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THE NEW CZECH GOVERNMENT IN PRO-KREMLIN MEDIA: A CASE STUDY OF SPUTNIK CZ

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The last quarter of 2021 was an eventful one for Czech politics – a parliamentary election took place in October and, mid-December, the new five-party coalition government was appointed. Researchers from Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) monitored the website Sputnik CZ in the period from October to December 2021 to map how it reflected the formation of the new Czech government.

The parliamentary election brought an end to the minority government of the populist ANO 2011 and center-left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), externally supported by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). It was led by Andrej Babiš from ANO, who was seen as an acceptable candidate by Sputnik, thanks to his proclaimed defense of national interests and increasingly anti-immigration stance.¹ He was especially favored compared to the more liberal conservative coalition of the SPOLU (Together) alliance dominated by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the alliance of the Czech Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents, who won the election. This new government led by Prime Minister Petr Fiala is more firmly oriented towards the West, and likewise an ideologically unfavorable candidate for Sputnik, whose negative stance towards this coalition was visible already in its coverage prior to the elections.²

It was, therefore, to be expected that the Czech branch of the Russian information agency Sputnik would have a biased approach to the new government, with the potential for disinformation campaigns. Sputnik CZ was established by the Russian state-owned news agency Rossiya Segodnya in 2014.³ Although Sputnik presents itself as a mainstream medium, experts consider it an important tool of Russian propaganda.⁴ In the examined time period, total visits to the website ranged between 1.9 million and 2.35 million,⁵ and its articles were also shared on its Facebook page with over 139 000 followers.⁶ Sputnik's reach makes it one of the most-read websites on the Czech disinformation scene⁷ and it has repeatedly proven to be the most active website in PSSI's monitorings due to the amount of original content it produces⁸, which also sets the tone for other manipulative websites.⁹

1 Kristína Šefčíková, "Pandora Papers: novinářská praxe a integrita ve střetu s alternativními médii", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/9483_pssi-perspectives-15-pandora-papers.pdf

2 Jonáš Syrovátka, Kristína Šefčíková, "České volby v éře dezinformací", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/9417_parliamentary-elections-2021-analysis.pdf

3 "O projektu", Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/docs/index.html>

4 "Russian Social Media Influence", RAND Corporation, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2200/RR2237/RAND_RR2237.pdf; Jonáš Syrovátka, "Sputnik CZ: jak funguje hlavní kanál ruské propagandy v ČR?", Prague Security Studies Institute (https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8414_699-blog-sputnik-cz.pdf)

5 According to Similar Web, <https://www.similarweb.com/website/cz.sputniknews.com/>

6 Sputnik Česká republika, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/cz.sputnik>

7 Jonáš Syrovátka et al., "Dezinformace jako byznys", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8207_751-dezinformace-jako-byznys.pdf

8 See e.g. Jonáš Syrovátka, "Sputnik CZ: jak funguje hlavní kanál ruské propagandy v ČR?", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8414_699-blog-sputnik-cz.pdf; Jonáš Syrovátka et al., "Infodemie: Koronavirus a konspirace v České republice", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8145_785-infodemie-coronavirus-and-conspiracies-in-the-cr.pdf; Jonáš Syrovátka et al., "Evropské volby 2019", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8412_705-evropske-volby-2019-analyza.pdf

9 Jonáš Syrovátka et al., "Infodemie: koronavirus a konspirace v České republice", Prague Security Studies Institute, https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8143_783-infodemie-koronavirus-a-konspirace-v-cr.pdf

Table 1: Czech disinformation websites replicating Sputnik's content

Name	Number of visits according to SimilarWeb (December 2021)	Number of followers on Facebook
AC24	800 000	80 688
CZ24 News	1 050 000	—
Česko bez cenzury	85 000	29 695
Nová republika	500 000	—

COVERAGE OF THE FORMATION OF THE NEW CZECH GOVERNMENT

During the post-election monitoring, PSSI researchers looked specifically at the websites' category "Opinions" which is the main source of Sputnik's manipulative content, as opposed to its news reporting, which is delivered chiefly in an informative and neutral manner. Around 70 % of the 139 examined opinion pieces were written by three Czech authors: Vladimír Franta (44 articles), Alena Novotná (32) and Jana Petrova (21). These pseudo-commentators are notorious for their long-term cooperation with the website. Sputnik CZ is likely to benefit from this cooperation since the authors can provide insights unavailable to foreigners. At the same time, the editorial office distances itself from them and stresses that articles in the opinion sections represent only the opinion of the given author, which allows it to shed possible criticism for bias or inaccurate reporting.

The majority of the examined articles included interviews with either representatives of anti-establishment political parties or both Czech and Russian sociologists and political scientists. The most space for expression was provided to the right-wing populist and eurosceptic party Freedom and Direct Democracy with 21 interviews, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (10 interviews) and the national-conservative, hard eurosceptic Tricolour (6). Representatives of similarly oriented Volný blok (Free Bloc), known for spreading COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, also made appearances, as did ČSSD. This demonstrates Sputnik's long-standing good relationship with these parties who then get to use this platform to promote their positions and agenda.

TOPICS

The general stance of Sputnik towards the new government in the monitored months was rejecting and skeptical. Although Sputnik did not doubt the legitimacy of the election result as the choice of the people, it claimed the winning parties did not play fair from the start. According to Sputnik, coalition forming is a process that should happen post-election. In doing so beforehand, the now governing parties supposedly cheated because the individual parties would not get the number of votes needed to get into the parliament.¹⁰ That is why Sputnik presents the new government as undemocratic and unrepresentative. The web often emphasized the fact that this election saw "the most lost votes in the history of the Czech Republic," around 1 million, which makes the new government a "dictatorship of the minority."¹¹

10 Tatjana Naronskaja, "Keller k volbám: Uplácet předvolební koalici z jedné silné strany a z několika trpaslíků se vymstí", Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211009/keller-k-volbam-uplacet-predvolebni-koalici-z-jedne-silne-strany-a-z-nekolika-trpasliku-se-vymsti-16113731.html>

11 Alena Novotná, "Budoucí vláda by mohla rozpolcenou českou společností sjednotit, a to proti sobě", Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211013/budouci-vlada-by-mohla-rozpolcenou-ceskou-spolecnost-sjednotit-a-to-proti-sobe-16154465.html>

Moreover, the election result supposedly brought the Czech Republic closer to a regime of “limited sovereignty.”¹² The five-party coalition’s success was interpreted as the work of biased mainstream media like the public Czech Television and foreign intelligence services, all representing interests of external actors such as the European Union or the USA. Sputnik presented the government and its agenda as a servant to Brussels’ whims and an antithesis to Czech national interests.¹³

The narrative of an undemocratic and totalitarian government was underlined by accusing the coalition of an open coup against President Miloš Zeman.¹⁴ At the time of the forming of the government, the President experienced health problems that led to hospitalization. The coalition considered evoking Article 66 of the Constitution, which would transfer the President’s powers to other constitutional authorities because of worries that the President’s health rendered him unable to properly carry out his duties. Sputnik interpreted this as an openly aggressive attempt, in collaboration with the media and even the hospital where the President was staying, to get rid of a president who does not match the new government’s ideological stances and is one of the last obstacles on their way to control all Czech institutions.¹⁵

Sputnik predicted a bleak future for Czech-Russian relations, as reported in 25 % of the articles. The website saw the embodiment of this issue in the contested candidate for the minister of foreign affairs, Jan Lipavský. President Miloš Zeman rejected Lipavský’s nomination at first, stating his reserved stance towards the Visegrad Group and Israel, as well as supposed lack of qualifications as the reason, and there was potential for a constitutional battle over the nomination with the new Prime Minister Fiala.¹⁶ In the end, Zeman appointed Lipavský after Fiala personally vouched for him.

In Sputnik, Lipavský’s stated plans to revise Czech-Russian relations were exaggerated as plans to bring this bilateral relationship to point zero as a part of the new government’s “doctrine of Russophobia”¹⁷ and led to claims that “the Slovak Embassy will become the representative of the Czech state in Russia.”¹⁸ Moreover, Lipavský’s new position was interpreted as a “reward” for his role in ousting Russian and Chinese companies out of the tender for the Czech nuclear plant Dukovany.¹⁹

This supposed “death of Czech-Russian relations”²⁰ was also presented as a death sentence for the Czech economy. The Russian share in the Czech economy and trade and Czech dependence on Russian energy was overstated to underline the probable catastrophic consequences of the new foreign policy towards Russia

12 Jana Petrova, “Votava: Dárků bude sice hodně, přesto občanům radost neudělají...”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211224/votava-darku-bude-sice-hodne-presto-obcanum-radost-neudelaji-16969421.html>

13 Vladimír Franta, “Lipavský chce lepší vztahy s RF? Škoda, že ČR rezignovala na samostatnou zahraniční politiku. Názor”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211209/lipavsky-chce-lepsi-vztahy-s-rf-skoda-ze-cr-rezignovala-na-samostatnou-zahranicni-politiku-nazor-16800984.html>

14 Jana Petrova, “Jiří Vyvadil: Proč nebylo svoláno konsilium lékařů a proč vojenská nemocnice?”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211022/jiri-vyvadil-proc-nebylo-svolano-konsilium-lekaru-a-proc-vojenska-nemocnice-16260577.html>

15 Vladimír Franta, “Maříková: Strana, jež by sama neudělala 5 %, nám bude poroučet v Poslanecké sněmovně? Toť život”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211022/marikova-strana-jez-by-sama-neudelala-5--nam-bude-poroucet-v-poslanecke-snemovne-tot-zivot-16260931.html>

16 Jan Lopatka and Robert Muller, “Czech president rejects new PM’s foreign minister nominee”, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/czech-president-rejects-new-pms-foreign-minister-nominee-2021-12-10/>

17 Vladimír Franta, “Kolář šéfem českého zamíni? Bašta by si uměl představit větší bizár, David varuje před eskalací”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211017/kolar-sefem-ceskeho-zamini-basta-by-si-umel-predstavit-vetsi-bizar-david-varuje-pred-eskalaci-16199887.html>

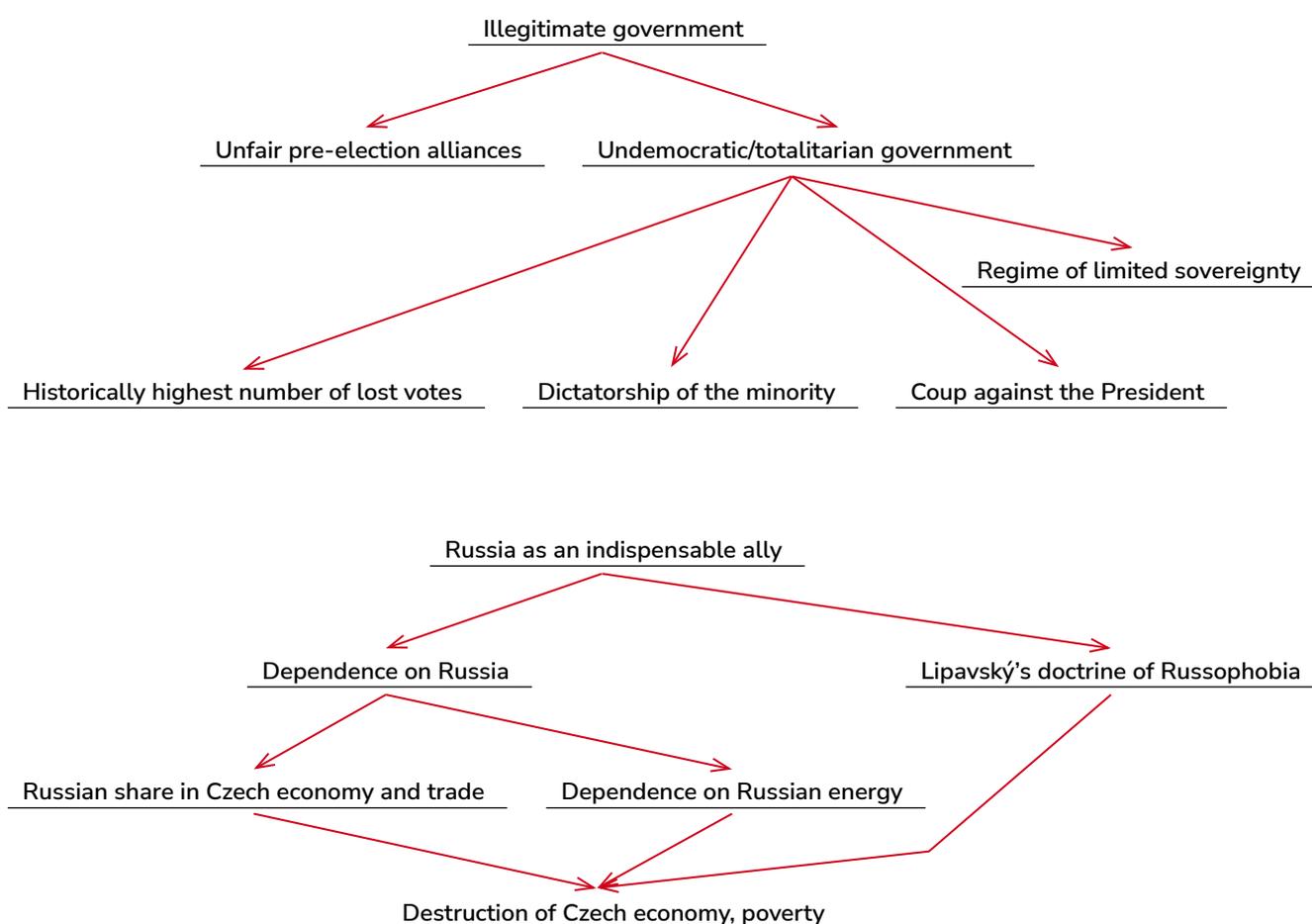
18 Alexej Saryčev, Timur Blochin, “Babišovy prezidentské šance jsou 50 na 50, pokud nebude zatčen. Názor”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211230/babisovy-prezidentske-sance-jsou-50-na-50-pokud-nebude-zatcen-nazor-17026958.html>

19 Tatjana Naronskaja, “Bašta: Nová vláda chce být jedním z iniciátorů nové studené války v Evropě”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211101/basta-nova-vlada-chce-byt-jednim-z-iniciatoru-nove-studene-valky-v-evrope-16335207.html>

20 Alexej Saryčev, Timur Blochin, “Babišovy prezidentské šance jsou 50 na 50, pokud nebude zatčen. Názor”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211230/babisovy-prezidentske-sance-jsou-50-na-50-pokud-nebude-zatcen-nazor-17026958.html>

and to prove that by distancing itself from Russia, the Czech Republic would be “shooting itself in the foot.”²¹ The new government is supposedly working on destroying the Czech economy, which will primarily impact seniors and young families²², bring poverty and “annihilation of the social state.”²³ These claims were often accompanied by references to past right-wing governments. As can be seen, Sputnik continues to utilize tactics typical of pro-Kremlin media such as exaggeration, pessimistic predictions, and fear-inducing narratives which build on past negative experience, targeting socially vulnerable parts of the society and concerns about their basic needs.

Picture 1: Sputnik’s manipulative narratives about the new Czech government in October-December 2021



21 Jana Petrova, “Mistrovství světa v kritice by pětikoalice možná vyhrála, ale volby v listopadu ne. Názor”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211208/mistrovstvi-sveta-v-kritice-by-petikoalice-mozna-vyhrala-ale-volby-v-listopadu-ne-nazor-16782492.html>

22 Jana Petrova, “Votava: Dárků bude sice hodně, přesto občanům radost neudělají...”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211224/votava-darku-bude-sice-hodne-presto-obcanum-radost-neudelaji-16969421.html>

23 Alena Novotná, “Další hřebíček do nestability. Fiala si vzal do týmu lidi, kteří mu mohou zlomit vaz”, Sputnik CZ, <https://cz.sputniknews.com/20211119/dalsi-hrebicek-do-destability-fiala-si-vzal-do-tymu-lidi-kteri-mu-mohou-zlomit-vaz-16565485.html>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sputnik CZ has demonstrated its ability to promptly react to and put forward its own interpretations of major political events, such as a change of government, and to support its interpretations by giving the floor to experts and public figures ideologically in line with the medium. Through its choice of interviewees, Sputnik not only draws voters of opposition parties into its readership — but Sputnik is also able to position itself as a platform where the voices of the 1 million voters left underrepresented after the election can be heard.

While the new government works on setting its agenda and building an image of legitimacy, it will be important to pay attention to the symbiotic relationship of pro-Kremlin, alternative media and the domestic political opposition, whether right-wing or left-wing. Acknowledging the grievances of the opposition representatives and supporters will be needed, otherwise they will keep turning to alternative media, creating a closed-off ecosystem inaccessible to mainstream media.

Due to Sputnik's considerable reach and position from which it determines the tone for other manipulative websites, the new government needs to take the potential threat of its disinformation campaigns seriously and react proportionally. To limit the impact of Sputnik and similar media on the public debate, the new government needs to go beyond declarations about the significance of disinformation and adopt a proactive stance — through a complex strategy for facing this threat, as well as dedicating an appropriate amount of resources to countering it.

The case of Sputnik also shows that disinformation thrives on pre-existing prejudice and uncertainties of vulnerable audiences, which can be used to undermine the legitimacy of the government and the mainstream media. Therefore, besides reactive debunking and prosecuting the perpetrators, more preemptive and long-term measures against disinformation campaigns must include strengthening the trust in public institutions and independent media.



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