rosatom has already established a joint venture with Ganz Holding to foster common development.

The list of other Russian-related investments is rather short. Panrusgaz Gas Trading Zrt. represents an old-fashioned intermediary joint venture in bilateral gas trade. Despite its high turnover rate, the firm is practically "empty", with no staff, insignificant profits, and no relevance. The similar is true for the Centrex gas trader, controlled by the Vienna-based Russian group under the same name. Lukoil, the Russian oil major sold its Hungarian petrol stations to the Normbenz Ltd. (allegedly controlled by the Russian Rakhimkulov family) in 2014. The most obscure entity with a possible link between Russia and Viktor Orbán personally is the MET trader. MET received major legal privileges on the Hungarian gas market after 2011, providing major rents for the company. Among its owners you can find István Garancsi, an alleged dummy of Viktor Orbán and Ilya Trubnikov, a Russian-Canadian businessman about whom little is known.

There were only two Russian-owned banks in Hungary until 2007: ÁÉB (which was first owned by Gazprombank and later by the Rakhimkulov family), and, now, the subsidiary of Sberbank. ÁÉB passed into Russian ownership through privatization in 1996, while Sberbank entered the Hungarian market as part of a regional acquisition (i.e. due to the Volksbank deal) in 2012. The primary objective of Sberbank's Hungarian subsidiary, Sberbank Hungary Zrt., is to provide comprehensive services to Russian private and corporate clients, and to enhance trade between the Central and East European countries, and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Sberbank is operating only 27 branches in Hungary.

The Russian interests around the metallurgic plant ISD Dunaferr constitute another channel of high-level political relations. ISD Dunaferr came under Vneshekonombank influence when it consolidated the Ukrainian ISD Group that owned the Hungarian plant. Nonetheless, ownership relations remained unclear, and the Ukrainian management still controls the company. Dunaferr compounds a number of sensitive issues, given it regional significance within Hungary, relatively high number of related jobs, and shaky financial situations.

CONCLUSION

The soft power exercised by Russia in Hungary is restricted to political messaging in the alternative media, in addition to classic diplomatic messaging. There is either no social receptivity, or no Russian willingness to enforce true Russophile feelings in Hungary. In this perspective, Hungary is an outlier compared to the other – Slavic – Visegrad countries. Hungarians are not oriented towards Russia; when they speak about the East, it is a Hungarian historical narrative about the origins of the Hungarian tribes, and population. The receptivity of the Hungarian public to foreign cultural goods is not specially shaped for, or against Russian culture despite the forty years of communist rule. It seems that most efforts are carried out on shaping foreign policy frames through media narratives – anti-EU, anti-NATO, supporting revisionism – and utilizing mistrust in state institutions through migration, and other citizen-level stories. Hungary, however, is not completely immune from Russian information pressure. Instead, it is arriving in a tailored-news manner to Budapest, and not through cultural soft power like in Slovakia or Czech Republic, where according to recent 2016 polls published by GLOBSEC Policy Institute, openness to Russia is much more significant. In addition to this, the Russian information attacks against Hungary also lead to the assumption that the increasingly Russia-friendly policy line of the government is apparently unable to defend the country from Russian information pressure.

The Hungarian government is providing financial support to some of the cultural actors in the field, but it does not elevate them to any level of importance, nor do they enable them to become stronger actors in the realm of soft power. They serve as symbols for the government to drive the dialogue with Russia. The above-mentioned institutions of Russian culture are not driven by a single political actor, they are not instrumentalized by the Kremlin. The reason is partially because they are affiliated with a specific side in the Hungarian political spectrum, and partially because they are oriented towards the small Russian-speaking minority living in Hungary, and not to the majority of

Hungarian society. While Russian culture is present, and Russian high culture is playing a role in the cultural life of Budapest, it is far from being influential in a political way.

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POLAND

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INTRODUCTION

In terms of Russian influence and vulnerability to Kremlin's soft power tools, Poland represents a distinctive case among Central and Eastern European states. Despite the fact that it shares with other V4 states the experience of being Moscow's satellite during the communist times, Russia's direct influence via soft power tools in Poland is perhaps the weakest among the group.

This situation may be explained through the fact that, apart from the relatively brief period at the beginning of 1990 s (the so-called second government of Waldemar Pawlak – then leader of the Polish Peasant Party, PSL)– the Polish political class has been united around a consensus on a need to reduce, rather than foster new dependencies on Russia. Importantly, in contrast to some other countries of the region, this aim was generally respected not only by former anti-communist camp but also by post-communist leadership.

This does not mean that, Poland – given its involvement in NATO, the EU enlargement, and relatively weak state institutions – is not exposed to risks stemming from Russia's anti-Western campaign. Russia-related factors continue to play an important role in the internal political and social developments. The soft power influence is most visible in the context of the rise of the nationalist and anti-Western sentiments, and movements within the Polish society. This process carries a risk of influencing political platforms of mainstream parties as well as of strengthening so far marginalized, openly pro-Russian forces. Apart from direct support for certain circles, Poland along with other Western countries is an aim of Russian-sponsored informational campaign. Finally, Russia has certain leverage on the Polish economy, particularly in the energy sector, and to a lesser degree agriculture. This influence on the economy consequently results in influence within Poland's political scene.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

The diplomatic mission of the Russian Federation in Poland is run by sixty-five diplomats (one hundred eighteen including spouses). For comparison, there are forty German accredited diplomats and seventy-seven American. Apart from the Embassy, Consulate and the Trade Representation in Warsaw, Russia operates two additional consulates-general in Gdańsk and Kraków. The Embassy's website, besides regular diplomatic news, regularly publishes press articles, or other statements presenting official stances on controversial issues (such as Soviet memorials or current state of affairs). Russian Centre for Science and Culture (RONIK) – a part of Rossotrudnichestvo[10] – is another institution operating in Poland under the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and located within the Embassy's premises. It organizes Russian language courses, and hosts numerous events promoting Russian culture. The majority of these cultural events seem to target the older generation of Russians or Poles interested in Russian culture.

At the same time, RONIK is a partner institution for the two Polish NGOs – Association of Polish-Russian Cooperation (Stowarzyszenie Współpracy Polska-Rosja) and Association of Polish-Eastern Cooperation (Stowarzyszenie Współpracy Polska-Wschód). The latter, which is based on the communist era Society for Polish-Soviet Friendship has several regional offices. The staff of RONIK are also frequent guests during more "politicized" events (such as meetings with delegations from Russia or public discussions) organized by these two institutions, which are run by an old generation of members of the former communist party, and have offices in the "House of Friendship" (former "House of the Polish-Soviet Friendship", which hosts several other pro-Russian institutions, including the Zmiana party). One may thus risk a claim, that these independent but closely cooperating with the Embassy NGOs are preferred to conduct more controversial activities.

RESEARCH INSTITUTES AND ACADEMIA

The Polish think tank field lacks significant actors with ties to Russia. Apart from other factors already mentioned in the introduction, this may be partially explained by financing patterns, as dominated positions are occupied by institutions financed from the state budget as well as by those receiving grants from both public and private donors in the West. Moreover, Poland lacks big businesses dependent on the Russian market, which could potentially try to influence public opinion via think tanks.

[9] The author thanks Antoni Wierzejski for his comments.

[10] Rossotrudnichestvo or The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots living abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation is a division of the foreign ministry tasked with promoting Russian cultural and language, but also strengthen Moscow's soft power. Initially, it was to operate in the post-Soviet region but extended its sphere of activities. In 2013 US media informed about ongoing investigation concerning Rossotrudnichestvo Washington office's activities aimed at recruiting young American as intelligence assets.

However, within the research community – the European Centre for Geopolitical Analysis (ECAG) is known for presenting Western-sceptic and pro-Russian views (though not exclusively). Through personal links, it is closely related to openly pro-Russian party Zmiana[11] (Change) and other pro-Kremlin circles. As ECAG is institutionally weak (for example it does not have its own full-time analysts), its main activities include administrating a popular internet portal Geopolityka.org and publishing books (also with support from Russian institutions). At the same time book launches may be seen as events integrating the pro-Russian circles in Poland. Additionally, according to press reports, ECAG has served as a "hub" for recruiting observers on the pro-Kremlin election monitoring missions in the post-Soviet space, including breakaway republics, which were organized by Commonwealth of the Independent States - Election Monitoring Organization (CIS-EMO), serving as a counterbalance to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHIR). For example, during the Crimean referendum the Secretary General of ECAG supervised a group of "foreign observers", which included a Polish MP Adam Kępiński. Additionally, according to Anton Shekhovtsov, ECAG was one of the two organizations responsible for recruiting members of election observation missions for the Russia-backed separatist republics in Eastern Ukraine.

In the field of academia, recent years brought some highly publicized cases of scholars openly praising Russian authorities for their actions during the Ukraine crisis or for defending "true Christian values"; highlighting the existence of pro-Russian sentiments in the academic community. Another interesting case is the cooperation between a research group on Russia and post-Soviet space at the University of Warsaw with the Russian Institute for Strategic Research (RISI) – known for its link to Foreign Intelligence Service and the Kremlin. In addition to joint conferences, this cooperation resulted in a book publication focusing on the Polish-Russian relations, issued by RISI and presented by this institution as a "reasonable voice" from the Polish side and contrasted with the mainstream, "Russophobic" ones (RISS).

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

In contrast to a growing number of European countries, the Polish political landscape, dominated by the former anti-communist opposition, lacks any major party, or figure which would advocate on a nationwide level for a closer link with the current Russian leadership. In fact, the need to resist what is widely seen as neo-imperialistic policy conducted by Kremlin, is among the few remaining elements of consensus among the Polish political class. For these reasons, the Russian state's ability to make alliance with powerful actor and shape the agenda in Poland is limited. Thus, the main aim in the Polish case, seems to be strengthening existing divisions, to drive a wedge within civil society as well as between Poland and its neighbours. This strategy becomes visible when we take a closer look, analyzing both mainstream parties as well as marginalized anti-establishment movements, which seem to play more and more important role in the political life of Poland.

Firstly, the importance of the Russian market for certain branches of the agriculture sector as well as constant competition among Polish political parties for support of the farmers – described in more detail later in this report – is reflected in the stance of the agrarian and Christian democratic Polish People's Party (PSL). It is the only party represented in the current Parliament openly criticizing EU's sanctions against Russia. The party's leader Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz called for lifting the restrictions, which he described as ineffective and declared that PSL's MEPs would work to, "unfreeze trade with Russia". However, PSL's position has not affected the public discussion on the validity of EU's response to Russia actions in Ukraine.

Russia's soft power activity is most visible amongst a conglomerate of various radical movements, and associations; active mainly on a local level, and until recently mostly under the radar of public awareness[12]. Apart from the anti-establishment moods, they share anti-American (or anti-Western) and anti-Ukrainian sentiments. The latter is connected with the historical memories of the Wołyń massacre, recently aroused by the new national identity politics in the post-Maidan Ukraine. These organizations may be grouped into openly pro-Russian, and those who may be susceptible to Russian's influence, and used in the information warfare.

Among openly pro-Russian organizations, the central role is held by Zmiana, which is led by Mateusz Piskorski – a former activist of Neo-Pagan movement and later Samoobrona (Self-defence) party MP, who in 2016 was arrested on espionage charges in favor of Russia. Zmiana was created in 2015 by various circles from both the extreme right, and left. Its official agenda include exiting NATO and building a, "European Security System from Lisbon to Vladivostok". Mateusz Piskorski, apart from inspiring political actions in Poland (organizing protests, conferences, or issuing publications) and animating pro-Russian circles, has been involved in a transnational network of anti-Western and pro-Russian activists. Together they have been taking part in propaganda actions aimed at legitimizing Kremlin's policy, including "election monitoring missions", or "study visits" to the occupied Crimea. Piskorski's partners in Russia, encompassed CIS-EMO, the International Institute of the Newly Established States (headed by Alexei Martynov) as well as Aleksandr Dugin's Eurasian Movement. Piskorski has also been a frequent guest in Russian media acting as a, "Polish representative".

The second group includes more politically significant organizations – such as the anti-establishment Kukiz'15 (with representation in the current Parliament), Freedom/KORWiN (led by veteran politician and currently MEP Janusz Korwin-Mikke) and other far right parties and movements, as well as the "Kresy" ("Borderland") communities. Although, their stance could not be described as consistently pro-Russian "Korwin-Mikke's position seems to have been evolving in this direction though", many of their positions are in line with the Kremlin's interests and narratives. For example, the anti-Ukrainian stances, and postulates for a "tough" position of the Polish government in relations with Kiev, fit Russia's narrative

[11] Zmiana has not been officially registered as a political party yet.

[12] Enormous work towards bringing activities pro-Kremlin circles, despite certain controversies, has been done by Marcin Rey and the Facebook fan page run by him "Rosyjska V koluma w Polsce" [Russian Fifth Column in Poland]. Many of findings in this reports are based on the reports published by him.

about the post-Maidan Ukraine and Kremlin's attempts to drive a wedge between Poland and Ukraine. Some of the Polish organizations use information produced by Russian propaganda about "Ukrainian fascists". On the other hand, Russian media legitimize their narratives with example of the anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Poland. As a result, one can clearly see a certain synergy and mutual legitimization of the two sides' positions towards Ukraine.

Secondly, the growing prominence of far-right movements influences the stance of the ruling conservative party's leadership, and thus can be identified as legitimate leverage on mainstream politics. According to several press reports, PiS leaders' vigilance about rise of the "Polish Jobbik" strengthens the more nationalistic wing in the party. The changing balance of power inside the party was manifested for example in the Polish eastern policy, including a growing role of "protection of Polish minorities abroad", the more assertive stance in the historical disputes with Ukraine, and continuing stalemate with Lithuania.

Moreover, the growing pressure from the domestic far right forces – which historically looked for support from Russia against Germany – is an additional structural factor, which in the long term may push PIS towards a more accommodating policy towards Russia. So far, one of the many stumbling block for Polish-Russian rapprochement is the Kremlin's refusal to return the Tu-154 wreckage. Some analysts see this issue as Poland's (and especially the ruling party's) vulnerability, allowing the Kremlin to fuel political conflicts in Poland, as well as boost Warsaw's negative image among allies and partners.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

Russian media (both state-backed, and with no direct links to the state) plays a relatively minor role in the Polish media landscape, but there have been recent attempts to boost its presence by engaging in partnerships with local organizations. For example, the news agency Sputnik which ran a Polish-language Internet portal until late 2015 was leasing airtime from the local radio station located nearby Warsaw. Its management explained their cooperation with Sputnik in terms of financial needs, but was nevertheless stripped of their broadcasting license by the regulatory body. Other cases of direct links include an Internet news portal, which cooperated with Russkiy Mir Foundation (translation of content) or the above mentioned ECAG partnership with Kaliningrad-based Newsbalt news agency (exchange of content).

In its latest report, Internal Security Agency (ABW) confirmed that in the information war against Poland, Russian institutions rely not only on directly controlled agents but also, as cited from the report, on "useful idiots". Indeed, much more Internet-based sources of information and opinions – situated in the niche of the media landscape, and institutionally weak, but with a growing audience – present content (often produced by Russian sources) fitting with both their anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian (less often openly pro-Russian) agendas and with Kremlin-inspired narratives.

Report from monitoring of 30 media outlets (from both groups), released in the frame of the project "Information warfare in the Internet. Exposing and countering pro-Kremlin disinformation in the CEEC", identified several manipulation techniques used in the articles, which can be seen as pro-Kremlin propaganda: fake interviews (e.g. with Polish generals, who allegedly criticized NATO presence in the country); providing false facts about Russian involvement in Ukraine, providing information, without any source, to trigger an emotional reaction; misleading article titles; using old quotes as a new information for propaganda purposes; conspiracy theories (e.g. chemtrails, NATO's goal is to protect the interests of a small elite group); concealing facts which are not favourable for Russia (e.g. Katyn massacre denial), and utilizing quotes out of context.

Pro-Kremlin circles are also keen to use social networks to influence public opinion, in particular to fuel the already existing tensions within Poland, and its relations with its neighbours. The case of a Facebook fan page, entitled "The People's Republic of Vilnius", styled as if representing Polish separatist forces in Lithuania exemplifies the ease (in terms of resources) and effectiveness of such actions. With the help from the major Russian media (including RIA Novosti), which reported on the initiative, it draw public attention (for example was commented on by then Poland's foreign minister) and caused reaction form the Lithuanian authorities.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

There are several factors hampering the presence, and influence of Russian culture and state-affiliated institutions in Poland. Apart from the strongly pro-Western orientation of post-communist Polish elites, or historical memories within the society, additional key causes include the lack of significant Russian or Russian-speaking minorities. In the Polish census of 2011, only about 13,000 Polish citizens declared Russian nationality. Finally, the Orthodox Church in Poland (approx. 0,5 million members) has an autocephalous status, and thus does not recognize authority of the Moscow Patriarchate.

All this does not mean that Russia is absent in terms of cultural promotion. On the one hand, such institutions as the Russian Centre for Science and Culture or Russkiy Mir Foundation promote Russian culture (please see the section "The Role of Russian Embassy in Poland"). The latter, for example, organizes trips to Russia for Polish academic and high school teachers, and has supported several Russian language learning Centres at universities. Director of one of them, in Cracow, reportedly has facilitated cooperation between Russkiy Mir and one of the Internet media outlet Obserwator Polityczny (Political Observer, described in a later part of this report).

On the other, certain actions (often interwoven with "cultural exchange") are aimed at promoting "Polish representatives", which would present views in line with the Russian narratives and using them to legitimize Kremlin policies. In this context, one particularly active group is the Foundation Centre for Russian-Polish Dialogue and Understanding (not to be confused with the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding located in Warsaw and financed by the Polish Ministry of Culture). Although it's been established in the heyday of the Polish-Russian rapprochement (thus, the similarities in names between the two institutions), since 2013 actions of the Moscow-based foundation

began to cause more controversies, particularly after its director's Yuri Bondarenko made public accusations that the Polish elite was solely to blame for the state of the mutual relations due to its "immanent Russophobia". Since then, the Centre engaged in propaganda activities, for example financing trips of Polish high school students and niche journalists to occupied Crimea as well as in attempts to promote "alternative" representatives of Poland in the Russian media sphere by organizing news conferences with pro-Kremlin journalists and politicians.

Given the role of War World II for current Russian authorities, and society, as well as controversies over the issue of the Red Army's memorials in Poland, the Kursk organization plays a relatively important role. Especially, after the new head of the Polish Institute for National Remembrance announced the removal of monuments "of gratitude to the Red Army", this matter raised a lot of attention. The Russian authorities use this issue (often blurring a distinction about the "monuments of gratitude" with military commentaries) both externally as a "proof" of the Polish Russophobia, and internally to spark patriotic emotions within the Russian society.

Kursk organization, registered in 2016, is headed by Jerzy Tyc, who additionally belongs to the national council of the Zmiana party. The association's members are engaged in the renovation of the Soviet-era memorials and cemeteries, but also in informational actions, issuing open letters criticizing the removal of above mentioned monuments. They also appear in Russian media as "an ideals of a Poles" – taking care of the Soviet heritage, despite the widespread Russophobia. Thus, from the Kremlin's point of view, Kursk's activities are very helpful, despite the fact that the association is rather unknown to Polish public opinion. Additionally, Jerzy Tyc recently held a publicized meeting in Russian media with the Russian MFA's spokesperson Maria Zacharova, and other representatives of the state during Kursk's tournée in this country.

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

The Polish economy is highly integrated with the EU's single market – as for the first three quarters of 2016 it accounted for approx. 80 % of the Polish export and 60 % of import. In turn, trade relations with Russia in recent years were severely harmed by Russian economic recession, sanctions, as well as falling oil prices. This came after a period of dynamic growth from 2004–2013: from 7,2 to 27,2 to billion EUR (Yearbooks of Foreign Trade Statistics). Consequently, after the first three quarters of 2016 Russia was the 8th biggest recipient of Polish exports, accounting for 2,9 % of its total value (5,3 % in 2013) and the third biggest exporter to Poland, accounting for 5,8 % of its total value (12,1 % in 2013) (Yearbooks of Foreign Trade Statistics). Overall, despite the sharp decrease in trade turnover, one can note that both countries represent certain (but not crucial) importance for one another in terms of international trade.

Accumulated foreign direct investments from Russia in 2015 were worth approx. 340 million EUR, accounting for just 0,2 % of the total FDI stock in Poland. This may be explained by a previously mentioned reluctance on behalf of the Polish elites to allow for large-scale investments, which could bring political dependencies. Interestingly, Polish FDI stock at that time was higher, and accounted for 589 million EUR.

As has been previously mentioned, the Polish political class has been for many years weary about creating possible economic dependencies on Russia. Major acquisition attempts (friendly and hostile), concerning the oil company Lotos Group in 2002 and 2010 or more recently the biggest chemical group Azoty, were never finalized.

Nevertheless, there are at least two areas of vulnerability in the Polish economy when it comes to Russia. First of all, Poland is dependent on Russia for energy resources, of which natural gas has most political significance. Currently, about two thirds (10 bcm) of the amount of natural gas used in Poland is delivered from Russia. Even more importantly, the gas supplies delivered by pipelines are regulated by a controversial so called "Jamal" contract, which is set to expire in 2022.

At the same time Poland has taken several steps to reduce it dependency, and strengthen position vis-à-vis Russia, which included opening in 2015 Poland's first LNG terminal in Świnoujście (annual capacity of 5 bcm, which is due to be increased in the future). So far most of the LNG deliveries are contracted to Qatari companies, but efforts have been made on political and corporate levels to obtain additional gas from the US. Moreover, the government plans to construction a pipeline from Poland's northern coast to Norway, with an aim to not to prolong the Jamal contract (decision on prolongation is to be taken in 2019) and make Poland a regional gas hub.

The second sector of the Polish economy where Russia plays significant role is agriculture. In 2013 Poland exported to Russia agriculture products valued at 1,3 billion EUR (6,2 % of all agriculture export) – what made the Russian market the third most important destination. In 2015, due to the Russian counter sanctions, this value dropped to 398 million EUR. At the same time, the overall value of agriculture export in 2015 rose by 7,7 % to 23,6 billion EUR. The effect of the embargo introduced by the Russian government, though affecting certain branches of the industry (for example fruit and vegetable producers), were partially cushioned by the employment of different schemes resulting in the capacity to bypass the embargo such as the redirection of exports, cooperation with Belarusian companies, and emergency measures taken by the EC (such as financial compensation for farmers). In effect, although the embargo imposed by Russian authorities did influence the PSL stance on the EU sanctions, it did not change the overall attitude of the majority of political forces and society.

CONCLUSION

Poland is a hard case among the V4 countries for Russia's attempts to exert soft power influence. This is mainly due to the shape of the political scene, homogeneity of the Polish society as well as lack of influential businesses deepened on the Russian markets. This does not mean, however, that Russia's activities in Poland are nonexistent, but that its scope is relatively limited. Most of them are based on important phenomena – that is a "structural alignment" between the official Kremlin's narratives, and interests of various radical movements in Poland, concerning mostly anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian platform. In this context, activities of various Russian institutions may be aimed at deepening cleavages in the Polish society as well as inflaming Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Effectives of such actions are enhanced by the growing importance of social media as a primary source of information. The previously mentioned case of the Facebook fan page, "The People's Republic of Vilnius", exemplifies the ease (in terms of resources) and effectiveness of using social media to influence public opinion. This allows institutions (often hardly formalized) with little resources to "punch above their weight", when it comes to disseminating their narratives, especially among the younger generations.

Finally, it should be noted that Russian activities are aimed not only at influencing Polish public opinion or political situation, but also at Russian society itself. In particular, different marginal actors from Poland (journalists or politicians) are used by the propaganda apparatus to confirm Kremlin's official narratives (i.e. about the Polish Russophobia or lack of international isolation of Russia). Certain actors from Poland are also engaged in legitimizing Kremlin's foreign policy, in particular by serving as observers (or recruiting observers) of different elections of referenda organized or inspired by Moscow.

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SLOVAKIA

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INTRODUCTION

Today, disinformation campaigns and other means of meddling of foreign powers are having a polarising effect in Central Europe and have become an issue that government and non-governmental institutions must address. The rise of extremism, activities of numerous alternative media, and certain vulnerability within Slovak society to the Kremlin's influence have created a wide space for pro-Russian influence activities in Slovakia. It has been demonstrated through the proliferation of paramilitary organisations, civic associations, and radical parties linked to pro-Russian foreign organisations. These groups then look to interfere with Slovak political structures, businesses, and media space.

The aim of this study is, therefore, to provide a mosaic of relevant people and organisations connected to the various spheres that contribute to expanding Russian influence in Slovak politics, economy and media space and shed more lights into their activities and influence.

THE ROLE OF THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

The Russian Embassy in Slovakia is the main contact point of pro-Kremlin activities. According to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, there are currently twenty-three accredited Russian diplomats (thirty-two including spouses) in the Slovak Republic. The number might seem low in comparison with other Visegrad countries but it is given by Slovakia's difference in size – to put it into context, there are twenty-six American and only fourteen German diplomats. (MFA, Diplomatic Record, 2017).

Activities of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia include organizing various memorial services, cultural events, and holding conferences such as "Russia and Europe: Topical Issues of Contemporary International Journalism." The Embassy organized this event in cooperation with Extra Plus, which is a pro-Kremlin and decidedly nationalist magazine. Its editor-in-chief, Lenka Eremiášová, was part of a journalistic team at the state-owned broadcasting organisation Radio and Television of Slovakia (RTVS), which compiled distorted and manipulative news, as well as TV programs intentionally made in favour of the former Prime Minister of Slovakia, Vladimír Mečiar (Kernova, 2012). Some of the invited speakers to the event were experts on Russo-Slovak relationships or media, and members of other journalistic or political science organisations. Among the conference panellists was Stanislav Slabeycius who argued that western nations destroyed Slovak castles in the Middle Ages, and today continue the destruction of Slovak nation through constantly trying to diminish Slovakia through activities of the European Union, and through the structures of NATO, while also highlighting Slovakia's cultural proximity to Russia. His speech was rewarded with as big an applause as the speech by Marian Tkáč, who is the chairman of the cultural organisation Matica slovenská. Tkáč presented various Slovak historical figures as prophets who expressed their wish for a tighter alliance between the Slovak and Russian nations.

In terms of public activities, the Embassy usually does not get involved in openly political events. However, its websites include articles originally published on Russian websites, which contain partial or completely incorrect information about the annexation of the Crimean peninsula (Russian Embassy, 2017). The Embassy also promotes conspiratorial media such as Sputnik Czech Republic and RT through its Facebook profile.

THE CULTURAL SPHERE

There are a number of cultural organisations operating in Slovakia with the aim of spreading Russian culture, language, and ideas of Russo-Slovak cooperation. Some of them are connected to prominent social or political figures, and use their websites or public appearances as a platform for spreading distorted news, or even pro-Kremlin narratives.

The cultural organisation Slovak-Russian Society (SRSPOL), promotes activities which are aimed at strengthening the Slovak-Russian relationship, but defines itself through its webpage as a, "medium which provides information about interesting news from Russian culture, economics and politics" (Slovensko-ruská spoločnost, 2017). The website provides a range of topics and articles, and its motto is, "Certainly authentic and undistorted news." However, the articles posted are anonymous, and use exclusively Russian sources. Some of articles (43 from 168 published in December 2016) are inauthentic, but copied from media portals and websites known for spreading fake news and disinformation.

The chairman of the SRSPOL is a dissident, and the former Slovak Prime Minister, Ján Čarnogurský, who was also the former head of the Christian-Democratic Movement (KDH) political party. Čarnogurský, a lawyer by profession, is a member of the international Valdaj Discussion Club, which combines experts and political scientists from various countries for annual discussions and meetings with members of the Russian government. In addition, he meets with Vladimir Putin and other important Russian political figures on a regular basis. He publicly questions Slovakian membership in NATO and organises protests against the Alliance in

Slovakia. He also publishes articles for conspiratorial media groups such as Hlavné správy (Main News), and supports the policy of Vladimir Putin and Slovak paramilitary organisations. In his article for Hlavné správy, Čarnogurský wrote: "Luckily, we still have forests, mountains. The Slovak recruits are already training there. There are not many of them, but for God's sake, thousands of other patriots can unite around them. And then, albeit again with Russian help, they will be able to expel those, who by their stealthy hands restrict our freedom," (Carnogursky, 2017). Also, he expressed his positive opinion of Marian Kotleba, the leader of the Slovak extremist parliamentary party People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), whose activities are described in more detail further on in this report.

Another cultural organisation which aims to spread Russian culture is MaRussia a.s. According to its website, it is an organisation with a focus on organising cultural events, including performances of Russian artists for the Slovak audience. The main goal of MaRussia is to, "reconnect [the] Slovak and Russian space" (MaRussia, 2017). The founder, Ján Feranc, is a former Slovak Information Service (SIS) officer who is known as one of the figures who declassified the Gorila case, the biggest political scandal and revelation in Slovak history (Domeova, 2013). After his departure from the SIS, Ján Feranc established a company called the Regional Procurement Agency, which shortly after its foundation received a mandate from the Slovak government to mediate various state acquisitions, including one acquisition of some PR services valued at 130 million EUR. Feranc was able to secure the deal thanks to his business partnership with the village Horné Plachtinice, and to a clause in the new legislative act. Parts of the business deal were cancelled after the media exposed suspicious details about Feranc's Regional Procurement Agency in 2013 (Hospodarske Noviny, 2013). In reaction to the case, Feranc was also excluded from the political party NOVA (Petkova, 2013). His current company MaRussia a.s. proclaims on its website that it organises annual cultural events and performances of Russian artists in Slovakia. However, the most recent event was organised in February 2015 (Projekty, MaRussia, 2017).

Understanding the underlying sentiments of the Slovak people for Russia and Slovak culture is important for understanding the formation, and current state of public opinion of Slovaks towards Russia. The Pan-Slavic concept, and cultural proximity of the Slovak and Russian nations were strongly highlighted by the cultural movement called Štúrovci[13] in the third decade of the 19th century, and was used mainly for strengthening positions of Slovaks as a Slavic nation in political achievement of Slovak national sovereignty.

THE POLITICAL SPHERE

Russian influence in the political sphere is visible in the public statements and certain leaked private conversations of key politicians. For example, the Slovak Prime Minister, Robert Fico, is known for his support of the Slovak-Russian cultural and economic cooperation. On the one hand, Fico and his cabinet support sanctions against Russia applied by the European Union in 2014, and promoted the reverse flow of gas to Ukraine. On the other hand he has, on multiple occasions, changed his rhetoric toward the subject, and publicly objected the sanctions on numerous occasions. Ambivalence in the attitudes of key Slovak politicians toward Russia, and the inconsistency of Slovak political strategy have been characteristic features of Slovak foreign policy toward Russia in recent years (Duleba (2) 2014). PM Robert Fico expressed his opinion towards the sanctions against Russia after the EU summit in Brussels in October 2016: "I'm asking if there is any logic in sanctioning each other while there is no change in attitude toward objects of sanctions," (TVnoviny, 2016). Fico is often claiming his support for strengthening the relationship between Russia and Slovakia, and aims to build a closer partnership between Slovakia and Russia. A confidential cable leaked and later publicized by Wikileaks highlighted Fico's positive attitude toward Putin's policy (Wikileaks, 2009).

Endeavours to foster relationship between Slovakia and Russia have been present also in the Slovak parliament. The parliamentary group of friendship with the Russian Federation, which members of parliament can freely join, consists of fifty MPs, including thirty-one members of the leading governing party SMER-SD (Direction – Social Democracy, which has forty-nine seats in total), six members of the governing party SNS (with fifteen seats), and members of other parliamentary parties.

The parliamentary political party ĽSNS, headed by Marian Kotleba, espouses extremist ideology and presents itself as anti-EU and pro-Kremlin. The party has ties to Slovak paramilitary organisations and organises its own home defence units. Marian Kotleba is an elected governor of the region of Banská Bystrica. During the ride of the Russian Night Wolves through the city in May 2016, he placed the Russian flag on the balcony of the regional administrative department. ĽSNS and Kotleba were allegedly investigated by the Polish intelligence service for its financial ties to Russia (MFEASR, 2015). Leaked emails of Belarussian-born Alexander Usovsky showed Kotleba's links to Russian oligarchs and organisations, who financially supported political parties, including his party, and other subjects in part through their connection to Kotleba. These parties then went on to organise anti-NATO activities and spread pro-Kremlin propaganda. Kotleba has also allegedly received money to finance a referendum on Slovakia's secession from NATO which has never been held (Aktuality, June 2017).

PARAMILITARY ORGANISATIONS

Besides official political and cultural organisations, there are also paramilitary organisations with Russian ties. They are building armed forces and their proclaimed goal is to protect the Slovak state and its citizens in a case of war, or any other exterior threat. One such organisation is the Slovak Recruits, labelled by the Slovak Ministry of Interior as "militantly oriented" (Pravda, Feb. 2015). It has a strict structure and consists of units which operate in different regions in Slovakia. Previously, it cooperated with the Russian ultra-conservative and nationalistic organisation Narodny Sobor (National Council). A former member of Slovak Recruits, Martin Keprta, also joined fights in the Donbass through the pro–Russian military forces. He was fully trained in

[13] Named after Ľudovíť Štúr, leader of the Slovak national revival

Slovakia within the structures of the Slovak Recruits. The chairman of the organisation, Peter Švrček, who joined training in the Russian association Stjag (Banner) (Kren, 2014), repeatedly denied the militant character of the organisation, or any link between its philosophy and the activities of Martin Keprta (Dennik N Channel Youtube, 2015).

Slovak blogger Ján Benčík, and journalist of Denník N (N Daily) Tomáš Forró reported on Slovaks and Czechs who joined illegal military forces operating in the Donbass and made public names of at least eight Slovaks fighters. According to Forró, the unit of separatists which were joined by Slovaks and Czechs was directly supported by Russia financially (Aktualne TV, 2016).

Another paramilitary organisation operating in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic is called the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve. Its members, similarly to the Slovak Recruits, undergo military training sessions focused on various fighting techniques, the manipulation of weapons, in addition to chemical, and medical practise. Both organisations issue army ranks to their members. The organisation proclaimed open reluctance to the Czech and Slovak official policies toward the European Union and NATO. It also openly supports the Russian Federation in the war with Ukraine and publicly called the Ukrainian political regime fascist. It was established in January of 2015, and the group actively operates on social media, including Facebook and the Russian social media site VKontakte, alongside various online discussion platforms.

The paramilitary organisation Action Group Resistance Kysuce (Akčná skupina Vzdor Kysuce) is a paramilitary organisation with an extremist ideology. The founder of the organisation is a former candidate for parliamentary elections from ĽSNS, Marian Magát (Mikusovic, 2015). Magát was charged by the Czech police with hate crimes against members of other social groups, because of his public speech during a protest against immigrants and the Islamisation of Europe in 2015 (Bucekova, 2013). Recently, he was sentenced for a three year suspended sentence for illegal arming (Pravda, Feb. 2017).

The Slovak Revival Movement is a radical civic association also with an extremist ideology. Its founder and president is Róbert Švec. A list of their partners and "friends" includes the conspiratorial media outlet Slobodný vysielač, the Russian radical extremist and orthodox movement the National Council, and an orthodox military-patriotic club Dobrovolec (Volunteer) (Slovenské hnutia obrody, 2017).

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION SPACE

Slovak traditional and disinformation media have their own features and characteristics in regards to the utilization of tools of soft power through the media space. In the case of the traditional Slovak media, no ownership of any audio-visual media or mainstream newspaper with links to Russian governmental structures has been found.

However, the official Press Agency of the Slovak Republic (TASR) signed a contract with the Russian propagandistic media agency Sputnik in the spring of 2016. After publicizing of information about the planned cooperation by Sputnik, the former head of TASR, Jaroslav Rezník, claimed that such cooperation would enable TASR to get access to the original content of Sputnik and use it for the evaluation of propagandistic material. The contract was eventually cancelled one month after it came into force due to the pressure from media and civil society that opposed the TASR's cooperation (Snidl, 2017). Jaroslav Rezník is now the director of the public-service TV and radio RTVS.

On the other hand, an absence of qualified foreign correspondents in Slovak daily newspapers causes various issues, such as the production of direct translations and unattractive articles instead of newsworthy, journalistic material. This leads to the limited ability of the media to kindle an interest among the public for reliable foreign news. Another consequence is that even in articles in the daily newspapers such as SME (We Are) and Pravda (Truth), one can find techniques of language aggression, labelling or undervaluing facts with reference to Russia (Varenyiová, 2017).

The Slovak disinformation scene includes a considerable amount of conspiratorial or propagandistic websites, and online newspapers and magazines, all of which are promoting pro-Kremlin narratives on a regular basis. The comprehensive, yet still growing, list of them was published, and is periodically updated by the website Konšpirátori.sk (Conspirators), an initiative created by the marketing firm Netsuccess, and a group of partners and media experts aiming to disclose "unserious, faux, conspiracy or propagandistic content" (Konspiratori, 2017). Currently, the list includes 108 websites, all of which we investigated. The most relevant to this paper are the websites: Hlavné správy, Slobodný vysielač (Free Broadcaster), Zem & Vek (Earth and Age), Slovenské slovo (Slovak Word), Dôležité (Important) and Pán občan (Mr. Citizen). In December 2016, redactors of Slobodný vysielač, Zem & Vek, Medzičas (Meantime), Hlavné správy and DAV DVA established the Association of Independent Media with the ultimate aim to protect freedom of speech.

Hlavné správy is a self-proclaimed conservative daily online newspaper which has been operating since 2012. According to Denník N, the editor in chief of Hlavné správy is Róbert Sopko, who owns the promotion agency Heuréka Evolution, which is named as an admin of the webpage Hlavné správy (Snidl, 2017). The portal publishes 50–100 articles every day, many of them about Russia. Hlavné správy spreads disinformation through its articles using methods such as mockery, and over exaggeration. Additionally, they are known for failing to provide the whole truth or sharing false or unverified articles, which were originally published by Kremlin–owned media outlets such as Sputnik or RT. Interestingly, many of the published articles are prepared by Hlavné správy in cooperation with the already mentioned SRSPOL, headed by Čarnogurský.[14] Articles

[14] Ján Čarnogurský is Slovak politician and lawyer. Čarnogurský was vocal opponent of communist regime and was sentenced for publishing uncensored newspapers. He was first vice chairman of Slovak government in 1990 then was named chairman of Slovak government and later minister of justice. As a politician, lawyer and active social figure Čarnogurský joined Valdaj discussion club in 2005, year after establishing Slovensko-Ruská spoločnosť (Slovak-Russian society). He was awarded by various international orders and prizes. Russian state order Orden družby (Order of friendship) for development and propagation of Slovak-Russian friendship war given to him by Dmitrij Medvedev 2010.

from Hlavné správy are also shared by other Slovak politicians such as Boris Kollár, the leader of the parliamentary political party We Are Family – Boris Kollár.

Slobodný vysielač is an online radio channel established in 2013. Among the founders were Norbert Lichtner, Boris Koróni and Peter Kršiak. Norbert Lichner is also the head of the civil association Free Broadcaster. The medium publishes conspiracies, and pro-Kremlin propaganda content. Slobodný vysielač often promotes Tibor Eliot Rostás, Slovak writer and pro-Kremlin activist and the head of Zem & Vek, who is an anchor-man of the radio programme Mlčanie (Silence). Yet even though Slobodný vysielač attacks Western policies, questions democracy and glorifies pro-Russian or Eastern European leaders, no direct alliance between the medium and Kremlin structures has been established.

Zem & Vek is a monthly printed newspaper and online magazine lead by Tibor Eliot Rostás who often calls himself a "friend of Russia." The main themes of the newspaper are alternative ways of thinking, healthcare, and opinions of political events in Slovakia and abroad. It uses techniques of media manipulation, such as sharing false information or the permeation of fear through exaggeration. Juraj Smatana, a Slovak teacher and co-founder of the website Konšpirátori.sk, published a recorded conversation between Rostás and Pavel Maratovič Kuznecov, the then ambassador of the Russian Federation in Slovakia, held at the Russian Embassy in Slovakia on May 26, 2014. Kuznecov expressed his hope for establishing functional channels by financially supporting pro-Kremlin organisations in Slovakia. Rostás then asked him for financial backing for his own activities. As a reward, he offered to spread pro-Kremlin narratives in Slovakia (YouTube, Feb. 2017). Rostás visited the headquarters of the International Affairs magazine in Moscow where he discussed his aim to establish a media house in Slovakia with direct ideological and financial links to Russia, with Russian journalists, governmental figures, and representatives of various business organisations (Bencik, Feb. 2016).

Pro-Kremlin narratives go often hand in hand with the anti-American rhetoric, links to instability, criticism of consumer culture and the failing system of values and democracy. Another narrative perpetuated by these groups is the anti-EU story, which is usually related to its bureaucracy, regulations and promoted values. The pan-Slavism narrative based on Slavic identity, and cultural proximity of Slavic nations is also frequently cited (SFPA: Information Warfare on the Internet).

THE ECONOMIC AND FINANCIAL DOMAIN

The economic dependency of Slovakia on Russia is insignificant due to the relatively small percentage of bilateral imports and exports. Import from Russia represented only 6 % of the total imports in the first six months of 2015, while the export share was just 2,3 % of the total Slovak exports in the same period (MFEASR, 2015). The main categories of traded commodities and products were mineral oils and petroleum, surface conveyance transports, and nuclear reactors and boilers in 2015 (Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bratislava, 2017). According to the information material for negotiations of the Government Council of the SR for support of export and investments from February 2015, the amount of Slovak export to Russia has continually decreased.

Sanctions against Russia have, nevertheless, meant low risk and minimal damage to the Slovak economy (MFEASR, 2015). Conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine caused some changes with regards to the transportation of oil to and through Slovakia. However, it is expected that Slovakia will still profit from its strategic position as a transfer country of Russian oil and gas until at least 2050. It is guaranteed by a contract between the Russian gas company Gazprom Export and the state-owned Slovak company, Eustream, in a total value of 5,3 billion EUR. The low amount of imports and exports between Slovakia and Russia, and the signed, stable transit contract, indicate that the Slovak economy is not dependent on trade with Russia, and any claims about possible massive damage to the Slovak economy by sanctions are false.

Signs of the usage of economic and financial tools of Russian influence in Slovakia could be discovered by tracking connections between members of the Slovak governmental party SMER-SD with influential business figures. One of such figures is Miroslav Výboh, owner of an armament company called Willing, which on behalf of the Russian company RSK MiG signed a deal on air-fighter servicing with the Slovak government, lead by Mikuláš Dzurinda in 2005. Willing then won a public procurement project for the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic in 2009 during the government of Robert Fico. Miroslav Výboh was also a member of the delegation of businessmen who accompanied Robert Fico to Russia and Israel. Fico publicly labelled Výboh as his friend in 2014 (Pravda, Feb. 2014).

Traces of the Russian economic influence can also be found in political connections between the Slovak oligarch Juraj Široký and his hockey club, Slovan Bratislava. During his official visit to Moscow in 2015, Fico personally asked Vladimir Putin for financial support for the club from Russian businessmen (Kysel, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Most of the public activities of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia are linked to cultural and memorial events. However, the institution also purposefully shares media content made by conspiratorial media outlets and invites members of such organisations and institutions, which are well known for sharing conspiracies and fake news, to its official events.

Cultural organisations with the official aim of spreading Russian culture and ideas of cooperation between Slovakia and Russia often use rhetoric based on Pan-Slavism or pro-Russian narratives to influence members of Slovak society. Those tactics are highly effective, and often serve as a platform for spreading conspiracies and pro-Russian demagogy, as could be seen in case of relatively influential SRSPOL and its activities.

What concerns the political sphere, main characteristics of Slovak policies towards Russia have become inconsistency and attempts to play it 'both sides' - at one hand supporting EU policies towards Russia and at the other promoting closer relations with Russia. Despite the fact that the rhetoric used by the Slovak Prime Minister Fico towards Russia is not completely positive and pro-Russian, many of his statements and objections toward sanctions indicate his pro-Russian political orientation. Openly pro-Russian stances are then promoted by the People's party Our Slovakia, headed by Marian Kotleba. It espouses extremist ideology, presents itself as anti-EU and pro-Kremlin, and maintains ties to paramilitary organisations.

The majority of paramilitary organisations which operate in Slovakia are directly or indirectly linked to ideological or economical support from Russia. In addition, several soldiers trained within Slovak paramilitary organisations then went on to join pro-Russian units in Ukraine. The social impact of paramilitary organisations is growing alongside the increased popularity of People's Party Our Slovakia.

Slovak disinformation media and websites use techniques of media manipulation for spreading conspiracies and pro-Russian narratives on a daily basis. However, functional anti-campaigns of various organisations and traditional media against those activities are partially disabling the effect of such media outputs. A short-term contract between the TASR and Sputnik signed by its former director Jaroslav Rezník (now director of the Slovak public-service radio and TV RTVS) proved that activities of Slovak traditional media should be also closely monitored.

The Slovak economy and trade are not directly threatened by sanctions against Russia or possible political or economic changes in Russia, due to the small volume of mutual trade. Business deals between Slovak businessmen linked to Slovak political structures with Russian corporations showed signs of efforts of enlarging the political and economic influence of Russian businesses and political structures in Slovakia.

This report has shown how Russian links to various Slovak paramilitary organisations, cultural organisations, governmental structures and businessmen are used to influence public opinion and governmental policies in favour of Russia. Despite the lack of clarity in the purpose and origins of those activities, Slovak researchers should sustain a constant effort in revealing such practises, and actively work toward diminishing it.

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CONCLUSION

Mounting evidence proving the Kremlin's involvement in the events of the last three years, from the annexation of Crimea to attempts to influence the American presidential elections in 2016, made the very existence of the Kremlin's subversive activities abroad difficult to dispute. Yet, the variety of players involved and the background, extent, and effectiveness of their activities remain to be explored. As this study seeks to demonstrate, the Kremlin does not deploy one overall strategy, but rather has adopted a case-by-case tailor-made approach to each country, even within a region with shared a historical experience of being a part of the former Eastern Bloc. What is applicable in Slovakia with a higher positive sentiment for Russia, for instance, might never succeed in Polish society with a deep-rooted mistrust towards Russia. This study provided an insight into various tools the Kremlin uses in the different spheres of each country.

Even though the variances are evident, the Visegrad countries share many similarities. First of all, the Russian Federation has large diplomatic missions in all of the Visegrad countries. Taking into account Russia's population size, such large missions are disproportionately larger than those of the Visegrad countries' Western allies such as the US or Germany. The role of the embassies in the spreading of the Kremlin's influence and narratives has been very important. In many instances, they have supported disinformation outlets, made connections to various pro-Russian civil and research organizations, or maintained active contacts, as the Bony killing in Hungary aptly demonstrated, with far-right and other extremist groups and individuals.

All our Visegrad partners have similarly reported a significant increase in disinformation pressure, and pro-Russian groups' efforts to shape foreign policy through media-based narratives since 2014. Despite differing attitudes towards Russia in each country, none of the Visegrad countries is entirely immune to pro-Russian information pressure, given that its goal is not so much to promote a positive image of Russia, but instead to garner support for revisionism and spread anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives. Many of these narratives have been spread through social media and alternative news pages with an unknown ownership structure, most of which claim no allegiance to the Kremlin, despite opposing suspicions. They have rarely reached mainstream media. However, Hungary constitutes a distinctive case as the pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narrative is spread by media agencies owned and funded by the state, enabling disinformation and pro-Kremlin narratives to reach a larger audience.

Hungary, the only non-Slavic country among the four, starkly contrasted with the other countries in many other ways as well. The government's active, Russia-friendly policy is rather unique, and even more so given that it is being promoted despite the fact that friendliness and openness towards the Kremlin among the general public has been steadily decreasing since 2012.

Even though the Czech government has not adopted a similar Russia-friendly policy, traces of the Kremlin's influence can be found across the entire political spectrum and the various parties. The most prominent advocate of the Kremlin's interest in the Czech Republic is the current President, Miloš Zeman, who appears to have economic interests linked to the Kremlin. In addition, two of his closest allies, Zdeněk Zbytek and Martin Nejedlý, have strong connections to Russian diplomats and businessmen. This highlights another frequent point of leverage used by the Kremlin to gain influence: exploitation of economic dependencies. Most of the countries in the region are dependent on energy supplies from Russia, thus giving the state significant leverage, especially through fostering ties between large Russian gas, oil and nuclear companies, and influential business and political figures in individual countries.

Poland appears to be a harder case for the Kremlin, as the Polish political representation has continuously pursued a policy of reducing, rather than fostering, dependencies on Russia. Therefore, Russia's subversive measures in Poland are limited, yet they exist in a different form. They are positioned around a 'structural alignment' between the official Kremlin's narratives and the interests of various radical movements in Poland. Anti-Western narratives, as well as historically fragile Polish-Ukrainian and Polish-Lithuanian relations play an important role in pro-Kremlin campaigns and active measures.

Slovak society, unlike the Polish, has been more receptive to the Kremlin's side of the story, in addition to the idea of pan-Slavism, a sentiment often used by pro-Kremlin advocates in the region. Slovakia is also experiencing a growing influence of extremists and pro-Russian paramilitary, a phenomenon closely linked to pro-Russian groups and narratives. Members of such formations have joined fights in the Donbas as part of the pro-Russian militia, indicating the radicalization potential of these groups, in combination with strong disinformation pressure.

As the dissemination mechanism of disinformation aptly demonstrates, pro-Russian narratives very often originate in the Kremlin and are spread by the Kremlin's outlets and personalities, such as Sputnik or individual Russian journalists and politicians. They are then, however, adopted by local entities, individuals, and other media outlets in other countries who do not claim any direct allegiance to the Kremlin. The lack of public information and non-transparency of these processes makes it very difficult to fully investigate the background of the phenomenon.

Yet despite the lack of clarity, the Kremlin and its aforementioned steps in the past three years have proved to be a destabilizing and polarizing element in all four of the Visegrad countries. With or without financial support, its subversive campaign and policies have inspired and radicalized a number of extremists groups, as well as reinforced growing polarization within the local Russian minorities, as is now visible in the Czech Republic. By promoting a strong anti-western, anti-establishment narrative, the Kremlin has opened space for the creation of networks uniting groups and entities that have previously shared little common characteristics, such as extreme-right groups and left-leaning conspiracy believers in Slovakia.

To conclude, this study has sought to bring better understanding of the complex phenomenon of Russia's subversive activities to disrupt European unity and crumble trust in local governments. It has shown various tools of Russian influence activities adapted to the specific environment and exploiting weaknesses in individual countries. Still more attention, resources and expertise need to be devoted to similar endeavors, should we aim to fully understand scope and consequences of the Kremlin's subversive undertaking in the region. The study has, however, pointed to the need to not only counter Russia's activities but to turn attention also to our internal problems and democratic deficiencies because these challenges are creating a fertile ground for Russian-led or inspired influence activities.

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