



Prague Security
Studies Institute



Czech Resilience Against Foreign Malign Influence

Factors, techniques
and recommendations

Jonáš Syrovátka

Program Manager

Kristína Šefčíková

Project Coordinator

Šimon Pinkas

Project Assistant

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Situational background

In recent years, the Czech Republic has witnessed repeated attempts by Russia and China to leverage influence among the political elite, business representatives, and media, as well as to interfere in decision-making processes. Despite their considerable efforts, these attempts have been largely unsuccessful as these state actors succeeded neither in penetrating strategic projects (such as 5G networks and Dukovany nuclear power plant) nor in improving their image in the eyes of the Czech population. On the contrary, their attempts to interfere have mobilized a variety of interest groups in politics, government service and civil society, all of which started to point out the unacceptable behavior of Russia and China. The results of the 2021 parliamentary elections demonstrated that these countries had lost their main supporters in Czech politics¹, which complicates their ability to exert influence in the immediate future.

Czech society therefore has a window of opportunity to reinforce the existing institutions and mechanisms that are tasked with tackling foreign influence, and to address issues that allow such influence to prosper, such as the population's reserved attitude towards Western institutions, insufficient coordination among government ministries and departments, and increasing mistrust of the media.

Vulnerabilities and Techniques

Of the dimensions analyzed in the Vulnerability Index – public perceptions, politics, state apparatus, media and civil society – influence operations by foreign malign actors mainly targeted political representatives. These attempts were hardly surprising, since Russia and China could rely on support from local political forces driven by various motives. In this regard, Czech President Miloš Zeman and his associates have been considered the most influential², despite primarily acting behind the scenes due to the President's limited powers. Foreign malign actors could also rely on the support of certain segments of legislative branch of power.

The October 2021 parliamentary elections changed the status quo. Parties receptive to voices from authoritarian states lost by a considerable margin, while right-wing and liberal parties that advocate a more resolute approach to such states are likely to form the coalition. Moreover, President Zeman's health started to deteriorate rapidly, and the degree of his influence in Czech politics remains to be seen for the remainder of his term (which should end in 2023). It is therefore possible that the change in the Czech political scene will significantly limit the influence of Russia and China in coming years.

Nevertheless, these countries will likely continue to utilize the Czech population's lukewarm attitudes towards Western institutions. Czechs largely perceive the European Union negatively due to alleged limitations on Czech sovereignty and the imposition of "ideologically-driven" measures that are thought to harm the domestic economy. Needless to say, politicians across the spectrum carry some responsibility for this prevailing attitude as they regularly use the EU as a scapegoat. Aside from the divisive topic of migration, we can already assess that the next polarizing issue to be exploited by entities that spread conspiracy theories will be measures against climate change – in particular the Green Deal. Propaganda that overemphasizes problems associated with the EU (such as migration and decarbonization of the economy) can incentivize Czechs' passivity towards Western institutions or – in the worst case – attempts to exit such institutions.

Government institutions have started to reflect the challenges related to various means of foreign malign influence by drafting measures and strategies against them - yet unfortunately a significant part thereof has not been implemented. The likely establishment of a government that considers Russian and Chinese influence as a pressing issue might incentivize improvements, such as increasing coordination among individual government entities, establishing a culture of strategic communication, and securing sufficient funding. The last point will be particularly challenging, since the new government will operate under significant financial constraints

due to the rapidly increasing national debt. While civil society and the expert community have developed significant expertise and capacity to tackle the various tools exploited by foreign actors to exert interference, their ability to do so remains limited due to a restricted ability to establish a whole-of-government approach, as well as meaningfully involve the non-profit sector in discussions and exchanges.

Czech media faces a decline in public trust and financial revenues, similarly to outlets in other countries. However, an important difference is the strong position of the Czech public broadcaster, which is perceived as a reliable and objective source of information by a significant part of the population. Certain political forces understood this fact, and consequently strove to exert pressure on this media channel's content by placing nominees in supervisory bodies. Maintaining this institution's independence and quality of output is paramount for the value of Czech public debate. This is particularly true since the further fragmentation of information space can be expected, which will be utilized by foreign and domestic malign actors that seek venues that might support the proliferation of their propaganda.

→ Policy recommendations

1

Political dimension

→ Investigate ties to foreign entities.

→ Limit the policy-making influence of individuals around the President and launch an investigation of their connections to foreign entities.

→ Launch an investigation into the potential influence of financial groups on foreign policy towards Russia and China, and adopt measures that will increase the transparency of such actors' lobbying activities.

→ Support the consensus across the political spectrum regarding foreign and security policy, including building societal resilience and situational awareness.

→ Use existing parliamentary institutions, such as the Committee on Hybrid Threats, which can serve as a venue for this discussion.

→ Include the issues and foreign malign influence into the agenda of the Czech Presidency of the European Council.

→ Involve a wider variety of actors and their expertise including think-tanks and academic community, in the discussion about foreign and security policy.

→ Lead a constructive dialogue with citizens

→ Launch a proactive policy approach towards the EU in national public institutions and thereby show citizens the relevance of Czech membership in the EU. This should include active communication on EU policies and how Czech representatives/public institutions are contributing to EU initiatives and decisions.

→ Start constructive deliberation about measures related to climate change, mainly the EU Green Deal, which are likely to be the next target of disinformation campaigns.

→ Address the broader (social, political, and economic) issues (distracts, excluded regions, looming energy poverty) behind the division of Czech society, which weakens resilience towards disinformation and foreign interference.

→ Immediately suspend the Czech Republic's participation in the International Investment Bank³ and commit to complete withdrawal from the institution in a timely fashion.

→ Avoid labeling every "anti-establishment" or "anti-EU" movement as a result of foreign malign influence - although people with such views might have ideological affinity towards authoritarian regimes, they do not necessarily serve as their deliberate proxies.

2

Public administration dimension

→ For general institutional resilience:

→ Continue with the adoption of existing strategic documents (mainly the National Strategy against Hybrid Influence), and regularly communicate their achievements and implementation to the expert community, NGOs, and the public. Strengthen their implementation by setting clear strategic goals with timelines, and by identifying specific actors responsible for individual steps.

→ Consider re-allocating resources to overcome the problem of understaffed departments that deal with foreign influence.

→ Institutionalize the coordination mechanism and structures among individual departments and ministries and establish a regular consultation mechanism with experts from civil society and academia.

→ Provide more financial and technical support to research projects in terms of security and foreign policy.

→ Increase cooperation with allied countries, including sharing and promoting Czech experiences and achievements.

→ For greater public resilience:

→ Improve the strategic communication capabilities of the government and other public institutions.

→ For electoral resilience:

→ Work on improving the enforcement of laws that regulate the funding of individual election campaigns, e.g. funding via associations.

→ Strengthen and enforce the regulation of third parties participating in election campaigns.

→ For tackling corruption:

→ Intensify efforts to regulate lobbying, especially at the municipality and regional levels, and create an obligatory and transparent registry for entities involved in lobbying activities.

→ Focus on improving the transparency of foreign investments and limiting their involvement in critical infrastructure and/or projects of strategic importance.

→ Regulate social platforms with an emphasis on allocating part of their revenue to developing journalism in countries where they operate. The ecosystem of anti-system outlets is likely to be further existing and developing. Yet such platforms might be deprived of influence by a combination of fact-checking, demonetization by limiting online advertising, and lawsuits in appropriate cases.

3

Information landscape dimension

→ Maintain the public broadcaster's independence mainly by restructuring the supervisory and oversight institutions that might currently be easily misused by politicians

→ Improve the quality of journalism by setting higher standards among the journalistic community with regards to freedom of expression and the need for diverse opinions



References

¹ <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/czech-republic/>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/30/world/europe/czech-republic-russia-milos-zeman.html>

³ Nominally a United Nations-registered intergovernmental organization, but largely controlled by the Russian government https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8422_8228-3-pssi-perspectives-oct-2020-e-f-threat-program-international-investment-bank-report.pdf

