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The practical impact of disinformation on Czech society

Coffee Beans

Pavol Kosnáč, Hugo Gloss

What exactly is disinformation? The Ministry of Interior defines it as a systematic and deliberate deception. The term "disinformation" means "the dissemination of deliberately false information, especially by state actors or their offshoots towards a foreign state or the media, with the aim of influencing the decisions or opinions of those who receive it." (Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic)

CEDMO Trends research shows that Czech society is divided on the question of which narratives are actually "disinformation." If someone is struck by misinformation that they accept as their own, and at the same time does not trust any authority to correct the misinformation - such as the scientific community - it is almost impossible to convince them otherwise. The aim of disinformation is to create similar distrust and confusion on a mass scale, which is beginning to have an impact on state security and the stability of the state establishment. Society and the state are aware of this and are therefore reacting. Let us give a few examples of the practical effects of the reactions to disinformation.

1. The formation of so-called "strategic communication" at the level of the state administration. Its role is to prevent situations where trust in state institutions declines due to a lack of clear communication from the state. From the citizens' point of view, such lack of clarity is often perceived as a lack of transparency on the part of state institutions, and this reduces their trust in the institutions in question. We saw this in practice during the pandemic crisis, when measures and regulations were changed almost daily in the first months, without clear communication channels to explain these changes. The specialists responsible for strategic state communication should therefore help to ensure that such a chaotic situation does not recur and that the public always knows what the state's basic position is on key issues, why it is so, and can access information in an appropriate way. (Horák, 2022)

2. The courts are beginning to grapple with views that are the result of disinformation - for example, hateful attitudes towards Ukrainians and uncritical attitudes towards the Russian Federation. An example is the indictment of Tomáš Čermák, who the courts say committed the crimes of defamation of a nation and incitement to hatred. (irozhlas, 2022) According to a CEDMO Trends poll, the majority of the Czech population believes that such statements should be punished. However, a significant minority is against it. At the same time, 70% of respondents agree that the level of punishment should send a signal that freedom of speech is not unlimited. It is therefore to be expected that the question of where freedom of speech begins and ends will not be exhausted any time soon.

3. The Czech Government abolished the post of Government Commissioner for Media and Disinformation, which was held by Michal Klíma, in February 2023 after less than a year of existence. His task was, among other things, to cooperate with the state bodies dealing with media and disinformation, and his office prepared the so-called Action Plan for Countering Disinformation. The plan suggests possible ways of blocking disinformation,

sanctioning its publishers and prosecuting its authors and disseminators, as well as financial support for some media outlets. The function follows the creation of the Department for Countering Hybrid Threats and Terrorism at the Ministry of Interior and was intended to help counter the disinformation waves, that is, targeted disinformation designed to change the mindset of the population in relation to the state establishment. The demand for a systemic solution to disinformation intensified after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, when some websites were shut down without any legislation to back such a move. (Fujáček, 2022) A CEDMO Trends poll shows that only 23% of the population believed that the function threatened freedom of speech in the country. The function was abolished, but the fact that the function was established shows that the state takes the issue of disinformation seriously. At the same time, the termination of the function did not terminate the agenda of the function - it was transferred to the Office of the National Security Adviser, which is currently held by Tomáš Pojar.

In practice, the consequences of the impact of disinformation and the reactions to it are much more frequent. However, these three serve as tangible manifestations that make this dynamic more visible.



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