

## Propaganda in the Czech Republic

By Sophie Weresch

Propaganda – a theme nobody would directly connect to the Czech Republic. But “Russia subtly influences Czech media with pro-Russian coverage through news websites on the internet”, Maxime Kratochvil says a 25 year old Econometrics Master student at the University of Amsterdam. Originally he is from a small city in the extreme eastern part of the Czech Republic.

“The Czech republic is just one example of how Russian institutions lead by the Kremlin try to influence media in my country”, Kratochvil says. He carries on:” But Russia influences all the old parts of the USSR with the purpose to acquire more power.”

Nowadays the internet is a common instrument to spread propaganda. More than 40 media providers in the Czech Republic are under the influence of pro-Russian media coverage. According to Kratochvil, Czech media websites, which are spreading pro-Russian opinions such as AC24 and Svet kolem nas, have increased during the last years, he knows from echo24.cz for example. But not only websites but also internet discussions in forums and social media such as Facebook are influenced by Russian thoughts through people who are being paid by Russia to do so.

“Since the Crimea conflict and the shut down of MH17 propaganda got stronger”, Kratochvil says. “After it that was quite clear that MH17 was taken down by Russian military system, the propaganda stopped saying "it was Ukraine", but started a different strategy. They started to overwhelm the internet and discussions by so many different possible explanations, opinions, suggestions and disinformation that people would eventually get lost what could be believed anymore.“

More popular topics in which Kremlin led opinions are imparted are for example the refugees' policies and the Syria war.

The influence is not obviously shown but subtle. The websites try to push peoples' opinion towards pro-Russian or anti European approaches. For example "They mostly blame western politicians and spread fear against the west and their political decisions", says

„The propaganda often works by releasing shocking news, so it spreads quite easily among "common" people.”

That means those news websites don't obviously praise the Russian president Vladimir Putin but slightly shed a bad light on political decisions made by the EU.

According to political experts this is a classical technique of manipulation through stereotyping certain politicians. "These news websites which show a pro-Russian point of view even spread misinformation to make Russia seem stronger than Europe does in the eyes people in the Czech Republic. They are acting as they would be the real and only truth teller", Kratochvil adds.

But who are "they"? Kratochvil struggles with answering these questions. "Probably", he assumes: "it has to be people who are paid by Russia."

To somehow take action against the propaganda, the NGO organisation "People in Need" originated a project. Their purpose is, to already make Czech teenagers familiar with how Russian propaganda works.

As Russian propaganda is not really obvious, the project wants to make the students aware of how the Russian government uses techniques and methods. Students also learn about the main topics in the Czech news, which are under the impact of pro-Russian propaganda such as the conflict in eastern Ukraine. Kratochvil also agrees with the fact that it is necessary to already start early in telling students to have a critical eye on the media coverage in the Czech Republic but he is still sceptical about the impact.

In terms of protecting the Czech population against propaganda there is not much one can do in case you want to keep the freedom of expression Kratochvil suggests. "It always depends on the individual and one's common sense."