

GLOBSEC Trends

Central Europe under the fire of propaganda:

Public opinion poll analysis in the
Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia



Summary

GLOBSEC Policy Institute (formerly the Central European Policy Institute) carries out research, analytical and communication activities related to Russia's efforts to increase its influence in Europe, including the impact of strategic communication and propaganda aimed at changing the perception and attitudes of the general population in Central European countries.

The ultimate goal of Russian propaganda in Central Europe is undermining citizens' trust in the European integration project, contesting the importance of NATO as a viable military defence pact, and the membership of the Central European countries in it. Events such as the conflict in Ukraine, migration crisis, civil war in Syria, or the recent attempted coup in Turkey are therefore used in Russian and pro-Russian disinformation media channels to disseminate the story of a morally corrupt and incapable West and aggressive US, which wants to destroy Russia using NATO. Secondary target in such efforts are independent media in the target countries, which are portrayed as biased, serving foreign interests and concealing the truth from the public. Russia under Putin's leadership, on contrary, is portrayed as a protector of the so called traditional values, saviour of the Slavic nations, and a viable economic and political alternative for the countries of Central Europe.

Although Russia has not been able to win the hearts and minds of the people in this region, it has managed to enchant them, ensuring that they are confused and frustrated, full of negative emotions towards their own values and institutions. To map the effects of the propaganda campaign on public perception, the GLOBSEC Policy Institute commissioned a series of opinion polls in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia¹.

It is obvious the region of Central Europe witnesses significant differences in perceptions of Euro-Atlantic integration. **Hungary is the strongest supporter of NATO** in the Central Europe, despite the political rhetoric of its leaders and recent economic overtures to Russia. It also hosts the only NATO base in the region. **Hungary is also the most euro-optimistic country in the region**, however this might change due to the current migration-quota referendum campaign, which is strongly anti-Brussels oriented.

Slovakia is on one hand the second most euro-optimistic country (with almost the same level of support for the EU as in Hungary) and the only country of the three which adopted the Euro. On the other hand it is the **most pro-Russian leaning** and anti-American country

¹ An extensive trilateral comparison of public perceptions based on the results of opinion polls conducted by GLOBSEC and its partners in the Czech Republic (European Values, STEM), Hungary (Political Capital, TNS Hoffmann) and Slovakia (FOCUS). The series of opinion polls was supported by the National Endowment for Democracy.

in the region. The level of **support for neutrality in Slovakia is by far the highest in the region**, almost up to 50 percent of the population.

Czech Republic is the most euro-sceptic country of the three, and its president recently supported the idea of a referendum on EU membership. At the same time, Czechs are clearly supporting the Western orientation of their country and perceive NATO membership positively. However, **the impact of alternative media and disinformation campaigns is strongest in the Czech Republic** where the public seems to trust such sources the most.

In all countries, however, there are some common trends - about half the population in all three countries see their country's position between East and West, and therefore this segment of population could become the easiest target for propaganda and misinformation efforts of the Kremlin.

Recommendations:

1. Officially recognise the problem of foreign propaganda in a form of political declaration
2. Upgrade the security system and its ability to monitor, respond to, prevent and counter disinformation and propaganda.
3. Develop and implement comprehensive communication strategies focused on defending and promoting our values and institutions.
4. Develop and disseminate our own narratives, both negative and positive.
5. Increase support for quality journalism and promotion of medial literacy.
6. Defend the online battlefield from propaganda by developing and employing proper capabilities countering disinformation, radicalisation, and recruitment.
7. Adapt the education system and immunise the younger generation to propaganda techniques.
8. Increase international cooperation and the exchange of good practices regarding strategic communication and countering propaganda.

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Opinion polls methodology

Slovakia

Public opinion survey was conducted from 31 January to 7 February 2016 by FOCUS Agency on a representative sample of the adult population of Slovakia in the form of personal interviews. Sample size : 1000 respondents over 18 years old.

Hungary

Public opinion survey was conducted from 23 June to 7 July 2016 by TNS Hoffmann on a representative sample of the adult population of Hungary in the form of personal interviews. Sample size: 1 102 respondents over 18 years old.

Czech Republic

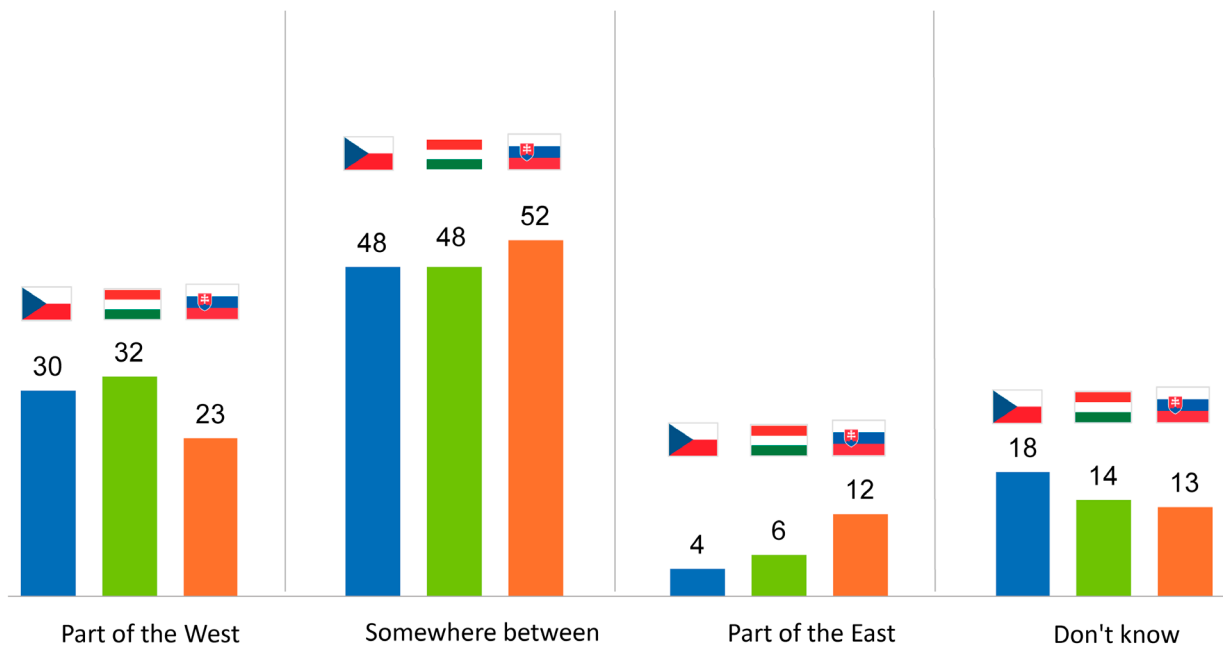
Public opinion survey was conducted from 13 June to 21 June 2016 by STEM agency on a representative sample of the adult population of the Czech Republic in the form of personal interviews. Sample size: 1,061 respondents over 18 years old.

In all three surveys, the profiles of respondents are representative of the country by sex, age, education, place of residence and size of settlement.

Public opinion polls GLOBSEC Trends were carried out in collaboration with our partner organizations - European Values (Czech Republic) and Political Capital Institute (Hungary) with the financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy.

I. East vs. West geopolitical orientation

„There has been much discussion about the geopolitical and civilizational integration of the Czech Republic / Hungary / Slovakia in our society recently. Would you like the Czech Republic / Hungary / Slovakia to be ...?“



Czech Republic / Hungary / Slovakia

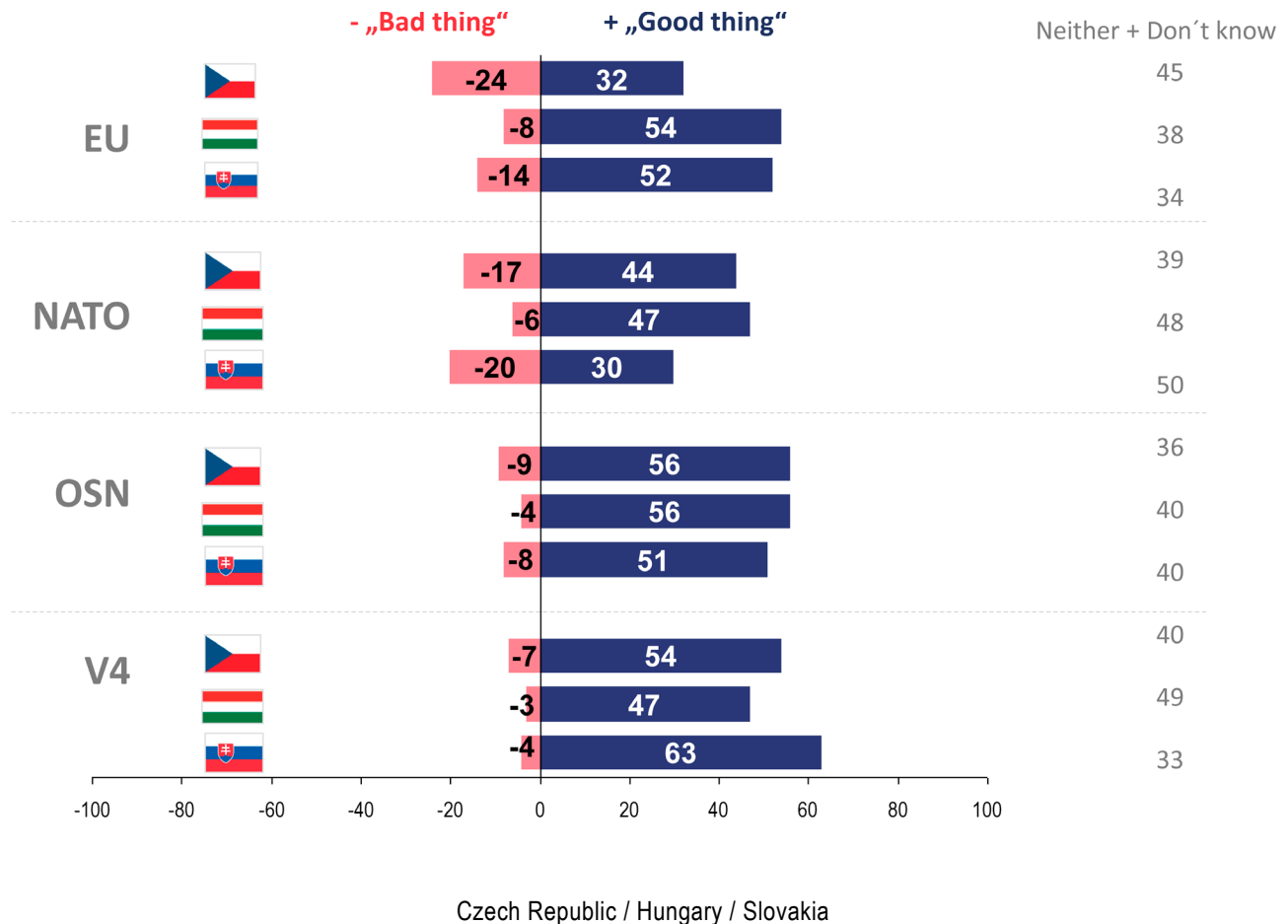
The Slovak results show that support for a **pro-Russian (Eastern) orientation is relatively small, but the strongest of the three countries** - just above 12%. The pro-West camp is almost twice as numerous - with 23% of support. Most of the respondents (52%) want Slovakia to be outside the traditional East and West dichotomy, somewhere in the middle.

Public opinion in the **Czech Republic** is slightly more pro-Western: 48 % of Czechs opt for a position in the middle, while 30% prefer the country's westward orientation and less than 4% an eastward geopolitical orientation.

The same percentage of the **Hungarians** (48%) think their country is somewhere in between the two geopolitical and cultural poles, while **32% prefers the West** and 6% prefers the East. These numbers show that the largest groups in all three countries prefer the middle position and could be persuaded and influenced towards the West or the East.

II. Support for NATO and EU membership

„What is your opinion on the membership of the Czech Republic / Hungary / Slovakia in following organizations“



Significant ambivalence is also reflected in the support for NATO membership: 30% of the respondents in the Czech Republic hold that it is neither a good nor a bad thing, while in Hungary the number is 35% and in Slovakia 39%. **Only 30% of Slovaks think their NATO membership is a good thing**, whereas the group of supporters is as large as **44% in the Czech Republic and 47% in Hungary**, which represents a significant intra-regional difference. Also, while only 6% of Hungarians think NATO is a bad thing, the alliance is unpopular among 17% of people in the Czech Republic and 20% in Slovakia.

Slovakia, traditionally one of the most pro-EU countries, **has experienced a steep fall in support for the EU**, from 68% in 2010² to **52% in 2016**. Today, 30% of people claim that EU

² 2010 data based on the Standard Eurobarometer 72.

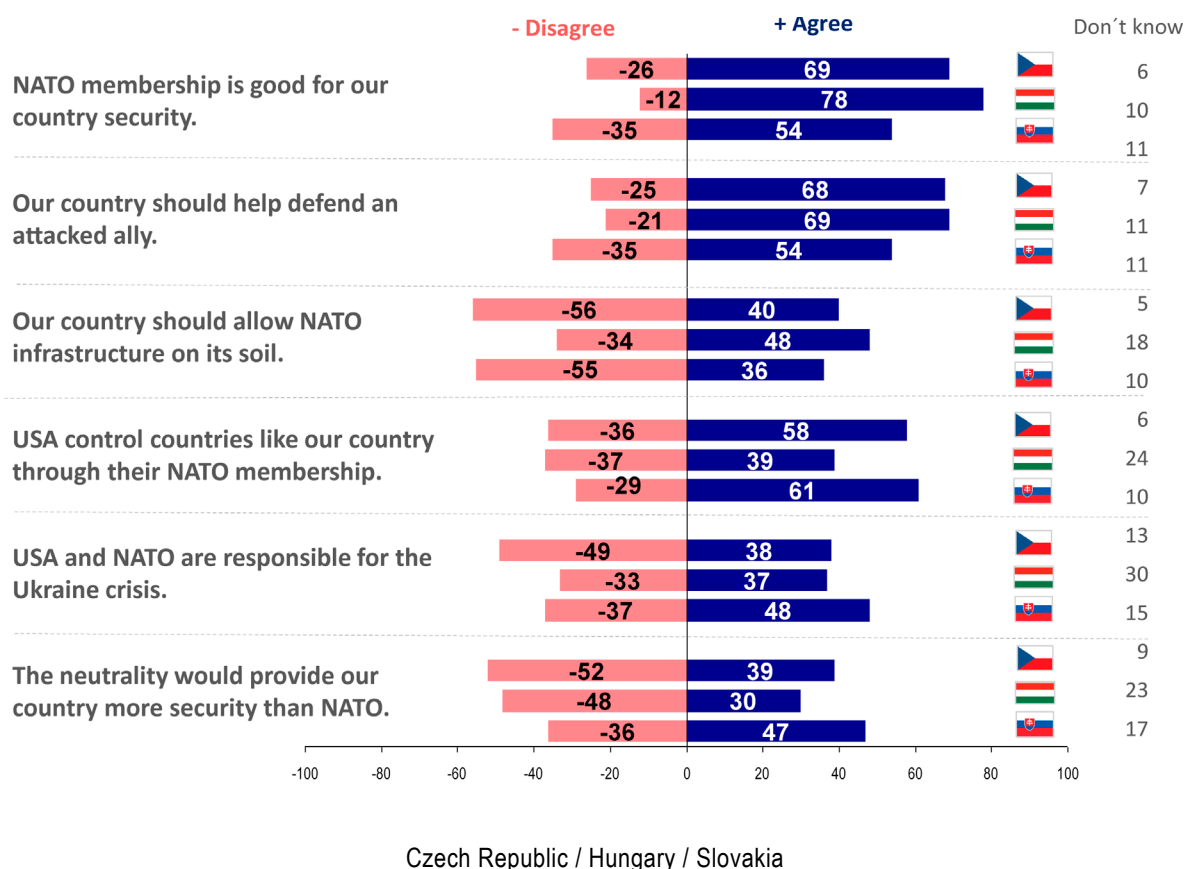
membership is neither good nor bad, and 14% are against it. These numbers can be explained in the context of the migration crisis hysteria, as the poll was conducted in February 2016, a few weeks after the alarmist messaging climaxed.

A bit more optimistic results come from Hungary, where **54% of people think that membership is a good thing**, 32% hold the “neither-nor” position and only 8% oppose the country’s EU membership.

On the other side of the spectrum, the **view of the traditionally Eurosceptic Czech public towards membership in the EU is rather bleak**. Less than 32% consider it a good thing, which is lower than the approval rating of NATO. Almost 24% of Czechs have a negative view of the EU and more than 40% see it as neither a good nor a bad thing. This large group would be decisive if a referendum – which is already a public topic – were to be held.

III. Importance of NATO and support for neutrality

„Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?“



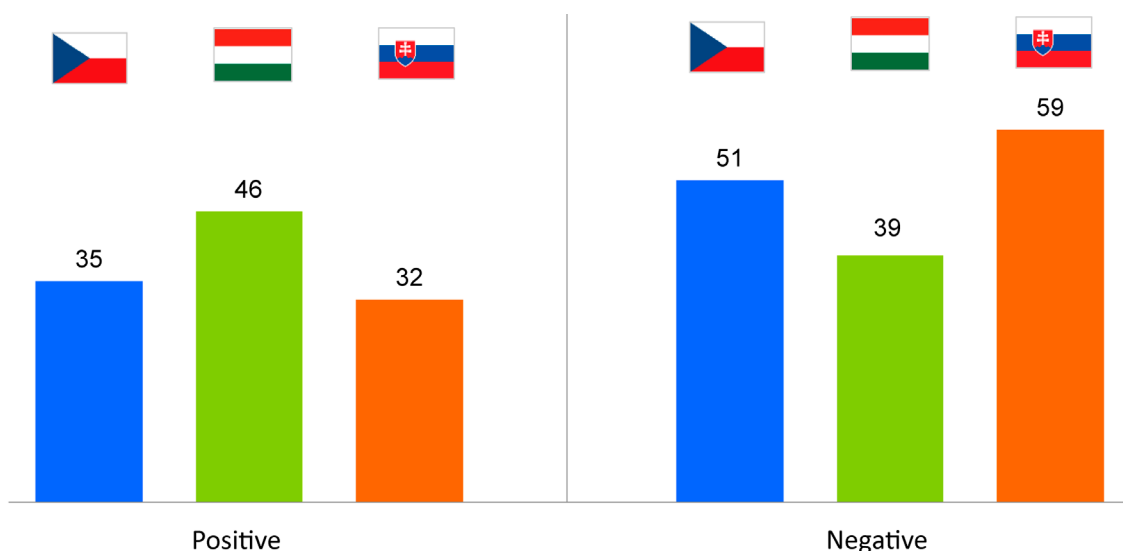
Besides overall support for integration groupings, the poll monitored the specific perceptions and motivations of the respondents. For instance, 78% of the Hungarians, 69% of the Czechs, and 54% of the Slovaks agree that membership in NATO is important for their country's security. Although there are significant differences across the region – with **Hungary being the most and Slovakia the least pro-Atlantic – the majority in each of these countries understand the value of NATO**. Also, 78% of the Hungarians, 68% of the Czechs and 54% of the Slovaks think that their country should participate in the defence of an ally, if attacked. The opinion poll conducted in the Czech Republic included an additional question inquiring about a specific scenario of Russia attacking a Baltic state: The willingness to engage in a collective defence was just 47%.

On the other hand, there is **considerable resistance towards NATO infrastructure**, with 56% of the Czechs and 55% of the Slovaks opposing any allied build-up on their soil. Again, the Hungarians seem to be more favourable towards NATO, with only 34% opposing the NATO infrastructure while 48% support it.

A particularly disturbing finding comes with the question whether neutrality would provide better security than NATO membership, which is one of the key narratives aimed at undermining popular support towards NATO membership: Although only 20% of Slovaks and 17% of Czechs oppose NATO membership, **as soon as the word neutrality appears, 39% of Czechs and 47% of Slovaks respond that neutrality would be better than NATO membership**. In the case of Hungary, the number is lower, at 30%.

IV. The role of the United States in the world

„Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?“

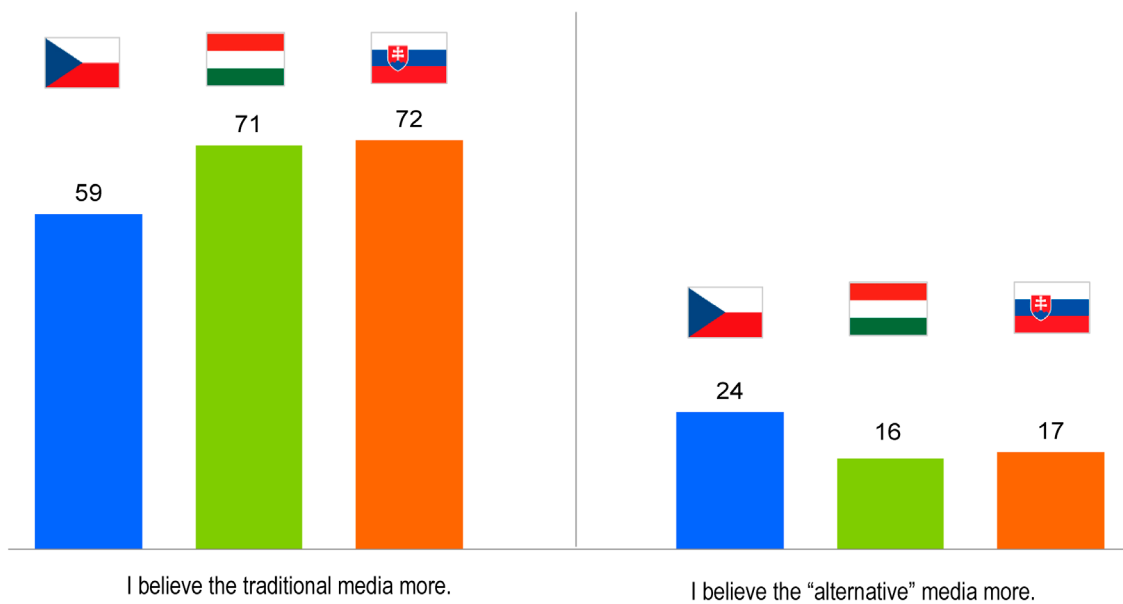


Note: The total of 100% in each country represent answers „do not know“

Anti-Americanism is a significant factor in distrust towards NATO. To illustrate: **59% of Slovaks and 51% of Czechs find the U.S.'s role in Europe and the world negative**, and the idea that the U.S. uses NATO to control small countries is believed by 60% and 58% respectively. To the contrary, 46% of the Hungarians see the U.S. engagement in the world and European affairs in a positive light, and 39% negatively. Also, many fewer Hungarians (39%) than their Czech and Slovak counterparts believe that the United States uses NATO to control other countries and impose their will on them.

V. Traditional vs. Alternative media

Approval of "alternative" (conspiracy, anti-West) media
 „Which of the two following opinions is closer to what you think?“



Note: The total of 100% in each country represent answers „do not know“.

One of the major aims of pro-Russian propaganda is to undermine the confidence of general public in the independent (public or privately owned) media in CEE. The goal of Russian propaganda is not necessarily to convince people that the Russian view of the world is the right one or that their interpretation of events is better, but rather to destroy and undermine confidence in the Western media (including Central European ones) so that the people would not believe anyone.

The most affected country in this sense seems to be the Czech Republic, where the smallest proportion of the population trusts the traditional media – only 59% and the trust towards the alternative media is the highest. The multitude and reach of Czech alternative media is also at a higher level than in the neighbouring countries.

The situation in Hungary and Slovakia is almost identical - around 70% trust the traditional media and about 17% trust the so called alternative media.

However, there is a **significant vulnerability that might reverse this trend, if not addressed properly: 29% of young Slovaks between 19 and 24 have more confidence in “alternative” media** (that of conspiracy theories and anti-West propaganda) and the trend in support for these outlets is constantly growing. Among the whole population, the support rating is 17% (7% in the 65+ group).

The results of the recent Slovak parliamentary elections (March 2016) signal that Eurosceptic or outright anti-EU (anti-NATO) and extremist parties are on the rise, which corresponds with a trend observed in many other countries and evidenced by the results of the elections to the European Parliament. In Slovakia, the crypto-fascist party of Marian Kotleba – which surprisingly entered the parliament – has already used the British Leave camp victory to announce a petition on a similar referendum. Similarly, the former Czech president and notorious anti-EU figure Vaclav Klaus, called for a domino effect in Europe. His successor, Milos Zeman, though claimed he would opt for remaining, has swiftly reacted to the British referendum by calling for one in the Czech Republic, surprisingly adding that a NATO membership referendum should be conducted as well.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

The information war against the West undermines cohesion and aggravates internal divisions, threatening the very existence of national and international institutions, and ultimately peace, security, and prosperity in this part of the world. However, this attack can and should be warded off, and the civilization to which we naturally belong must be defended. The recommendations listed below are the result of intense discussion within an international consortium of organizations, with the ambition of assisting policy-makers in defining national and common policies to counter the present threat.

1. **Official recognition of the problem** is a *conditio sine qua non* if any counter-propaganda strategy is to be successful. In addition to official political declarations, moves can be made at lower levels of state bureaucracy by identifying the threat in documents such as intelligence services' annual reports and national security strategies. The inability of state institutions to publicly identify the problem would make it hard for the non-governmental sector and media to conduct public awareness raising activities, as their claims would be dismissed as biased and groundless. Public exposure of the propaganda network (including potentially illegal schemes of funding and cooperation with intelligence services) is an important part of increasing resilience as it delegitimizes and thus disables illicit information channels. Also, communication of political representatives from both government and opposition camps is essential. They are well suited to inform the public and advocate values and institutions to which our countries adhere, because they have exceptional communication skills, unparalleled space in the media, access to information, and authority among their voters. National policy documents conceptualising threat and response to hostile foreign influence & disinformation operations need to be adopted.
2. **Upgrading the security system** needs to include changes in the legislative, organisational, financial, and personal setup of the government's institutions. These must undergo thorough analysis, perhaps in the form of a government-run national security audit (already conducted in the Czech Republic). Measures aimed at disrupting propaganda campaigns need to be taken, including the halting of illegal funding and rigorous prosecution of perpetrators of such illegal activities. Monitoring and continuous analysis of propaganda should be the role of intelligence services responsible for informing the government and other state institutions. Periodical briefings for members of parliament would improve understanding of the problem and decrease the penetration

of disinformation in this highly influential group. However, these activities need to be conducted in the public domain as well, to build capacities for countering propaganda from the official, non-governmental, and media standpoints. Monitoring and analysis of the situation is essential in developing counter-narratives and exposing propaganda networks. For example, the Czech Government is launching a new Hybrid Threat Centre with up to 30-man team of experts by 2017.

3. **Comprehensive communication strategies** focused on defending and promoting our values and institutions in this information war need to be adopted at both national and international levels. The documents should be based on thorough research and analysis and include modern and out-of-box forms of communication with the public. They must be prepared and implemented together with the non-governmental sector, marketing professionals, and media, as proved effective in the pre-accession period. National communication strategies should be further developed into communication strategies of the respective state institutions (especially of the government and the foreign, defence, interior, education, culture, finance, and economy ministries). Communication in national languages is necessary to overcome language barriers, especially as the other side communicates this way. Translations of foreign content (such as books, articles, videos) should be supported on a large scale. Unlike in the EU, information on NATO's website is only available in English, French, Ukrainian, and Russian. An agreement on including more language versions is necessitated, especially when it comes to the official languages of the most vulnerable countries.

4. **Development of our own narratives**, both negative (based on myth-busting, fact-checking of anti-Western and radical propaganda, informing of the situation in Russia) and positive (based on the benefits of the Western values and institutions) is a must. We must monitor the information environment and provide evidence of the lies and hate speech spread by the other side to question their credibility. But this is not enough; the attack on our values (such as democracy, liberty, human rights) and institutions (especially the EU and NATO) needs to be counter-balanced by their active defence and support. The story of Central Europe in the EU and NATO is one of success; the public should be given sufficient arguments to stand behind these integration projects. Addressing the problem of anti-Americanism is also important, as it is one of the main drivers of the negative stance towards NATO.

5. **Support for quality journalism** can make a difference in the information war. Adherence to the basic principles of journalism, including fact checking and crosschecking of information, is what differentiates the traditional media from their alternatives, often serving as propaganda mouthpieces of the Kremlin. The role of public media is therefore indispensable. Additional support for their domestic and international news boards, discussion formats, investigative journalism, as well as increased funding for quality documentary production in related areas is important. Discussion needs to take place on the ethics of today's journalism, as media in the post-communist area tend to lean towards balance at any cost, rather than the truth. Also, the development and improvement of media literacy skills need to be promoted, especially through the education system, and the oft-discussed problem of poor journalism education at many of our universities needs to be dealt with.

6. **Defending the online battlefield** from propaganda by developing and employing proper capabilities is necessary to counter disinformation, radicalisation, and recruitment. Arbitrary censorship is unthinkable in a democratic society, but there should be no tolerance of any illegal behaviour, especially hate speech or propagation of violations of human and civil rights. The online environment needs to be monitored and legal action taken against physical and legal entities violating the law. Also, government and non-government initiatives aimed at countering illicit narratives in the online environment need to be supported. Technological solutions and programmes countering trolling and propaganda must be developed, supported, and implemented. Last but not least, substantial strategic communication and cyber defence capacities need to be built within the military and intelligence services, to protect our institutions and societies from large-scale propaganda attacks in times of peace and war.

7. **Adaptation of the education system** is important to protect the young generation victimisation in the information war. This generation has not experienced a totalitarian regime or the integration process in Europe and is vulnerable to the attempts of the so-called alternative media disseminating conspiracy theories, hate speech, extremist ideologies, and disinformation, and an increase in support of extremism has been reported. Curriculums need to focus on the development of critical skills such as media/digital literacy, critical thinking, methodology of science, knowledge of foreign languages, as well as key formative matters such as modern history and the effects of totalitarian regimes, Euro-Atlantic integration processes and institutions, and Western values. Our education systems should help promote democratic citizenship

by employing modern and entertaining tools such as video-documentaries, games, personal experience, interactive museums, and other field visits (such as to Nazi and communist concentration camps).

8. **International cooperation** is expected as many countries of the EU and NATO face the same threat of Russian propaganda. Activities may include the exchange of good practices at various levels and in various fields (intelligence, education, foreign affairs, defence, de-radicalisation, media, etc.). Cooperation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia could be very effective, as their information space and propaganda actors (as well as those opposing them) are highly connected. Also, international bodies, such as the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence and EEAS East Strategic Communication Task Force need to be supported (funding, personnel) by the EU and NATO member countries.

9. Finally, **fixing our own internal problems**, especially when it comes to corruption and the unfinished development process of the rule of law and good governance, is essential in gaining the trust of the public in democratic institutions and Euro-Atlantic integration. Our weaknesses are a source of anger and frustration, fertile ground for populist and extremist political forces, and outright anti-Western propaganda. Russian propaganda exploits our perceived historical and societal grievances and antipathies to its benefit. Extreme and radical threads are present in every society, but we need to limit their ability to expand and penetrate mainstream thinking. Comprehensive national and international strategies must be adopted and their implementation sufficiently appropriated.



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