

NARRATIVES IN CZECH SOCIETY ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract: *The war in Ukraine, escalating into a full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022, profoundly affects European and global security and shapes public opinion in affected countries, including the Czech Republic. This paper examines the impact of Russian disinformation campaigns on public perception in Czech society, where various narratives influencing attitudes have been circulating since the beginning of the conflict. Some originate domestically; others reflect externally driven disinformation aimed at eroding trust in official institutions and weakening national support for Ukraine. The paper presents evaluations based on quoted references concerning the impact of disinformation narratives on public discourse and the national security of the Czech Republic. The findings highlight risks posed by foreign information influence, underscore the role of media and civil society in countering disinformation, and emphasise the necessity of coherent and effective strategic communication. Building societal resilience through media literacy and critical thinking is essential for mitigating the impact of disinformation and sustaining democratic stability in the face of ongoing geopolitical challenges, particularly by reinforcing public trust in both national and Euro-Atlantic democratic institutions.*

Keywords: *Pro-Russian narratives in the Czech Republic; public perception of the war in Ukraine; hybrid threats to national and societal security.*

Introduction

The Russian invasion in Ukraine in 2022, which escalated into a full-scale war, significantly impacts European and global security, profoundly shaping attitudes and public opinion in countries directly or indirectly affected by it. In the Czech Republic, public reaction to the invasion was overwhelmingly negative. According to available data, 95% of citizens condemned the invasion, with 89 % expressing strong disapproval and an additional 6 % indicating partial disagreement (Glaserová 2022). In the aftermath, various narratives began to circulate that have influenced public attitudes. Some of these narratives originate from domestic political and societal institutions and actors (Hübscherová 2022), while others are directly influenced by hostile disinformation campaigns primarily aimed at undermining public trust in official institutions and state authorities and reducing support for Ukraine.

Russian influence is confirmed by the National Centre Against Organized Crime (NCOZ - Národní centrála proti organizovanému zločinu), reporting regular Russian-led or supported information operations in the Czech Republic designed to spread fear, uncertainty, and sway public opinion towards pro-Russian narratives (Chodil 2024). These disinformation campaigns notably impact Czech public opinion regarding foreign and security policy. Russia's war against Ukraine has influenced Czech public views on geopolitical issues, creating a risk of increased societal polarisation. Systematic pro-Russian information operations divide society, emphasising the necessity of

continuous awareness-building about threats, the active promotion of critical thinking, and the development of skills to recognise and reject disinformation.

In the Czech Republic, the core supporters of conspiracy and disinformation narratives remain stable, accounting for less than 10% of the population (Pika and Cibulka 2023). Wider public opinion strongly resists these pro-Kremlin narratives, preventing their dominance in public discourse. However, direct belief in conspiracies plays only a partial role; more critical is trust in political systems and state institutions, which conspiracy theories and disinformation seek to undermine.

Building resilience against hybrid threats and combating disinformation is crucial not only for state institutions, which must engage in effective strategic communication (Divišová 2022) but also for civil society and media. Strengthening social, institutional, and national resilience (Bízik et al. 2022, 77-78) is essential for ensuring state and societal security.

Therefore, the war in Ukraine presents the Czech Republic with complex challenges affecting security policy and public opinion formation. Systematic monitoring and proactive countermeasures are key to maintaining stability, security, and democratic principles during ongoing geopolitical shifts (MO ČR 2021).

1. Narratives as Instruments of Societal Influence

The term *narrative* does not have a universally established definition, and there are differences in how its meaning and scope are understood across national contexts and at the international level (Divišová 2014, 109-110). This also presents a challenge for the development of effective strategic communication (StratCom), for example within NATO (Bolt and Haiden 2019, 9-12). The Cambridge Dictionary offers several definitions of how the term can be interpreted, such as: "a story or a description of a series of events," "a particular way of explaining or understanding events," "telling a story or describing a series of events," and "a story or a description of events" ("Meaning of narrative in English" 2025). A narrative can be understood as the way in which information is interpreted and how it influences collective perceptions of reality and societal discourse (Táborský 2019, 8-10). Narratives provide frameworks for interpreting complex events and phenomena, thereby creating a shared reference base that shapes individuals' and groups' understanding of their environment. They significantly impact political and social dynamics by shaping attitudes and establishing norms and rules of public discourse, which can either strengthen social cohesion or contribute to polarisation and the deepening of internal societal conflicts. Narratives play a crucial role in legitimising political decisions or delegitimising specific actors, directly affecting the form and outcomes of political processes in a country (Vinš 2022, 1).

In recent years, Czech public discourse has witnessed the strengthening of narratives related to the situation in Ukraine, identifiable as pro-Russian. These narratives often rely on interpretations aligned with or directly echo Russian state propaganda. Their influence is evident not only in the Czech Republic but also in other Central and Eastern European countries, reflecting a broader geopolitical strategy by the Russian Federation aimed at influencing public opinion in countries historically complicated in their relations with Russia (Vinš 2022, 3-10). Pro-Russian narratives frequently question the credibility of Western institutions, democratic values, and allied commitments to NATO and the EU, justify Russian actions in Ukraine, relativise the current international order, and emphasise negative impacts on the Czech state and society. Fortunately, this influence is not always sufficiently successful (Žabka 2023).

These narratives exploit historical resentments, economic hardships, and fears of an uncertain future within segments of society, attempting to influence public attitudes emotionally. Through targeted campaigns primarily on social media (Pačková, Hanzelka, and Šenkýřová 2024) and alternative media platforms, these narratives can quickly penetrate broader segments of the population

(Pásztor 2024a), leading to a gradual erosion of trust in state institutions, democratic processes, and media, potentially weakening political stability and societal cohesion.

2. Main pro-Russian narratives

The following section presents the most significant pro-Russian narratives identified in Czech public discourse, illustrating their core claims and argumentative structure.

2.1. The West provoked the war

One of the most prominent pro-Russian narratives asserts that the West provoked the war (Vinš 2022, 7). This narrative claim that Western geopolitical actions, particularly those of the United States, the European Union, and NATO, allegedly forced Russia into military action. Central to this argument is the perceived threat to Russia posed by NATO expansion and the intention to geopolitically weaken Moscow. This narrative portrays Russia as a defender of its national interests forced into action by aggressive moves from the so-called collective West (Kirby 2025). However, available facts refute this narrative. NATO expansion was based exclusively on democratic decisions by countries seeking security guarantees from historical experiences with Russian dominance or aggression.

This narrative occasionally invokes long-standing, although marginal, pro-Russian and pan-Slavic sentiments, portraying the war as a Western attack on the Slavic world led naturally by Putin's Russia (Holub 2014). Such arguments ignore the fact that Ukraine is also a Slavic nation whose population chose European integration. The exploitation of Slavic sentiment serves Russian propaganda by targeting Slavic populations in Central Europe to gain support for Russian geopolitical objectives.

2.2. Ukraine started the war

Another widespread pro-Russian narrative claims that Ukraine itself started the war. This narrative is frequently propagated through information channels systematically utilized for the dissemination of Russian state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation. These include, for example, RT (formerly Russia Today), Sputnik, Aeronet, and Voice of Europe, as well as a wide array of Telegram channels and Facebook profiles affiliated with or supportive of Russian interests. The narrative typically draws on selective interpretations of the 2013 and 2014 events collectively referred to as the Euromaidan. The core assertion of this narrative is that following these events, a supposedly fascist and nationalist government seized power in Ukraine, systematically oppressing Russian-speaking populations in the eastern regions (Mateo 2018). However, this narrative ignores the fact that Ukrainian governments post-Euromaidan emerged from democratic elections, and no credible evidence supports claims of widespread oppression of the Russian minority.

A critical component of this narrative alleges that eastern Ukraine was forced to defend itself due to supposed oppression, prompting Russian intervention solely to protect this minority. In reality, the conflict in Donbas was initiated by Russian military and intelligence structures supporting separatist movements and destabilising the region since 2014. Available reports have confirmed a substantial Russian military presence in eastern Ukraine long before Moscow officially admitted its involvement (Amnesty International 2014).

Additionally, this narrative often links Ukraine's current leadership to historical figures like Stepan Bandera, attempting to create negative associations and portray Ukraine as extremist. In reality, the glorification of Bandera and Ukrainian nationalism is marginal and does not reflect the official policy of the Ukrainian government (Hudec 2025). Such disinformation aligns with a broader

Russian strategy aimed at weakening international support for Ukraine and discrediting its political leadership.

2.3. Ukraine Has No Right to Independent Existence

The pro-Russian narrative denying Ukraine's right to independent existence is based on claims that Ukraine has always historically been part of the Russian state or under its control and that its territory belongs to the so-called Russian world (*Russkiy mir*). This narrative disregards historical facts demonstrating Ukraine's independent statehood and identity development. Ukraine has a long history of independent political evolution, from the *Kyivan Rus* era through medieval and modern periods to turbulent struggles for national emancipation in the 20th century and today (Lebduška 2022, 10-11).

Another frequent element of this narrative is the claim that Ukraine is an unviable state plagued by pervasive corruption, unable to provide favourable living conditions for its citizens, especially the Russian-speaking minority. Although Ukraine faces corruption-related challenges, since 2014, its government has implemented comprehensive reforms targeting the judicial system, strengthening anti-corruption efforts, combating money laundering, limiting oligarchic influence, regulating the media market, and enhancing minority protection (Movchan 2023). In 2022, Ukraine was recognised as one of the most actively reforming countries in the region, confirmed notably by the European Commission in evaluating Ukraine's application for EU membership (EC 2022).

2.4. Ukraine Cannot Win the War

This narrative emerged in Russian propaganda already in the initial days of the invasion of February 2022, predicting Ukraine's defeat within days or weeks (ABC News 2022). The fact that the planned "special military operation" (Putin, 2022) extended into a prolonged conflict lasting over three years has not diminished the persistence of this narrative. Its purpose is to undermine Ukrainian morale and weaken Western support for further military and economic assistance towards it.

This narrative also claims that the war must be ended at any cost, even if it means territorial concessions and significant limitations on Ukraine's sovereignty (Sezemský 2024). This interpretation ignores the reality of international law, which stipulates that territorial integrity cannot be changed by force. Ukraine has demonstrated its ability to effectively defend its territory, gaining substantial military experience and crucial Allied support, enabling continued resistance against Russian aggression. Proponents of this narrative also assert that providing military and economic aid to Ukraine prolongs the conflict and increases civilian suffering (Palata 2022). However, without this support, Ukraine's defence capabilities would likely be significantly weakened, potentially leading to further Russian territorial advances and additional human and material losses.

2.5. Ukraine's Current Leadership is Illegitimate

The narrative questioning the legitimacy of the Ukrainian president and Ukraine's leadership was initiated by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his statement on May 24, 2024, referring to the expiration of Volodymyr Zelenskyy's presidential term (Reuters, 2024). This narrative was later repeated and amplified by the current U.S. President Donald Trump, who referred to Zelenskyy as a "dictator without elections" (Trump 2025a) and claimed that he had a negligible 4% support among Ukrainians (Trump 2025b). This claim lacks evidence, ignoring the fact that President Zelenskyy was elected democratically in 2019 with 73% of the vote, one of the strongest electoral mandates in modern Ukrainian history (OSCE 2019, 42).

Furthermore, this narrative emphasises that no elections have been held during the ongoing war in Ukraine, allegedly undermining the legitimacy of the current government. This is justified by the fact that Ukrainian constitutional provisions prohibit holding elections during martial law, a

standard practice observed by other democratic states facing crises. Conducting elections during the occupation and active combat would result in significant portions of the population being unable to vote, thereby compromising the legitimacy of any elected officials under such conditions (Hosenseidlová 2024).

Additionally, since May 2024, when President Zelenskyy's mandate was supposed to expire, Russian propaganda has intensified claims that Ukraine's leadership lacks democratic legitimacy and popular mandate (Sukhov 2024). However, this assertion is part of a broader information operation aiming to weaken international support for Ukraine and cast doubt on governmental stability. Such claims come from a Russian authoritarian regime led by Vladimir Putin since 1999, with a long-standing absence of genuinely free, just, transparent and internationally monitored elections.

Despite these disinformation efforts, Ukraine's current leadership continues to receive strong support from both the domestic population (Burdyga 2025) and the international community. The European Union, the United States, and NATO have repeatedly affirmed that Ukraine remains a democratic country with legitimate political leadership. Questioning the legitimacy of Ukraine's government thus serves primarily as a tool in Russia's broader informational warfare strategy rather than reflecting an accurate assessment of Ukraine's political reality.

2.6. Support for Ukraine Comes at the Expense of Czech Citizens, Their Prosperity, and Security

This narrative has multiple layers emphasising the alleged negative consequences of supporting Ukraine for the social, economic, and security situation of Czech citizens (Pásztor 2024b, 4-9). The most prominent claim is that Czech taxpayers' money is directed to Ukraine instead of being invested in addressing domestic issues, particularly social agendas.

For example, according to the 2023 annual report by the Czech civilian intelligence service, Security Information Service (Bezpečnostní informační služba - BIS), Russian information activities targeting the Czech public largely focused on the topic of assistance provided to Ukraine. Specifically, a Russian-directed influence operation was uncovered, coordinated by Viktor Medvedchuk, a Ukrainian oligarch closely linked to the Kremlin regime. Artem Marchevsky managed this operation locally, directing the well-known online medium "Voice of Europe" in Prague (BIS 2024, 11-15).

Another widespread claim asserts that sanctions against Russia are ineffective and damage only the Czech economy (EC 2023). However, economic impact studies indicate that sanctions have significantly weakened the Russian war machinery in the long term, and the diversification of energy supplies has successfully reduced dependency on Russian fuels. In 2024, nuclear fuel imports from Russia ended, and from January 1, 2025, the Czech Republic no longer imports any gas from Russia, with all Russian oil imports ceasing by mid-2025 at the latest.

Claims have also emerged stating that the Czech Republic is overwhelmed by Ukrainian refugees, who allegedly exploit the social welfare system and increase crime rates. Currently, nearly 600,000 Ukrainian citizens reside in the Czech Republic, including 400,000 refugees under temporary protection, predominantly women and children (75%). In 2024, Czech police prosecuted approximately 3,800 Ukrainians, representing just 0.7% of the Ukrainian population residing in the Czech Republic, approximately three times fewer than Slovak citizens, for example (Svoboda and Švihel 2025). Data from the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs also show that Ukrainian refugees are effectively integrating into the labour market, contributing more in taxes to the state budget than they receive in social support. For instance, during the three years of the Russian-initiated war in Ukraine, the Czech state budget's income from people under temporary protection doubled the total costs of humanitarian aid (MPSV ČR 2025).

Pro-Russian disinformation narratives portray the transfer of military equipment to Ukraine as weakening Czech defence capabilities. In reality, international agreements have enabled the Czech

military to acquire more modern equipment and financial resources to enhance its defence capacities. Supporting Ukraine also positively impacts the Czech economy through the defence industry's growth, foreign investment and Czech companies' involvement in reconstruction projects in Ukraine. According to Czech National Security Advisor Tomáš Pojar, the expenses related to assisting Ukraine have already been recovered, and military aid and support for Ukraine are now economically beneficial (Cieslar 2024).

Conclusion

The analysis of the aforementioned narratives within the Czech society demonstrates that manipulation of facts and disinformation significantly shape public attitudes and perceptions of the conflict in Ukraine. These narratives distort reality and contribute to societal polarisation, weaken public support for assistance to Ukraine, and potentially influence political decisions. Although the vast majority of Czech citizens initially condemned Russia's 2022 invasion, support for Ukraine has gradually declined. An increasing number of people express war fatigue, deepening societal polarisation, a trend particularly noticeable as parliamentary elections approach in the fall of 2025, with the radicalisation of public discourse and a surge in populist narratives becoming more pronounced.

Another critical factor influencing public perception is that key measures in support of Ukraine are implemented by an unpopular government, directly impacting how the public views this assistance. Additionally, Russian-backed information operations contribute to spreading these narratives through disinformation networks, so-called alternative media, and social media platforms. Public scepticism towards official state communication heightens vulnerability to disinformation, further eroding trust in both national and Euro-Atlantic democratic institutions.

The data and arguments presented suggest that supporting Ukraine transcends moral and security dimensions, offering tangible economic and geopolitical benefits for the Czech Republic. Hence, it is essential to continue monitoring and analysing these disinformation patterns and actively strengthen citizens' media literacy and critical thinking skills. Strategic, transparent, and proactive governmental communication, complemented by robust civic education initiatives, is crucial for countering disinformation, reducing polarisation, and sustaining democratic stability and resilience in the Czech Republic amidst ongoing geopolitical challenges.

***Author's Note:** AI (ChatGPT and Grammarly) was used to translate the text into English.*

***Acknowledgements:** This conference proceeding resulted from research supported by the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic under the project: Long-term Development of Organization - Armed Conflict (DZRO OZKON), which has been conducted by the University of Defence, Brno, Czech Republic.*

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