

# TOMÁŠ PROUZA

## PROJEV VE ŠVÉDSKÉM THINK-TANKU SIPRI NA TÉMA RUSKÉ PROPAGANDY

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### **Ladies and gentlemen,**

It is a great honor for me to speak this evening at such a prestigious institution. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has a great reputation and I appreciate all its hard and important work in the field of security studies.

It seemed for quite a long time that the security situation in Europe after the end of the Cold War had changed to a more peaceful and stable state. Especially for the Central and Eastern European countries such as the Czech Republic there was a key hope linked to the end of the Cold War, and that hope was restoring sovereignty. Sovereignty as the right to choose our internal political orientation as well as the course of our foreign policy. We voted for democracy and integration into the Western international structures. We started on this path almost 27 years ago and we became members of NATO in 1999 and of the European Union in 2004.

Today, with all the pros and cons of the democratic system in mind, I am proud to say that we have a stable and well-established democratic system with centre-right and centre-left coalition governments taking turns. The pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation of the Czech Republic has been set – and many of us believed it was set for ever. However, the 21<sup>st</sup> century and especially the new decade have brought a changing international environment and new threats. Challenges stemming from globalization and regional conflicts in our neighborhood have had significant – and underestimated – security and economic impacts. There have been mass immigration inflows to Europe, terrorists attacking our way of life, far-right radicals gaining popularity in our elections and aggressive actions of the Russian Federation meddling into

the internal affairs of sovereign states.

The Kremlin skillfully uses our internal grievances to force a wedge between our people and our democratic politicians, between different groups of our nations, between our people and the mainstream media, between our states as allies, between our states and our international organizations. Sadly, even almost three decades after the end of the Cold War, we can still see the East vs. West division in the Czech Republic. And with the current feeling of insecurity in the society in the context of the manifold challenges we are facing right now, I must admit that hostile disinformation operations are having an impact on our domestic issues.

Before moving on to deadly serious matters, I must share a brief joke from the Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linkevičius: He said we should call the Russia Today propaganda channel “Russia Yesterday”, because of its glorification of Soviet times. And I agree with him. Joking aside, Russian propaganda is a widespread and dangerous phenomenon. The ongoing scandal with the Kremlin trying to influence the U.S. presidential election is one of the many examples available. We must keep in mind that the Kremlin’s intent may not be to influence the election as such but to cause chaos in internal as well as external policy with enormous possible impact. The goal of this type of modern propaganda is not to convince us something is true – but to simply relativize facts, values and beliefs so that we live in a world of hundreds of shades of gray where everything is relative and there is no anchor to stabilize our lives.

Let me briefly introduce what I perceive as the strategic goals of Russia in the Czech Republic: the first aim is to strengthen the Kremlin’s political allies and to use them for changing the foreign policy course from the EU and NATO towards more submissiveness to the actions of Russia.

The second goal I see is undermining public trust towards democratic politicians and institutions, including the mainstream media. And the third one, the most strategic goal, is to undermine public support for EU membership. And I am sad to say that it currently lies at a historical low of approximately 30%.

To achieve these goals, several tools are being used. The key job of promoting the interests of the Russian Federation is done by its political

allies from various parts of the Czech political spectrum. Those are influential public figures who copy-paste a Moscow interpretation of key events such as the Russian intervention in Ukraine or in Syria and simply appease and relativize any aggressive action the Kremlin decides to take. Then, there is an impactful role being played by disinformation projects – usually websites offering lies and manipulation as so-called “alternative points of view”. Just to give you some perspective: there are approximately 40 disinformation projects which are very active in the Czech media space and pro-Russian public figures often share articles from these sites, lending them credibility and supporting public acceptance of these viewpoints.

A bit more data to illustrate how successful pro-Kremlin propaganda is in using the fears of our citizens:

- 50% of the Czech public thinks that the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees coming into Europe are the responsibility of the United States.
- 28% of Czechs think that the Russian military intervention in Syria is helping to solve the European migration crisis while in reality Russian military actions force thousands of people to flee their homes in Syria.
- The Czech Republic is the most Eurosceptic country in Central Europe and our president Miloš Zeman recently called for a referendum on EU membership.
- The impact of the alternative media and disinformation campaigns is strongest in the Czech Republic, compared to Slovakia or Hungary. According to recent research of the European Values think tank, 25% of Czechs believe disinformation stories and outlets.
- In the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, about half the populations see their country’s position between East and West, and therefore this segment of the population could become the easiest target for the propaganda and misinformation efforts of the Kremlin.

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### **So what can we do to defend our sovereignty against hostile disinformation ops?**

First and foremost, we need to put hostile disinformation operations on the domestic, EU and NATO foreign and security policy agendas. To be

able to solve the problems, we firstly have to name them and recognize them. That is why the Czech Government is currently finishing a process called the *Audit of National Security*. We are screening our security infrastructure to find blind spots to fill in. This process will establish the influence of foreign powers and hybrid threats as a legitimate threat to our internal security, next to more traditional areas such as extremism or terrorism. We also should talk about this more often at the EU Foreign Affairs Council and Justice and Home Affairs Council meetings.

In this context, it is great news that since September, Sweden has its expert in the EEAS East STRATCOM team as a part of our joint European response. I am proud to say that the Czech expert is the person behind the Disinformation Review, a thorough database and a weekly newsletter widely used by security forces. I believe we should do more and this team should get more resources to do their job. They also need counterparts in the member states who would focus on this agenda on a daily basis. Your team at MSB is a pretty good start, I believe.

Let me mention one more example of how important it is to be aware of ongoing disinformation campaigns – Chancellor Merkel just tasked German intelligence agencies to investigate hostile disinformation efforts targeting German domestic issues. I also appreciate how your counterintelligence agency SAPO is open about this threat in its latest report.

Second, we need to publicly challenge those who spread disinformation. This should be a part of an honest public discussion that once somebody lies, he or she must bear the consequences. States themselves must respond in this policy area, but sometimes, non-governmental activities are more flexible. That is why our governments need to find ways to support independent fact-checkers such as Ukrainian StopFake or other institutions countering these faked narratives. Only a few people know about it but a network of over 400 volunteer experts throughout Europe has emerged during the last year. Those people help the EEAS STRATCOM Team to create its weekly Disinformation Review.

And finally third, our societies need to expose disinformation operations. We need to call things what they are. That is why I need to congratulate you for exposing Sputnik. It is good to see that Sputnik has shut down its propaganda operations in all Nordic languages. Apparently almost

nobody trusted it here and I would like to hear more from you on the steps you have taken.

Another good example of a healthy reaction by a democratic society is the joint statement of 21 editors-in-chief of the main Finnish media. They exposed the so called “alternative media” for what they are – tools for spreading lies and disinformation. We need journalism professionals to react to those who only hide their disinformation agenda behind a journalistic label. The state can do very little in this field – only the media themselves can and must self-regulate.

I believe that each European government should have an analytical center which can work with open source and intelligence reports on disinformation operations. It would monitor and gather knowledge on the domestic situation, and closely cooperate with EU and NATO structures and its counterparts in other countries. That is why, based on Baltic experience, the Czech Government is setting up a new *Hybrid Threat Centre*. It will monitor the disinformation battlefield and propose a rapid reaction by authorities.

### **And what can we do to communicate to Russian-speaking audiences?**

We need to be honest. Only fact-based reporting can work. That is why we host Radio Free Europe in Prague, remembering the dark days when during our own history, our domestic information sources were effectively censored. The Czech Government also supports projects focusing on helping the Ukrainian educational system by training teachers, supporting Ukrainian journalists by providing them with training, and our Embassy in Kiev has co-funded StopFake.org. We also need to work on messaging that fits the Russian mentality and use all possible communication tools to reach various audiences. To conclude, let me remind everyone of the underlying purpose of our efforts and amplify what I was trying to say. We are democratic sovereign states. We need to take on difficult discussions on how we want to run our country and what our foreign policy should be. Sovereignty means that we must and we will decide on our own and no hostile disinformation operations are acceptable.

I, personally, strongly believe in our membership in the EU and NATO. If these communities of shared values and interests remain united, we stand a very good chance to fight and win this battle with the influence of disinformation or any other external or internal threats hitting us at home. Be they Kremlin-orchestrated, or ISIL, or our own xenophobic hate-peddlers.

*TOMÁŠ PROUZA*

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