

# Facing Disinformation: Narratives and Manipulative Techniques Deployed in the Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>

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Politics in Central Europe (ISSN: 1801-3422)

Vol. 17, No. 3

DOI: 10.2478/pce-2021-0023

**Abstract:** *Disinformation represents a pressing issue in the context of security and politics in the region (not only) of Central and Eastern Europe. With the conflict in Ukraine, European virtual space was flooded with online media offering alternative explanations concerning the situation in that country. So-called alternative media developed into trusted sources of information for part of society. Therefore, this paper analyzes in-depth the techniques of manipulation they use; in other words, the aim of the paper is to deconstruct their power over peoples' hearts and minds. Through the case of the Czech Republic, we demonstrate modernized manipulation of public opinion based on a selective choice of topics and stories combined with properly chosen manipulative techniques controlling emotions and relativity.*

**Keywords:** *disinformation, online media, manipulative techniques, narrative analysis, Czech Republic.*

## Introduction

Information is the lifeblood of any society. Thanks to the current technological revolution, which is based on the interconnection of information, communication, and mass media technologies, we have increased access to information while at the same time reduced space and time constraints. In the twenty-first

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<sup>1</sup> The article was written as a part of the research project "Hey Slavs! Visual culture of propaganda inspired by Slavic nationalisms in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and its anti-European character" (GA20-07592S) funded by the Czech Science Foundation.

century, a century of easily accessible internet, social media, and online influencers, the weaponization of information has reached an unexpected and unprecedented level. Technological developments in communication have brought about amazing opportunities for the centuries-old techniques of manipulation and deception.

We know quite a lot about what disinformation looks like, to what purposes it serves and what kind of threat it represents for modern democracies and their societies. From the research of Nazi and communist propaganda, we have learnt dozens of different manipulative techniques propagators might use (Pratkins and Arons 2001; Shabo 2008; Bernays 2004). On the other hand, we know far less about how these manipulative techniques are used specifically in the context of the disinformation strategies defining current disinformation campaigns and the efforts of hostile actors (often operating in online space). Thus, this paper analyzes narratives and manipulative techniques deployed in the Czech Republic by disinformation online media outlets, that is, online media outlets providing readers with unsubstantiated, misleading information, and conspiratorial content. Based on a Czech case study, the paper contributes to uncovering the workings of the weaponization of information through an analysis of how manipulative techniques are instrumentalized. The analysis was conducted on a sample of 2,364 articles produced in March 2016 by four media outlets providing space for disinformation.

## Disinformation Strategies – How Audiences Are Manipulated

With the development of virtual space, we are witnessing a trend in the diversification of information sources. Media outlets are no longer alone. As internet users, we have multiple possibilities from where to get information. And even among media outlets the landscape has changed. It is not just serious media or tabloid (yellow) media anymore; new actors with new roles have entered the virtual space. One such new actor category is *disinformation media*, providing manipulated or entirely fake news, selling so-called alternative facts or real truth. Disinformation includes a broad scale of false, fake, inaccurate, or misleading information; thus, three characteristics must be fulfilled to speak about disinformation properly (Fallis 2015; Gregor and Mlejnková 2021). Disinformation is still meant as information; true or false, it is information. Second, disinformation is misleading information, which means it creates false beliefs. And thirdly, disinformation is intentionally misleading, intentionally providing manipulated content, and therefore intentionally creating false beliefs.

Leaving aside the motivations behind the dissemination of manipulative content, disinformation media outlets do not differ in disinformation strategies. They exploit existing vulnerabilities, both on the level of information itself and on the level of target audience. As regards information itself, it is about

manipulating the content, the flow, and also timing. In the case of the target audience, here we think about cognitive vulnerabilities being exploited. With the advent of the internet, it is difficult to work with explicit lies which can be easily verified. However, it does not exclude lies. Lies are produced in order to confuse a target audience and to create an atmosphere of uncertainty in terms of feeding the feeling that “everybody lies” and that “the truth is not relevant anymore” because “nothing is as it seems.” The information space is flooded with conflictual information, alternative stories (false or true), relevant and irrelevant information. The audience is overwhelmed by the incredible volume of information, which is difficult to navigate. Shenk (1997) talks about a “data smog,” in which useful information becomes hard to find and thus might lead some individuals to apathy, resigning the search for any information.

Another strategy is built on relativization. The post-truth era (Higgins 2016; Mair 2017; Bufacchi 2020) has brought about the diminishing importance of verifiable facts. The truth is no longer essential and has been superseded by a new (alternative) reality. It empowers people to choose a reality where evidence-based facts are less important than one’s existing beliefs and prejudices. The post-truth era is typified by relativization. The line between objectively recognizable facts and the presentation of one’s opinion has been blurred.

As mentioned above, disinformation exploits a target audience’s vulnerabilities, which are usually coded in cognitive vulnerabilities connected with our beliefs, experiences, opinions, and attitudes. Another effective strategy is therefore to mix the truth with manipulative content and using manipulative techniques directed at emotions. Emotions represent a crucial part of human existence, and they play an important factor in cognitive processes and information processing (Damasio 2010). Emotions in particular lead to feelings of threat or instability, increasing the impact of information because the need for personal safety belongs among basic personal needs. Fear belongs among the most common emotions exploited by manipulators (Baines et al. 2020). Fear usually goes hand in hand with blaming and labelling, manipulative techniques related to calling the enemy responsible for problems, responsible for the feeling of fear and uncertainty. The role of the enemy has a special place in manipulation because this category in manipulative narratives moves responsibility for individual or group failures away from “Us” and transfers it onto “Them” (enemies). This has in some way a calming effect via a false consciousness of not being responsible for our own faults – there is an external actor negatively affecting our well-being. Moreover, the creation of external blameworthy groups plays a vital role in enabling unification against the threat and thus contributing to group identification and identity (O’Shaughnessy 2004). In certain situations, when it is important to underscore how evil an enemy is so as to intensify the threat and push a planned mobilization against an enemy, manipulators go even farther, demonizing the enemy – a more intense version of labelling.

Last but not least, cognitive vulnerabilities might also be deceived through use of visual information – images or videos that tell a story by themselves or accompanying textual information. The research on information processing (Blanco et al. 2010) states that text and image may be perceived differently. Visual information is easier to remember than textual. Individuals exhibit greater recall of visual information. Visual information may therefore be more effective because visual aspects enhance the sensory experience and encourage decision-making.

## **Research Design**

As mentioned above, disinformation strategies usually used by disinformation media outlets are clearly identified. Little is known, however, how specific manipulative techniques are used. That is the question we aim to answer in this article. Going a step beyond a content analysis of disinformation media outlets, we apply a combined quantitative and qualitative approach in order to understand what manipulative techniques these media outlets use when referring to selected topics and what the tools are that help them elicit the desired emotions. We believe that knowledge of individual manipulative techniques can help us to better understand why pro-Kremlin (and other) narratives are popular and why people believe them. Afterward, this understanding can serve as the backbone in forming a defense against manipulation and disinformation.

## **Sources**

Based on this reasoning, we have analyzed the disinformation media outlets from which a large proportion of (dis)information derives – or is shared – in the Czech Republic. The analysis was carried out on news articles from March 2016 published on the websites *Parlamentní listy* ([parlamentnilisty.cz](http://parlamentnilisty.cz)), *AC24* ([ac24.cz](http://ac24.cz)), *Svět kolem nás* ([svetkolemna.info](http://svetkolemna.info)), and *Sputnik* ([cz.sputniknews.com](http://cz.sputniknews.com)). Website selection is based on SimilarWeb's readability measurement. All classified websites were among the top ten most read Czech online news websites in January 2016 (Table 1). Every media outlet included in our study has over one million article reads per month. *Parlamentní listy* even placed fourth as the most read online media source. All four of the selected media outlets provide media space for manipulating, disinformation, or conspiratorial content, including pro-Kremlin, biased perspectives on political events. The period of March 2016 was selected due to the fact that the media reported on several internationally relevant issues at this time; nevertheless, bias could be caused at any time in the amount of information – as might have happened, for example, in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1: The most read disinformation websites in the Czech Republic in January 2016 (over one million article reads per month).**

Name	Number of article reads in January 2016
Parlamentní listy	5,985,937
AC24	1,525,904
Sputnik CZ	1,212,893
Svět kolem nás	1,089,343

Source: SimilarWeb.

Parlamentní listy (PL) began operations in 2008 (Brodcová 2016), and their main (but not exclusive) focus is on domestic politics. Thanks to its name (translated in English as Parliamentary letters), it has sometimes been perceived as the official website of the Czech parliament. A significant portion of PL content consists of copied and rewritten articles from other Czech or foreign media. The owner is Our Media, a. s., which operates about three dozen Czech news media outlets and belongs to the media magnate Michal Voráček and the billionaire and Czech senator Ivo Valenta. The articles are written by authors whose names are public.

AC24 was established in 2011 and focuses on international events. According to the investigative website neovlivni.cz, the site often offers news from Ukraine featuring the point of view of rebel separatists (Neovlivní.cz 2015). The website belongs to a Czech citizen Ondřej Geršl.

Sputnik was formed in 2014 after the transformation of the Voice of Russia radio service through a merger with the RIA Novosti news agency. The News Agency and Radio Sputnik (Sputnik n.d.), as it is officially called, is tasked with disseminating the official Russian view of events in Russia and across the world to other countries. Unlike other media outlets included in this analysis, Sputnik is an official state channel.

Svět kolem nás began operations in the summer of 2013. The motto of the portal is ‘controversial reality’; the editorial staff is completely anonymous, and the sources of financing and the media owner are unknown. The owner of the domain, however, is the abovementioned Ondřej Geršl. The portal often works with conspiracy theories, which is declared in many article titles (Brodcová 2016).

### ***Manipulative Techniques Deployed***

Data from these four media outlets were tested as to whether and to what extent manipulative propaganda techniques are present. We analyzed the manipulative techniques of propaganda and persuasion as defined by Anthony Pratkanis and Ellion Arons (2001), Magedah E. Shabo (2008), and Edward Bernays (2004).

Based on these works, we have included blaming, fabrication, labeling, appeal to fear, author's opinion, relativization, demonization, manipulative video, and manipulative picture.

The appeal to fear benefits from the fact that emotions are the backbone of propaganda. Thus, fear belongs amongst the most common emotions exploited by propagandists. We can identify several basic fears frequently present in propaganda: the fear of rejection, powerlessness, and, most significantly, the fear of death (Shabo 2008). The appeal to fear employs audiences' worry of the unknown or uses the bad experiences of audiences with the target group or principles. These fears are one of the most powerful motivations behind people's behavior and attitudes.

The author's opinion is a specific category of manipulative technique. It's not manipulative per se. In the opinion sections of the media, the author's opinion is expected and usual; however, news should mediate events and issues and should present facts only, so it should not contain the author's opinion. In this vein, we have cleared data from the opinion section so our dataset contains just news, and therefore, we can consider the presence of the author's opinion to be manipulative.

Blaming as a manipulative technique pinpoints the enemy responsible for the event or situation. Propagandists often oversimplify complex problems by pointing out a single cause or a single enemy who can be blamed for it (even if not responsible at all). For everything from unemployment to natural disasters, blaming the enemy can help the propagandist achieve his or her agenda (Shabo 2008).

Demonization as a manipulative technique is used to dehumanize the opponent. It usually employs similar tools to labelling – though, in a more straightforward way. The aim is to picture the opponent as an enemy not just with a different point of view but also as not even human.

Fabrications are false information presented as true statements (Syed 2012). They usually take the form of misleading or completely false information presented as verified.

Labelling (or name-calling) is the use of negative words to disparage an enemy or an opposing view. Labelling can take many different forms depending on the circumstances, but they all, rather than making a legitimate argument, attack the opposition on a personal level. It often appeals to the audience's pre-conceptions and prejudices (Domatob 1985; Shabo 2008).

Manipulative video and pictures represent one of the most obvious manipulative techniques here. In the context of analysis, we consider video or picture manipulative if it shifts audiences' perception of the article, or if it presents a collage or somehow modified media.

Relativization serves to weaken either the opponent's merits or damage a specific actor. It's usually used to calm down emotions when (from the propa-

gandist's point of view) something terribly wrong is happening. It explicitly contains criticism of the opponent and/or trivialization of the problem. In our research we distinguished the relativization technique between the relativization of Russian behavior versus the relativization of Western behavior. Since the analyzed media outlets were usually labelled as pro-Kremlin or at least giving space to pro-Kremlin voices, we expected the relativization of Russian misbehavior and the relativization of positive Western efforts.

The analysis itself, however, had two levels. In the first step, using an inductive content analysis, we identified the topics written about by the media outlets. In a frequency analysis, we also tracked references to individual politicians and how the media framed them (very positive, positive, neutral, negative, very negative). This content analysis helped us identify topics and articles that subsequently followed the use of manipulative techniques – the second level of analysis. Besides the occurrence of each manipulative technique, using framing and sentiment analyses, we observed the emotional bias of the articles (categories of positive, neutral, and negative in the case of framing and categories of fear, hatred, compassion, and indignation in the case of sentiment). We also analyzed whether selected media outlets take the side of Russia and/or criticize the West. For our purposes, the West is represented by the United States, NATO, and the European Union. Due to the geopolitical position of the Czech Republic, Czech disinformation media outlets are the usual suspects for the obvious promotion of Russia as a geopolitical alternative to the West and therefore are often labelled as pro-Russian or pro-Kremlin. The articles were retrieved from the media outlets using a script. Subsequent coding was performed by three coders who were trained in the meaning and recognition of the individual variables; an intercoder reliability test followed.

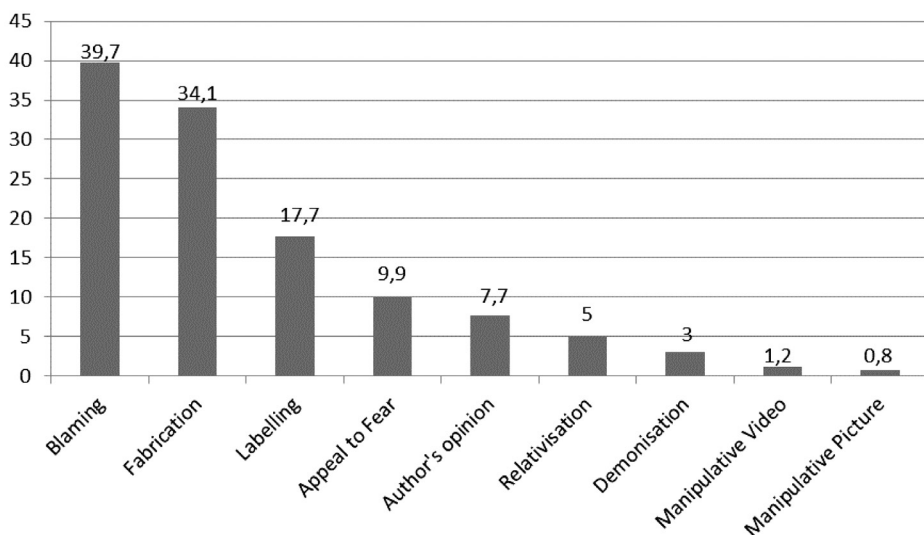
## **Dataset**

The examined media outlets published 2,660 articles in March 2016. After the exclusion of opinion pieces, 2,364 texts could be recognized as news articles. The representation of each media outlet was expectably unequal – the largest representation was held by *Parlamentní listy* (53 %), the most read media outlet among those analyzed. A third (36 %) of the articles came from Sputnik, 7 % from AC24, and just 4 % from *Svět kolem nás*. While the articles on the latter-mentioned media outlet made up the smallest part of the analyzed sample, it did have the greatest number of articles devoted to conspiracy theories (such as 9/11 and others).

The most frequent manipulative techniques in the dataset were blaming (40 %) and fabrication (34 %). Quite often there was labelling (18 %) and appeal to fear (10 %). On the contrary, manipulative images or videos were rarely present; in both cases, these were found in only 1 % of articles. An interesting

case is demonization, which appeared only 3 % of the texts (Chart 1). However, considering how strong and brutal a technique it is, the seventy news articles containing demonization deserve our attention. In further sections, we go into more detail about the context of specific topics in order to explain how the manipulative techniques were used.

**Chart 1: Presence of manipulative techniques (in % of articles).**



Source: Authors.

Among the most frequently covered topics were three issues connected with abroad: the conflict in Ukraine, the war in Syria, and the European migration crisis. The following part of the paper presents their background, their framing by the four media outlets, and examples of narrative and manipulative techniques deployed in the articles.

## Results

### *The Conflict in Ukraine*

The triggers of the current Russia-Ukraine problem reach far into the past. Nevertheless, the current stage can be traced to 21 November 2013 when the Ukrainian government announced that it had canceled negotiations and preparations for signing an association agreement with the European Union. In response to this decision, tens of thousands of protesters stood in the streets of various Ukrainian cities insisting that the country take a pro-European direction. On 29 November, a third Eastern Partnership summit was held in Vilnius, Lithuania,



which was originally scheduled for the signing of the association agreement. Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich refused to sign the agreement, however. This prompted further protests in Ukraine, which had seen an increase in the extensive opposition to the president and his regime. Kiev's Independence Square, popularly known as Maidan, became the center and symbol of this resistance. Riots and later calls for revolution gained support mostly in the Western and central parts of Ukraine. In mid-December, when Yanukovich met Russian President Vladimir Putin and concluded an agreement on Russian support worth \$ 15 billion and a gas price cut of a third, the European Union suspended negotiations with Ukraine.

In January 2014, demonstrations in Maidan took a more dramatic turn, which resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Mykola Azarov's government. The protests, however, did not diminish. The Crimean Peninsula also experienced a crisis and, subsequently, unilaterally declared itself the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. Separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions followed suit and proclaimed their own people's republics. Due to legal issues, neither the Ukrainian government nor the West have accepted these statehoods. Russia, on the other hand, has become the main supporter and promoter of all these regions.

### **Way to Blur the Conflict**

The events in Ukraine also affected situations and developments in other countries. Particularly in Central and Eastern Europe and other post-communist countries, new online media outlets began to emerge and have paid special attention to the events in Ukraine. Unlike the previously established news channels, however, they have brought guaranteed, truthful, undistorted information that the mainstream media has concealed from citizens – at least this is how they might present themselves. For example, Sputnik states that “they are talking about what others are silent about” (Sputnik n.d.). It became apparent that they were more involved in the Ukrainian conflict and partisan to Russia as early as 2014. They did provide different information and a different point of view than that of the mainstream media. While CNN, BBC, and other world-renowned agencies and media reported on the demonstrations of pro-Western Ukrainian demonstrators in Maidan, the so-called alternative media outlets provided information describing all events in Ukraine as a conflict provoked and controlled by fascist groups. While the events in Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk were framed by the mainstream media as illegal and with poorly concealed Russian support, the alternative media saw them as the rightful independent and free choice of local residents. Furthermore, the downing of a Malaysia Airlines' Boeing 777 (Flight MH17) stimulated higher activity. Without being clear on what exactly happened, the alternative media devised a number of contradictory scenarios just a few hours after the tragedy.

When considering the analyzed media outlets, reports of the conflict in Ukraine were, in March 2016, less emotionally tinged (11.3 %) than those on other topics. Representations of fear, hatred, and indignation were uniformly distributed. The lesser emotiveness of this topic might be due to the long duration of the conflict; hence, the topic is no longer particularly interesting to the media. Thus, having fewer articles on this topic in comparison with, for example, the war in Syria is understandable. However, the topic is not uninteresting to pro-Kremlin media outlets, and we see increased evidence of this in particular techniques of manipulation. The conflict in Ukraine has been relativized not just by the incidence of relativization proper, but also by the significantly lower-than-average use of other techniques, thanks to which this topic (alongside the war in Syria; see below) arouses much less emotion than others. In short, we can say that the narrative was describing the conflict as nothing new, nothing exceptional, and nothing worthy of international attention. From these media outlets, readers may get the impression that there are many conflicts like this one all around the world and that the Ukrainian case is just one of media exposure.

**Table 2: Manipulative techniques as regards the Ukrainian conflict.**

Manipulative technique	Incidence in topic (%)	Total incidence (%)	Deviation from total
Blaming	34.8	39.7	- 4.9 pp
Fabrication	18.3	34.1	- 15.8 pp
Labelling	14.8	17.7	- 2.9 pp
Appeal to fear	5.2	9.9	- 4.7 pp
Author's opinion in news	3.5	7.7	- 4.2 pp
Relativization	8.7	5.0	+ 3.7 pp
Demonization	5.2	3.0	+ 2.2 pp
Manipulative video	0.9	1.2	- 0.3 pp
Manipulative picture	0.0	0.8	- 0.8 pp

Source: Authors.

Among the articles dedicated to the conflict in Ukraine, we can identify several characteristic ways that media outlets refer to it. Sputnik especially often uses statements by former Ukrainian politicians who have ties to Russia. However, these ties are never mentioned in the articles; politicians are always introduced only as current or former representatives of Ukraine. Thus, readers may have the impression that the situation in Ukraine is not clear or that a large part of the Ukrainian elite support Russia, for example, consider this statement by

former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov: “The Kiev ministry of lies has become entangled. If Donbass was subsidized, the department would have to be profitable for Ukraine. But, if Donbass did feed the whole Ukraine, then Donbass should agree to continue feeding it” (Sputnik 26 March 2016). Usually only the “Russian side” was allowed to comment, and, without any explanation of the context, Ukraine was blamed for all that was bad: “‘The initiative of the Ukrainian leadership to disrupt diplomatic relations with Russia is bordering on madness,’ Russian spokesman Dmitry Peskov said” (Sputnik 31 March 2016a).

In another article, Sputnik worked with the statement of Ukrainian oligarch Dmytro Firtash, who was previously suspected of corruption and arrested. In the past, Firtash did business in the gas industry selling gas purchased from Russia to Western Europe. According to the FBI, he had close ties to Russian mafia boss Semion Mogilevich (Walker 2016). Sputnik cites passages from a Bloomberg interview with Firtash, who describes the then Ukrainian government as incompetent and politically bankrupt. The events in Ukraine are supposedly merely a project driven by the United States, events which are also unsuccessful. According to the text, the US has turned Ukraine into a battlefield and brought it to ruin (Sputnik 30 March 2016a). In this article, we find blaming, relativization, and fabrication.

Another common way of reporting on Ukraine is to highlight the high level of corruption in the country as its biggest problem. As evidence, Sputnik used an alleged report by unspecified British economists. The article refers only to the Russian RIA Novosti, which also writes only abstractly about “British experts,” with no names or affiliations. These articles never mention that there is a conflict in Ukraine that would bother the country. The only one responsible for the adverse development of the economy is Petro Poroshenko: “The President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko is one of the causes of the high level of corruption in Ukraine. This conclusion was reached by UK experts on international trade issues who prepared a report for the UK Government” (Sputnik 31 March 2016b).

If the European Union or the United States are mentioned, they are framed as incompetent political powers. For example, Sputnik framed the US as a country that could stop the war in Ukraine but did not: “If the US wants to stop the war in Ukraine tomorrow, the bloody massacre there will be over,” Sputnik quotes Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko (Sputnik 30 March 2016b). There was no mention of Russia or its role in the conflict, however.

Not many articles provided the opinion of Czech politicians. The only exceptions were found in *Parlamentní listy*. However, these were mostly politicians presenting long-standing arguments in favor of Russia. Parliament Member Jaroslav Foldyna (then of the Czech Social Democratic Party and today a far-right populist in the Freedom and Direct Democracy party) made statements, for example, regarding the case of the Ukrainian pilot Nadiya Savchenko, quoting ProtiProud – another media outlet spreading conspiracy theories and pro-

-Kremlin narratives. The article is titled “The Murdering Monster. MP Foldyna Offers a Quite Different Point of View to Pilot Savchenko” (Parlamentní listy 20 March 2016). However, this title had been changed a few days after publication, and the original title was quite different, reading: “Ukrainian Murdering and Torturing Monster in Court: Prime Minister Sobotka Flames Out with the Savchenko Card in Brussels. New Round of Anti-Russian Hysteria? Bloody Nadezhda Needs an Exorcist Rather Than a Lawyer.” Another notable point of the article is the fact Bohuslav Sobotka was from the same party as Jaroslav Foldyna at that time. Savchenko was also a common topic for AC24. This media outlet, for example, frames her as a pilot of the Aidar Battalion responsible for burning civilians in Odessa in the spring of 2014 (AC24 12 March 2016).

## ***The War in Syria***

Another significant stimulus that triggered greater activity among these media outlets was the war in Syria and Russia’s engagement in it. Russia has been openly engaged in the war since September 2015 when Syrian President Bashar al-Assad asked Vladimir Putin for Russia’s participation. Immediately after the request, Russia launched air strikes in Syria. These strikes intensified after 31 October 2015 when an airplane flying to St. Petersburg was downed in Egypt. Daesh claimed responsibility for the act. For Russian supporters, this was a clear signal for increased activity. On 18 December, over forty people died in air strikes in the northern city of Idlib. According to Reuters, Russian aircraft were probably responsible for the attack. This argument is supported by the fact that the Russian Air Force and the Syrian Army had been conducting on an offensive operation against the rebels in Idlib since the beginning of December (Reuters 20 December 2015).

However, this was not the only incident – thousands of people have died in Russian air raids. The secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, said that the Russian air strikes in Syria were focused mainly on opposition groups, not Daesh militants as Russia claimed, and undermined efforts for a peaceful solution (BBC News 5 February 2016).

## **Russia is Not Worse Than the United States**

In these cases, the analyzed media outlets have used slightly different tactics and narratives than in the case of the Ukrainian conflict: The attack victims and Russian engagement in Syria were not questioned or doubted; reported Russian misconduct and American failures or mistakes were immediately offered to readers. This was regardless of whether the American lapse was supposed or true, whether it was in Syria or Iraq, or even whether it was a recent event or several decades old.

Reports of the conflict in Syria were much less emotionally charged than those of other topics (4.6 %). If present, the prevailing emotion tended to be indignation. In terms of emotional appeals and the presence of manipulation techniques, the conflict in Syria was presented very similarly to that in Ukraine. On the AC24 website, manipulative relativization appeared as commonly as in one out of every five articles. The website that focused particularly on the conflict in Syria during the period monitored was Sputnik, which published 150 articles (versus 53 for the other websites combined). The reporting on Sputnik was also less emotionally tinged (less than 3 %). With the exception of relativization, the tendency to use manipulative techniques was less prevalent on Sputnik than on the other websites.

**Table 3: Manipulative techniques within the topic of the war in Syria.**

Manipulative technique	Incidence in topic (%)	Total incidence (%)	Deviation from total
Blaming	23.6	39.7	- 16.1 pp
Fabrication	24.6	34.1	- 9.5 pp
Labelling	10.8	17.7	- 6.9 pp
Appeal to fear	0.5	9.9	- 9.4 pp
Author's opinion in news	4.9	7.7	- 2.8 pp
Relativization	12.3	5.0	+ 7.3 pp
Demonization	1.0	3.0	- 2.0 pp
Manipulative video	1.5	1.2	+ 0.3 pp
Manipulative picture	0.0	0.8	- 0.8 pp

Source: Authors.

The Syrian conflict is often portrayed as a result of the inability of the United States, and the partial improvement of the situation is attributed to the successes of the Assad regime and Russia: “The Tiger Forces of the Syrian Army with their allies, under the air support of the Russian Aerospace Defense Forces, are heading towards Palmyra. Syrian forces yesterday, after a cruel battle with Islamic State terrorists and their allies, have gained full control over the western slopes of Jabal Al-Tar” (AC24 24 March 2016). If America is mentioned, it is usually done with a negative framing, either in connection with civilian casualties or the alleged sponsorship of terrorists: “Although there is an agreement between Russia and the United States negotiated, many point out that Washington is among the main sponsors of terrorist struggles against the Syrian governmental forces” (ibid).

On AC24, Russia is almost exclusively referred to as a country that helps Syria make progress after incompetent US engagement. At the end of many

articles, AC24 often states that Washington, DC is one of the main sponsors of terrorists fighting against the Syrian government.

Parlamentní listy's greatest manipulation lies not in what its authors say, but in its selection of so-called experts who comment on issues. These experts make it possible for us to read things like this: "The civilized world tolerated the emergence of the Islamic State's radical ideology, supported by its allies, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia" (Parlamentní listy 8 March 2016a). Similarly, this media outlet frames US engagement in Syria as embarrassing and aggravating, while Russia is trying to mediate peace and consensus: "Moscow supports anything the Syrians will agree on" (Parlamentní listy 8 March 2016b). This is contrasted with the US plan to divide Syria into three areas controlled by Assad, the Kurds, and Daesh along with Al Qaeda.

## ***Migration Crisis***

Judging by the number of published articles, the third and strongest focus for analyzed media outlets was the migration crisis in Europe. It had several sub-causes that originated in the regions from which the migrants came to Europe. For the purposes of this text, we can simplify the two main reasons and regions of origin: migrants from Africa decided to come to Europe due to long-term deplorable conditions on the continent, especially in selected countries, and migrants from the Middle East came to Europe mainly due to war conflicts, with the worst being the war in Syria. Approximately one-third of incoming migrants to Europe in 2015 were Syrians fleeing the war (Connor 2016). Representatives of European countries and the European Union have long been unable to respond adequately to the situation or to agree on a common approach to the solution. Moreover, even in mid-2019, they had yet to find a common approach.

To contextualize the data we analyzed, the situation in the Czech Republic as regards the migration of asylum seekers and refugees was as follows: The Czech Republic received 1,525 applications for international protection in 2015, a 31.9 % increase compared to the previous year. Applicants were mostly from Ukraine (694 applications), Syria (134), Cuba (128), and Vietnam (81). 71 applicants received asylum. 399 applicants did not fulfil the conditions necessary for obtaining asylum; nevertheless, they received another form of international protection. The Czech Republic stopped 8,563 individuals who entered the country illegally (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic 2016). In 2016 the total number of applications for international protection decreased to 1,478 (507 from Ukraine, 158 from Iraq, 78 from Syria, 68 from China). 148 applicants received asylum, and another form of international protection was granted to 302. In terms of illegal migration, 5,261 individuals were stopped attempting to enter the Czech Republic (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic 2017).

## ***Divide and Rule***

The first strategy used by news portals was intended to raise fear and hatred of migrants among Europeans. They tried to achieve this through fictitious or at least distorted reporting on the attacks and crimes committed by immigrants. Fear of the unknown was also fomented in some countries; mainly in homogenous countries with no or little experience with diversity, such as the Central European post-communist countries (e.g., the Czech Republic). The second strategy was to decrease the popularity and credibility of the European Union among its citizens. The EU was portrayed as a club of incompetent politicians uninterested in the citizenry of their own countries and who deliberately oppress citizens at the expense of migrants. This was strongly contrasted with the framing of Vladimir Putin as a leader who would not have caused similar developments in Russia.

The combination of these two strategies resulted in a part of society being a priori negatively orientated towards any possible solution to the migration crisis, and confidence in the European Union decreased in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. After having had two years of experience with migrants in their countries (either directly, as in Hungary, or mediated, as in the Czech Republic), the EU came to be perceived as a hindrance.

Compared to other topics, articles dealing with the migration crisis more often contained appeals to fear. While in all outlets examined, appeals to fear appeared in one out of ten articles, in those dealing with the migration crisis, they were present in one out of every four. This significant difference also reflects the emotional biases of the texts: More than with other topics, reporting concerning the migration crisis was found to be emotionally tinged (32 %). The emotions most frequently expressed included fear (present in 53 % of emotionally tinged reporting of the topic), hatred (20 %), and indignation (19 %). On the Svět kolem nás website, all of the coverage of the migration crisis included negative emotions; this is in contrast with Sputnik, where fear or indignation appeared in only 12 % of news items.

The dominant framing in the articles dedicated to the migration crisis portrays the European Union's approach as a failure of EU leaders. As side-by-side narratives, there are several cases of violence demonstrating Islam's incompatibility with European culture and Russian assurances that it will not allow such a catastrophe within its territory.

One example of this narrative is an article from Svět kolem nás "Danish Imam Admits to Muslim Agenda – Goal Is to Conquer Europe" (Svět kolem nás 15 March 2016). The article implies that migration from Arab countries to Europe is a centrally-managed (cultural and political) invasion. The common denominators of such articles are the demonization of Muslims and Islam, an attempt to bipolarize the world, and a push to awaken fear among readers. These

**Table 4: Manipulative techniques within the topic of the migration crisis.**

Manipulative technique	Incidence in topic (%)	Total incidence (%)	Deviation from total
Blaming	34.8	39.7	- 4.9 pp
Fabrication	18.3	34.1	- 15.8 pp
Labelling	14.8	17.7	- 2.9 pp
Appeal to fear	5.2	9.9	- 4.7 pp
Author's opinion in news	3.5	7.7	- 4.2 pp
Relativization	8.7	5.0	+ 3.7 pp
Demonization	5.2	3.0	+ 2.2 pp
Manipulative video	0.9	1.2	- 0.3 pp
Manipulative picture	0.0	0.8	- 0.8 pp

Source: Authors.

articles often repeat alleged calls from European Muslims to their counterparts in other parts of the world to come to Europe; they certainly do not seek to integrate into the majority society, and, conversely, they must lead a holy war against Christianity.

Sputnik often quotes Vladimir Putin and his comments on migration in Europe. According to Putin, “Russia cannot make the mistake with migrants as the EU did” (Sputnik 15 March 2016). Putin is portrayed as a protector of the Russian state whose powers and method of government can be embraced by the Russians for not being as naïve as the European Union – Russia has no problems with migrants from the Middle East thanks to him.

These media outlets often work with examples of violent migrant behavior, real or not, which occur mainly in Germany and Sweden. *Parlamentní listy* published an article about how Australian journalists in Sweden were almost hit by a car driven by migrants, who subsequently attacked them (*Parlamentní listy* 27 March 2016). The article refers to the mainstream media; however, it does not provide the context of the event. So, thanks to reporting almost exclusively focused on violent acts, readers get the feeling that violence is a common, day-to-day practice throughout the European Union. Sweden is depicted as a country on the verge of collapse in this particular article.

Articles describing difficult situations of cultural conflict with Muslims in Europe are also quite common. Russians are often portrayed as victims or heroes, either as ordinary citizens who are the targets of Muslim attacks in Europe or as defending members of other groups against Muslim attacks. One *Svět kolem nás* article from 16 March 2016 describes, for example, the horror of a Russian female driver who found three migrants in her car. When called,



the police urged the woman to take them wherever they wished. The situation was resolved by the driver's family members, who dealt with the migrants on their own. The article thus refers not only to the strength and heroism of the Russians, but also to the inability of German (Western) authorities to deal with migrants.

Meanwhile, articles based on comments from US public figures framing the migration crisis, its causes, and consequences are also not rare. For example, in the article "It's an Epidemic of Rapes. Wake up, Call Voices from the US," *Parlamentní listy* offers a translation of the text by Christine Niles, who is presented as an American commentator (*Parlamentní listy* 30 March 2016). There is no explanation as to why the personal blog should be representative or why this point of view is presented. The article only gives the impression that this is a common opinion in the United States, and it is our fault that we in the European Union do not want to hear it.

### ***To Side with Russia?***

Russia, Russian leaders, or Russian politics appeared in almost a third of the articles (30 %). The biggest share in articles concerning Russia was in *Sputnik* where it appeared in a majority of its articles (57 %); on the contrary, in *Parlamentní listy*, Russia was in only 12 % of the articles. Russia was mentioned most often in texts devoted to the wars in Syria and Ukraine. Russia was also mentioned in articles dealing with domestic politics in the Czech Republic, specifically in 58 cases.

In two out of three cases, Russia was framed as neutral (64 %). In 14 % of the articles, Russia was a good example to be followed, while in 9 % of the articles Russia was criticized. In a tenth of the articles, Russia was described as a victim – this particularly concerned the media image of Russia in Western countries, with Russia's positions presented as hostile to the top political leaders of the West. This tendency was most obvious in articles in which Russia was compared to the US. In such cases, one out of every five articles framed Russia as a victim. In the analysis, when compared to the US, Russia was represented positively 33 % of the time; in the remaining cases, the framing was neutral.

If we had focused only on the frequency of references to Russia and its framing, the analyzed articles of the selected media outlets would probably not be perceived as somehow exceptionally pro-Kremlin. Only in 4 % of all news articles was Russia framed as a positive example worthy of following or as a hero. Moreover, in *Parlamentní listy*, Russia was framed neutrally in 55 % of the cases and in 30 % of the articles Russia was framed negatively. *Sputnik*, on the other hand, criticized Russia in only 4 % of the articles mentioning it.

Vladimir Putin was mentioned in 7 % of the articles, which made him the most frequently mentioned foreign politician overall; only the president of the

Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman (10 % of the articles) and Andrej Babiš (9 %), chairman of the ANO movement and then minister of finance, appeared more often in the analyzed articles. Putin was mentioned more frequently than German Chancellor Angela Merkel (4 %) or Chinese President Xi Jinping (4 %), who made an official visit to the Czech Republic at that time. Even then Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka was mentioned less often (4 %). If we compare whether the politicians were mentioned with a negative (-1), neutral (0), or positive (+1) framing, we find that media outlets were rather critical of politicians: Each of the ten most frequently mentioned politicians was mentioned more often negatively than positively. Xi Jinping (-0.12) and Vladimir Putin (-0.15) reached the best overall score. Politicians with the most negative framing were then US President Barack Obama (-0.33) and Angela Merkel (-0.34).

## Conclusion

One can admit that the Czech Republic has had a quite recent and rich experience with propaganda (during the Cold War), so the level of resilience should be high. With this article, however, we try to show that today's propaganda and disinformation campaigns are rather different from what the world experienced during the modern history of the twentieth century in relation to the World Wars and the Cold War. All these conflicts were rich in propaganda and manipulation of public opinion, but due to technological developments, the techniques of manipulation have also changed and modernized. The manipulation of public opinion is more sophisticated. First of all, based on the analyzed data, we can see that the usage of propagandistic pictures and movies in disinformation media outlets is minimal. Images seeking to deliver a clear message that is obviously manipulated (propagandistic) are rare. Instead of leaflets with pictures and movies, it is written text or, more precisely, words and stories (narratives) that are used for these purposes. Attempts to convey emotions and a biased view of the world rely more on manipulative techniques such as blaming, fabrication, labelling, and relativization. Of course, this ratio could be influenced by the analyzed medium.

The disinformation campaigns in the Czech Republic do not necessarily need to lie to the audience. As Scot MacDonald notes, a great propagandist does not tell lies. Instead, he tells the truth, or selects a truth that serves his purposes and tells it in such way that the recipient does not think he is receiving any propaganda (MacDonald 2007). It is about choosing a narrative from the selected topics and stories and combining it with carefully chosen manipulative techniques. This could be seen as regards the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria. Data shows that the importance of the topic and Russian activities in both countries were relativized in order to persuade readers that nothing serious was happening there. In the case of Syria, the relativization of Russian activity was done by

putting it in obvious and false counterbalance to US activities somewhere else and at a different time.

Moreover, techniques used to manipulate emotions controlled which stories the public paid attention to and what they considered important. Blaming, labelling, and appeals to fear worked well. This was seen in the case of the topic of migration, which was repeatedly framed as a failure of Western politicians and organizations, and the manipulative technique of appeal to fear was used frequently. This also correlates with high levels of negative emotional framing in the articles observed. Articles worked mostly with fear, hatred, and indignation. On the other hand, the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine were connected with lower levels of emotional framing, which confirms our argument about the relativization of Russian activities in conflicts.

Last but not least, Czech disinformation media outlets are considered the usual suspects as it pertains to the obvious promotion of Russia as a geopolitical alternative. Our research concludes that, in the case of the most read disinformation media outlets in the Czech Republic, this is not true. This manipulation was more sophisticated than obviously serving Russia as the only partner and alternative to the West. In our findings, Russia was mentioned in about a third of the news articles, but mostly in a neutral manner. Articles portraying Russia positively and negatively were about equal in number. In general, disinformation campaigns are more about redirecting blame onto others and lowering the level of trust in governments, elites, and established media within the general public. Such a conclusion explains the reality of 2016 where the analyzed media outlets were automatically, without deeper analysis, labelled as pro-Kremlin by mainstream media, analysts, and politicians. It would deserve comparison with another period to test whether the media outlets have developed their strategies in this context. Further analysis might also discover new findings as to how disinformation media use manipulative techniques, or new techniques altogether, in relation to selected topics in order to establish specific narratives and framings. However, it is clear that such an analysis will be done in the context of other topics since media shift their priming according to what is actual. Another question is the reflection of the articles from the disinformation media outlets on social media. So far as we know, social media became a frequent source of information for the general public, and its reflection of disinformation narratives and manipulative techniques can obtain even larger attention and audience via viral spreading on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other platforms.

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