

Larger than life - Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia?

*Grassroots vulnerability to Russian sharp power in Central Eastern Europe
Research Summary*

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FOREWORD

The current research presents a novel approach to the understanding of Russian soft and sharp power. Our analysis explores the vulnerability and resilience to everyday Russian hostile influence in Central Eastern Europe (CEE), focusing on the horizontal, online “grassroots” communication between citizens. An explicit aim of the research was to leave behind the “elitist,” top-down approach of analyses on hybrid warfare and investigate ordinary conversations taking place day-by-day between citizens, especially on social media. Important research on the perception of Russia has already been carried out using traditional public opinion polling methodologies.¹ Bakamo.Social’s social listening methodology mapped millions of “natural,” spontaneous online conversations of average citizens related to Russia. The research covered a two-year period (20 November 2016 – 19 November 2018) to understand the hidden societal and psychological drivers of anti-Russian or pro-Russian conversations and perceptions in the general population.²

The advantage of the “no questions asked” methodology that focuses on spontaneous discussions was that it revealed the underexamined relationship between elite and everyday communications and how it affects the West’s effectiveness to respond to the Kremlin’s hostile influence operations in the CEE. Thus, the Kremlin’s influence operations are best understood in the framework of Lazarsfeld’s classical two-step communication model explaining that the top-down messages of the elite (mainly through mass media) are being interpreted and spread by grassroots opinion-leaders in communication networks, often having an indirect impact on the attitudes and behaviour of voters.³

The basic questions of our research were the following:

- How Russia is perceived in the spontaneous discussions between citizens on the social media In Central Eastern European countries? What are the similarities and differences?
- To what extent do the “top-down” communications of local actors, the Euro-Atlantic Community and Russia affect grassroots communication in each country and in the CEE in general? How successful are Russian attempts in shaping the perceptions of Russia and the West?
- What are the underlying drivers of pro-Kremlin attitudes and discussions in these societies? What are the emotional vulnerabilities to Russian soft (and even more, sharp) power in CEE?

As we found in our previous studies, the classical soft power⁴ efforts of the Kremlin - to make itself more attractive in the world - have not really been successful, as the image of Russia has deteriorated considerably since the annexation of Crimea.⁵ In the region though, Russia has a bit more leverage on societies because of its proximity, the socialist past and ,in some countries, Slavic connections.⁶ Efforts to spread the dominant values and narratives of the Putin regime in CEE countries have not been a complete failure.⁷

1 Clark Letterman, ‘Global Views of Putin, Russia Largely Negative | Pew Research Center’, Pewglobal.Org (blog), 6 2018, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2018/12/06/image-of-putin-russia-suffers-internationally/>.

2 ‘Bakamo.Social | Strategic Social Listening | Insights without Asking’, Bakamo.Social | Strategic Social Listening | Insights without asking, accessed 26 February 2019, <https://www.bakamosocial.com/>.

3 ‘Mass Media | Two Step Flow Theory’, Universiteit Twente, accessed 6 March 2019, https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/communication-theories/sorted-by-cluster/Mass-Media/Two_Step_Flow_Theory-1/.

4 The term „soft power” is originally defined by Nye as a country’s ability to impact others’ behaviour through appeal and attraction instead of any coercion or „hard power.” You can find more on the definition on soft power here: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1148580?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

5 Péter Krekó et al (2019). Mystification and Demystification of Vladimir Putin’s Russia. http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_mystification_and_demystification_of_russia_eng_web_20190312.pdf

6 See for Example: Globsec Trends, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf> Krekó, P. (2018). Russia in the Hungarian public opinion https://www.tarki.hu/sites/default/files/2019-02/358_371_Kreko.pdf

7 Péter Krekó et al. (2016.) ‘The Weaponization of Culture: Kremlin’s Traditional Agenda and the Export of Values to Central Europe’.

However, authoritarian states such as Russia and China have more important goals than being popular. They “are not necessarily seeking to ‘win hearts and minds,’ the common frame of reference for soft power efforts, but they are surely seeking to manipulate their target audiences by distorting the information that reaches them,” as the inventors of the term “sharp power” suggest.⁸ Sharp power tools indirectly help Russian soft power attempts as well, albeit in a bizarre manner. As both an earlier and this study indicate, Russia has been successful in creating the illusion of near omnipotence in influencing Western policy processes, changing electoral outcomes and replacing leaders. This mystification of Russia in the whole Western world might be the greatest result that the Kremlin’s spin doctors have achieved so far, and the indirect impact can be that Russia becomes attractive in the eyes of many because it seems to be strong.

In line with this thought, we assessed in the study how the influencing efforts of Russia impacted the public discourse on Russia and challenged Euro-Atlantic strategic communication objectives in this region.

We are grateful for the generous support of the National Endowment for Democracy that made this research possible. We are particularly thankful for Joanna Rohozinska and Rodger Potocki for their help throughout the project, and for Chris Walker and Shanthi Kalathil for the enlightening discussions on sharp power at Ned Forum that gave inspiration for this research. In addition, we are thankful for all of our partners for cooperating with us in this research, namely Daniel Fazekas (Bakamo.Social) in Hungary, Daniel Milo, Katarína Klingová, Dominika Hajdu in Slovakia and Jonáš Syrovátka in the Czech Republic. We are thankful for our colleague Patrik Szicherle, András Rácz and Anna Orosz as well, who helped improve the text. All errors remain our own.

8 Walker, C., & Ludwig, J. (2017). The meaning of sharp power: How authoritarian states project influence. *Foreign Affairs*, 16.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Our research highlights not only the vulnerabilities, but an existing resilience towards Russian influence in Central Eastern Europe, giving room for some cautious optimism. Based on the data of our social listening analysis, in the three countries' conversations altogether, 46% expresses negative opinions, 33% is neutral and only 21% express positive sentiments towards Russia or the Kremlin. In line with previous public opinion polls,⁹ and in line with expectations, we could observe the most pro-Russian discourses in Slovakia. We saw the least pro-Russian discussions in the Czech Republic. Hungary stood between the two.
- Our results show that the Crimean annexation and its aftermath had a clear impact on the discussions. The mainstream, official position of Western Institutions and its narratives successfully seeped into the everyday conversations in CEE. Russia is often portrayed as “aggressor,” “invisible influencer” or a “manipulator.” Besides the current military aggression in Ukraine, disinformation and hybrid warfare attacks against the West, negative historical experiences of the Soviet crackdown on revolutions in 1956 (Hungary) or in 1968 (Czechoslovakia) frequently appear in discussions on the relations towards Russia.
- Still, for many, Russia is a more tangible point of reference that is easier to relate to – even as an adversary – than the West. Also, in line with our recent opinion poll,¹⁰ the Kremlin and Russia are perceived and portrayed as larger than life, stronger than they really are in terms of economic power, military capacities and influence over European policy processes.
- Pro-Russian arguments are still highly salient in public discussions, not independently of strong Russia-supported voices in the media. “Russian fanboys” and “Admirers of Russia” each constitute 10% of the regional public landscape. While the former expresses affinity towards the Russian military and masculinity, the latter admires the big Eastern brother's culture, Soviet times and the Kremlin's self-projected image of being the bastion of Christianity and traditions against a weak, liberal West overtaken by illegal immigration. The third consumer group with positive attitudes was labelled “Russia is the safer bet than the West” (8%). Its members interpret Russia's role in pragmatic economic and political terms based on Russia's geopolitical proximity and economic or military power. This group is also showing some Soviet nostalgia.
- There are two main social psychological drivers of pro-Russian opinions and discussions in the region. First, a general feeling of “insecurity” due to the international environment that is full of conflict and experiences of the region as being the battleground of the East and the West. The second, connected driver of “inferiority” reflects these countries' perceived dependence on “superpowers” and the experience of sometimes only being their toys. Consequently, Russian disinformation takes advantage of these fears and the identity crises by questioning the advantages of being a member of the EU, NATO or the Transatlantic community and promoting anti-Western views directly, but also indirectly, via relativization, geopolitical “in-betweenness,” and “neutrality.”
- Three region-specific factors could be identified which feed directly into this identity crisis. First, the elite's communication making Russia look stronger, bigger, better and more important than it really is by pro-Russian politicians such as PM Orbán or President Zeman. This is amplified by local pro-Russian media spreading pro-Russian narratives from the top. Second, special links to Russia based on Pan-Slavic ideology (in Slovakia and Czech Republic) or Soviet nostalgia plays an important role

9 <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>

10 http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/pc_mystification_and_demystification_of_russia_eng_web_20190312.pdf

in a considerable portion (20-40%) of everyday discussions. Third, Eurosceptic rhetoric, such as the Hungarian government's campaign against Brussels claiming to defend the "Christianity" of Europe¹¹ or Milos Zeman's similar messages, depicts CEE states as a "victim" of Western imperialism that comes in the form of multiculturalism, liberalism and nihilism – while the Kremlin, the last bastion of traditions and religion, can be the saviour of the region and Europe.

- Our research reveals an important layer of Russian sharp power that circumvents the official communication channels: the existing, strong pro-Russian discussions on the grassroots levels of communication. It is not accidental that Russia tries to influence and shape these discussions, not just via trolls and bots, but via more traditional forms of online discussions as well; e.g., as it was extensively observed in Slovakia, via email chains, which can have a strong impact among the elder generations.¹²
- Grassroots communication in the three countries reveal a clear connection between the perceptions of Russia and China. First, China is regarded as an ally or friend of the Kremlin, a part of the same Eastern geopolitical bloc hostile to the Euro-Atlantic community or to the West in general. Second, people characterised the Chinese regime similarly to the Kremlin in terms of it pursuing authoritarian rule, being aggressive on the international stage, spying on people or not being able to sustain Western standards when it comes to environmental protection, quality of goods, etc. Finally, China is also perceived to be a threat or political vulnerability in some country-specific cases, such as the Belgrade-Budapest railway constructed and financed by Chinese companies or President Zeman's political role in serving Beijing's interests. Thus, negative views on Russia tend to reinforce negative perceptions of China along economic, military or human rights issues, which hints at the same grassroots societal resilience factors against any authoritarian influence in CEE.

But the resilience we found is fragile, as a small group of opinion-leaders in the communication networks play a crucially important role in driving the discussions. Russia's image is shaped by a relatively small minority of active users in the three countries we examined. Given the increasing importance of social media in shaping political opinions in Central and Eastern Europe, "diverting" a few thousand individual accounts' interactions could fundamentally change current anti-Russian perceptions in the CEE.

11 'Orbán: "Kitartunk a keresztény Európa mellett"', 888.hu, accessed 7 March 2019, <https://888.hu/article-orban-kitartunk-a-kereszteny-europa-mellett>.

12 Email chains and other Russia's propaganda tools in central and eastern Europe. Euromaidanpress, 2017 <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/07/14/disinformation-email-chains-and-other-russias-propaganda-tools-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

METHODOLOGY

Our research utilized a novel trier approach to measure grassroots communication. Unlike representative polling or regular media content research, Bakamo.Social's social media listening methodology scooped millions of online conversations centred around certain keywords such as "Russia" or "Kremlin" on public media platforms (e.g.: homepages, forums, social media) to establish a mass database of messages without asking any pre-set questions from sources or people. As a consequence, the units of analysis are natural or unfiltered messages in the form of articles or posts commented below an article or in a public forum.

In the second step, Bakamo.Social categorized each message based on whether they displayed positive/neutral/negative sentiments towards Russia. The narrative analysis of these conversations revealed basic negative or positive perceptions of Russia dominant in the sample, while the combination of these perceptions was then used to construct public "segments" or consumer groups. The groups were described based on pro-Russian or anti-Russian narratives and psychological drivers of authoritarian influence and geopolitical orientation.

Third, the research results of Bakamo.Social were contextualized according to the specific political and institutional setting, media market, the populations' geopolitical orientation and Russian soft power and strategic communication strategies in each country.¹³

Due to Facebook's recent restrictions on data access, the research was forced to analyse Twitter and Facebook separately. While Twitter data could be included in the general sample, the analysis of Facebook pages had to be limited to the top 20-20 Slovak, Hungarian and Czech fringe and mainstream sources. The analysis of Facebook posts was carried out using Zoomsphere,¹⁴ adding another layer (top-down communication) to the analysis.¹⁵

This trier approach ultimately allowed us to assess the key areas of vulnerabilities and resilience of grassroots, horizontal communication and the underlying primary social psychological drivers that spur people to support or reject the Kremlin.

13 The low ratio positions or sentiments of the neutral geopolitical stances in all three countries compared to the significantly higher attitudinal ratios produced by representative polling can be attributed to the methodological differences between the measurements. Polling techniques inquire about the opinions of "neutral" respondents who are less likely to appear in the online discussion, so their neutral position produces less conversational data in our sample than in traditional polling researches.

14 Zoomsphere, 'ZoomSphere.com', ZoomSphere, accessed 5 March 2019, <https://www.zoomsphere.com/>.

15 Zoomsphere's methodology somewhat expanded the data beyond the 40 pages, because the tool also monitors a baseline of additional sources in each country.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

HORIZONTAL COMMUNICATION ON RUSSIA-RELATED ISSUES IN CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE

The research captured more than 3 million conversations in the three countries between 20 November 2016 – 19 November 2018 (see Chart 1 below). This led to the identification of six basic perceptions and six public segments or “consumer groups” of Russia-related communication based on the focal points or main lines of narratives found in the data.¹⁶

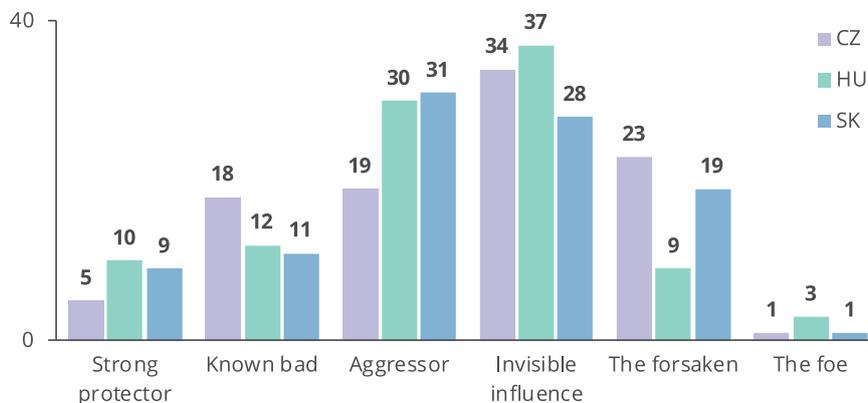
Chart 1. The number of conversations sampled in the three countries between 20 November 2016 and 19 November 2018



BASIC PERCEPTIONS

The analysis identified six types of perceptions about Russia. Four of them reflected a rather negative attitude, which shows that most people have a negative view of Russia and its leadership’s foreign policy, official communication, the strength of the Russian military or the political/societal system and standard of living in the country (See Chart 2).

Chart 2. The six basic perceptions about Russia and their representation in the three countries



¹⁶ The ratios displayed are not representative of the general populations under review; however, they are an accurate display of communication patterns in Czech, Slovak and Hungarian grassroots, horizontal public communication. Basic sentiments were assigned to messages based on pre-determined common definitions and qualitative content analysis done by a team of local experts in each country.

The two most dominant perceptions in all three countries reflect on the Kremlin's current "cross-domain coercion" or hybrid warfare, viewing **Russia as an "Aggressor" (on average 26.7%) or an "Invisible influencer" (on average 33%).**¹⁷ These perceptions describe the expansive and aggressive nature of Russia and Putin. Russia emerges as a ruthless, unpredictable and powerful country that also wields an invisible communication power to use smokescreens, political deceptions and disinformation to achieve its malicious goals. Conversations of these kinds are driven by past and current military conflicts, such as the 1940 Katyn massacre in Poland, the invasion of Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Crimea in 2014, etc. Moreover, many of the conversations of this type also implicate that the Kremlin meddles in democratic elections or that Russia is sending covert secret agents abroad. For about a quarter of Czechs (23%) and Slovaks (19%), Russia also represents a negative point of reference as a **"Forsaken country"** due to its low standard of living or the oppressive nature of its political system. Interestingly, the fourth negative perception about Russia being a **geopolitical "Foe"** of the EU or NATO is very rare: only 1-3% of the populations share this perception.

Positive perceptions are shared by less than 20% of the populations overall. The **Russia as a "Strong protector and ally"** perception (shared by less than 10% on average) has a positive interpretation of past and current Russian military "assertiveness." This perception reinforces Putin's image as a patriotic leader who stands up and defends his people against the "ailing West," as once the Soviet Union did against Nazi Germany. The **"Known bad"** perception appearing in more than 10% of the conversations reflects on the shared "positive" historical experiences with Russia in these countries. This view emphasizes the "familiar" Russian high culture, goods and societal habits, embellished by Soviet nostalgia towards perceived societal equality. This view holds that the "Russians are accused of wrongdoings unfairly" or the "West is just as bad as Russia" when it comes to international conflicts and interests. While these perceptions are clearly the main staple of pro-Russian Slovak, Hungarian and Czech communication and disinformation, their impact is limited due to the absence of other important factors that Russian hybrid warfare can exploit more efficiently in other countries (e.g.: exposure to Russia-controlled Orthodox Christianity, large Russian diaspora consuming the Kremlin's media indirectly).

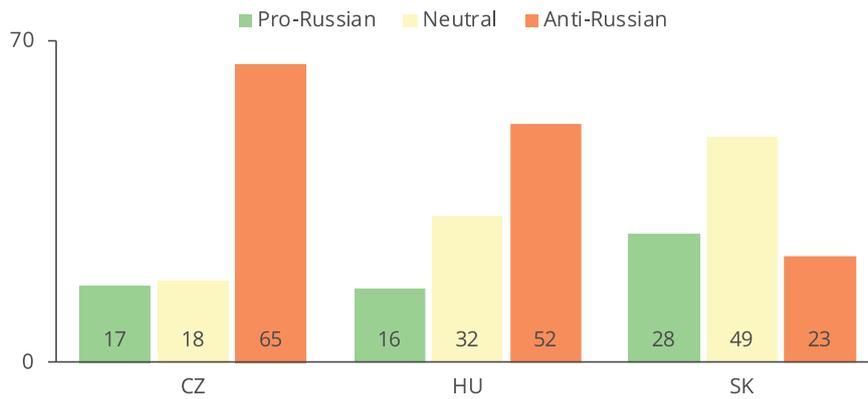
The analysis of the top 20 mainstream and top 20 fringe, pro-Russian Facebook pages in each country confirmed that narratives present on the social media platform fuel first and foremost the "Aggressor" or "Invisible influence" perceptions of Russia. Moreover, Facebook proved to be one of the most important multipliers of pro-Kremlin voices in the Czech, Slovak or Hungarian information spaces with fringe accounts providing a disproportionately wide and deep coverage of any Russia-related news as compared to mainstream or independent news sources in these countries. So, the Kremlin-critical mainstream media's presence and activity on Facebook is essential in keeping the geopolitical debate more objective and balanced on social media.

Altogether, the majority of the expressed sentiments of people in grassroots communication are negative towards Russia (see Chart 3.). A sentiment analysis of the messages shows that on average 46% of the sample have negative, 33% neutral and 21% positive views on Russia/the Kremlin/President Putin. We found the most anti-Russian conversation in Czech Republic, and the most pro-Russian in Slovakia. The more positive opinions expressed in Slovakia towards Russia and the higher level of neutral comments can be explained by the historically strong Slovak-Russian cultural Pan-Slavic ties.¹⁸

17 To describe Russia's hostile international behaviour, we decided to use the term „hybrid warfare" most known to the wider public, even though academically the term "cross-domain coercion" would be more accurate.

18 The low ratio of the neutral geopolitical positions in all three countries compared to the significantly higher attitudinal ratios produced by representative polling can be attributed to the difference of measurements. Polls are not only representative compared to the rather qualitative approach of Bakamo.Social's social listening, but they also inquire the opinions those "neutral" respondents the polling who would otherwise not be an active part of the discussion on Russia in the public space, so their neutral position produces no conversational data in our sample.

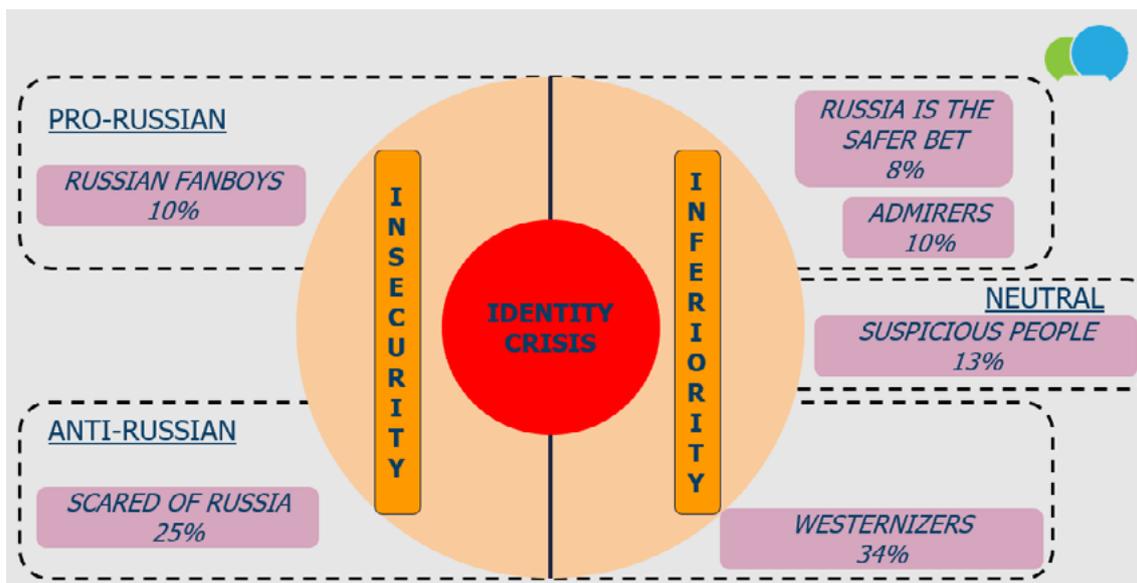
Chart 3. The evaluative content of expressed sentiments towards Russia in the three countries



“CONSUMER GROUPS”

Based on the six perceptions described above, Bakamo.Social identified six psychological profiles of public groups that tend to consume Russia- or Kremlin-related news. These reveal their two hidden behavioural drivers in each society, as seen on the info-graphic below (Chart 4).

Chart 4. Public segments or consumer groups of Russia-related communication (%) and their two main psychological drivers in the three countries



Although Russia-critical consumer segments form the majority of the sample of conversations,¹⁹ almost a third of the three countries’ publics can be considered part of one of the three pro-Russian groups. Among those, “**Russian fanboys**” and “**Admirers of Russia**” each constitute 10% of the regional public landscape. While the former expresses affinity towards the Russian military and masculinity, which is especially strong among young members of far-right subcultures throughout the region, the latter admires the big Eastern brother’s culture, Soviet times and the Kremlin’s self-projected image of being the bastion of Christianity

19 The difference in the overall ratios of negative or positive perceptions and segments can be explained by the fact that consumer groups or segments are made up by a mixture of some or all of the basic perceptions. Segment or consumer ratios cannot be considered a representative sample of the general population; however, they are representative of the regional grassroots communication overall.

and traditions against a weak, liberal West taken over by illegal immigration. Emotion-filled arguments are present in these groups, such as:

“Hey you Liberal, seems like Russia is the last shelter of Christianity. Oh, you do not care?”

„We, Hungarians, do not belong to Europe, not even culturally. We are a Eurasian nation. Those 40 years with the Soviets were great for everyone, we are sorry to see them gone.”

The third consumer group with positive attitudes, **“Russia is the safer bet” among international players** (8%) can be placed in the “rational middle” between “Fanboys” and “Admirers”. They try to interpret Russia’s role in pragmatic economic and political terms based on Russia’s geopolitical proximity and economic or military power. This kind of attitude resonates well with the anti-sanctions rhetoric claiming economic cooperation should not be hindered by the annexation of Crimea due to mutual interests. This group is also displaying some Soviet nostalgia:

„For many people, seeing the Soviet army leave was painful, and they think back fondly to those times. It had its benefits. Especially in the countryside, Russians took even the half-rotten products and transported them home by trains.”

There are two basic types of anti-Russian groups in the sample: **Westernizers** (34%) who identify themselves explicitly with the West and Western values, and condemn the pro-Eastern shift and people **“Scared of Russia”** (25%), who are genuinely afraid of the Kremlin’s aggressive expansionist foreign policy and military interventions. The size of these groups is in line with public opinion polls indicating that the absolute or relative majority of Czechs, Slovaks or Hungarians support their countries’ EU or NATO membership.²⁰ A typical comment refers to the threat the Kremlin potentially poses to both international and individual actors in the region:

„The whole world is terrified of Russian spies (...) whoever they don’t like, dies - I’m also on their radar as a loud opponent of their system”

The last neutral population segment called the **“Suspicious people”** exhibits distrust towards both the West and Russia because they view their country as weak and vulnerable to superpowers. This group is bigger in public opinion polls – which shows that this neutral attitude is less “loud” and expressed vocally during public conversations. Other studies found the group of individuals placing their countries between the East and the West and believing in “hidden powers” type conspiracy theories to explain international relations and events to be considerable in size.²¹

CRISIS OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN GEOPOLITICAL IDENTITY: DRIVERS OF INSECURITY AND INFERIORITY

Based on our analysis, all sentiments, perceptions and group behaviours exhibited by CEE people towards Russia can be traced back to two basic emotional drives. **“Insecurity”** and **“inferiority”** seem to be the dominant feelings behind the expressed attitudes, connected to a general identity crisis. This kind of “identity crisis” is both reflected by the 30-50% of the populations that consistently place their countries between the

20 ‘GLOBSEC Trends 2018: Central Europe Moving In Different Directions’, GLOBSEC, accessed 6 November 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/news/globsec-trends-central-europe-different-perspectives/>.

21 The difference between representative poll ratios of the „neutral” geopolitical stances and Bakamo.Social’s data can be explained by the different methodology. Polls are not only representative compared to the rather qualitative approach of Bakamo.Social’s social listening, but they also inquire about the opinions of “neutral” respondents who would otherwise not be an active part of the discussion on Russia in the public space.

For example, in Hungary around 30% of the general population believes in pro-Russian and anti-Western conspiracy theories with over 30% supporting theories about the “2015 European migrant crisis having been caused by American interest groups” or the “2014 Ukrainian revolution being brought about by George Soros and the CIA to install their people in power. Összeesküvés-Elméletek, Álhírek, Babonák a Magyar Közvéleményben’, politicalcapital.hu, accessed 11 February 2019, http://www.politicalcapital.hu/hireink.php?article_read=1&article_id=2323.

East and the West in recent representative polls. Russian propaganda targeting the Transatlantic community to alienate CEE member states' populations from the West aims to exploit these tendencies.²²

While the issue of geopolitical belonging is an age-old dilemma in the CEE, everybody thought the matter was put to rest by incorporating these countries into Western integration structures. Contrary to this conviction, our data revealed that individuals' attitudes towards Russia are far from settled, quite flexible and easy to shape. In our understanding, geopolitical "insecurity" translates into people contemplating their individual/national survival, while "inferiority" addresses their countries' perceived dependence on "big powers," and the feeling of being secondary citizens of Western alliances. Comments showing "insecurity" are framed by life and death - their real concern is whether Russia or the West is the safer bet to survive as a nation:

"As long as we have good connections with the West, it is not a problem to keep good relations with Russia. Germans are doing the same."

"If the situation between the USA and Russia becomes problematic, and a second Cold War will emerge, whose side would you choose? We've already decided. Why would we choose the losing side again?"

Comments showing „inferiority” reflect on the inability of one's home country to function on its own, and about the necessity of a "shelter" from the West or the East to make the country work:

"Putin is a brilliant tactician who does everything for his country. It's okay if we go on this road more than 90. Socialism was not good? It was a good way to live, there was free stay in SZOT (socialist recreation facilities, the editors). There were no homeless or unemployed people. I do not understand what the problem is with this."

RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY TO RUSSIAN SOFT AND SHARP POWER IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, SLOVAKIA AND HUNGARY

COUNTRY-SPECIFIC FINDINGS

Based on our analysis, Russian or pro-Russian disinformation takes direct advantage of the above-mentioned issues by questioning the region's political identity and the advantages provided by Western alliances. Each country under revision has specific societal and political circumstances affecting the resilience of the local grassroots communication to Russian influence.

HUNGARY

In Hungary, the traditional political and institutional factors affecting vulnerability to Russian influence include the Hungarian government's pro-Russian foreign and economic policies, the pro-government mainstream media's positive coverage of the Kremlin and the direct dissemination of Russian disinformation and conspiracy theories about Ukraine and the West.²³ There is also a network of Hungarian-speaking pro-Russian social media accounts, webpages embedded into the pro-Kremlin Hungarian far right and paramilitary subculture formed around the far-right Jobbik and Mi Hazánk parties.²⁴ Despite the government directly spreading political messages according to Russian interests, our analysis of Hungarian perceptions demonstrated that Hungarian grassroots communication is more resilient to top-down Russian disinformation, although a shift in public opinion is already notable.²⁵

22 'GLOBSEC TRENDS 2018', globsec.org, 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GLOBSEC-Trends-2018.pdf>.

23 'A Legnépszerűbb Orosz Összeesküvés-Elméletek a Magyar Kormánypartí Sajtóban', PC (blog), accessed 6 November 2018, <http://pcblog.atlatszo.hu/2016/07/13/a-legnepszerubb-orosz-osszeeskuves-elmeletek-a-magyar-kormanyparti-sajtoban/>.

24 Political Capital, 'The Activity of Pro-Russian Extremist Groups in Central-Eastern Europe', 28 April 2017, http://www.politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=933.

25 Krekó, P. (2018). Russia in the Hungarian public opinion. https://www.tarki.hu/sites/default/files/2019-02/358_371_Kreko.pdf

The discrepancy between the top-down pro-Russian public discourse and the dominantly Russia-critical grassroots discourses can be explained by four major institutional and media content-related factors: (1) the Russia-related discourse in Hungary is produced by an active group of users (42,400 individual users or voices) who mainly express negative sentiments or opinion towards Russia, while “neutrals” are more silent; (2) most of the discussions take place on independent media surfaces; (3) even the comments posted on pro-government media tend to be critical towards the Kremlin; (4) one of the main drivers of discussions concerns Russia’s current or past military aggression(s); finally, (5) experiences about the West can dilute anti-EU or anti-Brussels conspiracy theories.²⁶

Still, the Hungarian government’s anti-EU and Brussels communication playing on feelings of insecurity and inferiority fuels pro-Russian sentiments directly and indirectly as well. The Hungarian government’s communication on the allegedly weak, failing West that is unable to cope with mass-immigration and defend its Christian heritage fuels these two basic drivers among approximately 1.2-1.5 million Fidesz-voters or the 2.4-3.2 million strong geopolitically undecided populace, who can feel “left behind” by the West to fend for themselves.²⁷ Moreover, PM Orbán’s rhetoric fits well into the Kremlin’s conservative, “decline of the West” narrative.

SLOVAKIA

Slovakia has the largest pro-Russian population among the three observed countries, according to both earlier survey results and Bakamo.Social’s data. This can be attributed to the country’s close cultural, historic and linguistic ties to Russia, a shared Pan-Slavic ideology and the current presence of Russia-related groups and prominent figures in the Slovak civic and educational system, including a significant pro-Russian far-right subculture.²⁸ According to GLOBSEC Trends 2018, 13% of Slovaks would prefer their country to geopolitically belong to the East,²⁹ while elderly people feel a particularly strong nostalgia towards the Communist past.³⁰ Some in the ruling social-democratic SMER or the Slovak National Party also support a more neutral position of Slovakia, question relations with NATO and try to capitalise on anti-US sentiments present in the Slovak society. In addition, the far-right LSNS party led by Marian Kotleba openly praises the Kremlin and has a fiercely anti-NATO rhetoric. **Still, social listening revealed that neutral or negative sentiments and perceptions towards Russia are dominating the online conversations, which can be explained by a variety of elements:** (1) the Slovak media landscape is dominated by independent and pro-West mainstream media; (2) the spread of pro-Russian narratives is limited to fringe media and the far-right extremist subculture with limited outreach to the general population; (3) the discourse and perceptions about Russia are heavily influenced by the 1968 Soviet occupation; (4) only a limited number of users (20.900 individual users or voices) contribute to the Slovak grassroots discourse about Russia. In contrast, the results reaffirmed the presence of pro-Russian ideology in Slovak society, whose geopolitical orientation is the most pro-East and anti-NATO among the V4 countries.³¹ Such voices have a profound impact on the horizontal communication as well, which can be a long-term and sustainable launching pad for Russian sharp power in the future.

26 Lili Bayer, ‘Hungary Launches Campaign Targeting Jean-Claude Juncker’, POLITICO, 18 February 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/hungary-launches-campaign-targeting-jean-claude-juncker-george-soros/>.

27 The government’s communication proved to be a success so far, as it formed the first ever pro-Russian voting bloc among the Fidesz electorate of which 51% would support closer relations with Moscow instead of Washington, according to a Medián poll in 2018. See: <https://444.hu/2018/03/14/a-fideszesek-nagyon-megszerettek-putyint-es-oroszorszagot>

28 Grigorij Mesežnikov and Radovan Bránik, ‘Hatred, Violence and Comprehensive Military Training The Violent Radicalisation and Kremlin Connections of Slovak Paramilitary, Extremist and Neo-Nazi Groups’ (Political Capital, April 2017), http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_SK_20170428.pdf.

29 The same survey, shows only 21% of Slovak respondents ideally positioning their country to the West and more than a half of the population ideally seeing their country “somewhere in between”.

30 GLOBSEC, ‘Generation Trends Central Europe: Mosaic of Perspectives’, 2019 <https://www.globsec.org/publications/generation-trends-central-europe-mosaic-of-perspectives/>

31 ‘The Vulnerability Index: Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe’, GLOBSEC, accessed 6 November 2018, <https://www.globsec.org/publications/vulnerability-index-subversive-russian-influence-central-europe/>.

CZECH REPUBLIC

Similar to Hungary, Russian influence in the Czech Republic is partly connected to the highest levels of government, since President Zeman is openly praising the Kremlin and took a stance against the sanctions on Russia. In addition, the Babis government is supported from the outside by the Communist party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM),³² whose members supported the illegal annexation of Crimea and are among the staunchest Kremlin lobbyists in the Czech parliament, in cooperation with the Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies.³³ There is also a quite extensive pro-Russian media network embedded into the Czech far-right and pro-Russian subculture spreading anti-West narratives. **Still, our research data shows that there are no significant cultural, religious or civic ties to Russia in the Czech discourse.** 83% of Czech voices are either hostile or neutral to Russia and the Kremlin. These results can be attributed to a number of factors, such as: (1) the mainstream Czech media's strong position on the media market, providing an objective coverage of Russia and a lively debate on malign Russian or Chinese influence; (2) pro-Russian narratives and the network of pro-Russian alternative media itself is isolated from the mainstream political discourse; (3) the remembrance of the 1968 invasion continues to define Russia's perception as a military aggressor that has been even more reinforced by recent conflicts in Ukraine; finally, (4) the Czech public's interest and knowledge on Russia is low, which prevents the effectiveness of soft power tools, aided by the Center against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats established under the auspices of the Ministry of the Interior. In contrast, Russian sharp power can take advantage of the anti-West and anti-immigration narratives popular among Czechs and spread both by the president and pro-Russian fringe actors and of the fact that Czech society is the most Eurosceptic among EU member states.³⁴

All in all, we could identify three main elements of grassroots' vulnerability, which feed into the "inferiority" or "insecurity" aspects of the identity crisis of the CEE.

1. The elite's communication intertwined with local pro-Russian actors and media in all three countries, setting the frameworks of pro-Russian narratives and depicting bilateral relations with the Kremlin in a favourable light.
2. Special connection to Russia based on the Pan-Slavic ideology or Soviet nostalgia is widespread among 20-40% of the population.³⁵
3. Euroscepticism in the form of anti-immigration or anti-Brussels rhetoric coupled with the widespread "in-between" geopolitical attitude is rampant in V4 countries with at least a quarter of the populations believing in conspiracy theories.³⁶

GENERAL REMARKS ON RESILIENCE AND VULNERABILITY

Our research confirmed that Western strategic communication was successful in communicating its intended message. Most of the grassroots conversations in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia perceive Russia either an "Aggressor" or an "Invisible influence," which is by and large in line with Western media's interpretation of the Kremlin's operations in Ukraine or its attempts to meddle in Western elections. Our

32 Robert Tait, 'Czech Communists Return to Government as Power Brokers', The Guardian, 12 July 2018, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/12/czech-communists-return-to-government-as-power-brokers>.

33 Petra Vejvodová, Jakub Janda, and Veronika Vichová, 'The Russian Connections of Far-Right and Paramilitary Organizations in the Czech Republic' (Political Capital, April 2017), http://www.politicalcapital.hu/pc-admin/source/documents/PC_NED_country_study_SK_20170428.pdf.

34 Marián Koreň, 'Analyst: Euroscepticism among Czechs Will Stay, Even with New President', Euractiv.Com (blog), 26 January 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/interview/analyst-euroscepticism-among-czechs-will-stay-even-with-new-president/>.

35 'GLOBSEC TRENDS 2018'.

36 'GLOBSEC TRENDS 2018'.

analysis shows that there is a clear difference between the Western and Russian approach to elite and grassroots communication, which provides the Kremlin with an edge in its hybrid warfare, demonstrated by the comparative table below (Table 1.).

Table 1. Differences in Western and Russian strategic communication aimed at the EU or the Trans-Atlantic Community

Elements of strategic communication: soft and sharp power tools	Symbolical identification	Elite actors	Shared generational past experiences	Rational content	Irrational conspiracy theories	Mass manipulation operations
West	No or weak	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Russia	Strong	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The first and most important takeaway from Russia-related perceptions is that Russia is a stronger point of reference, more capable of invoking symbolical identification - even as an adversary - than the West. The Kremlin has an additional home-turf advantage due to shared Soviet times that binds together generations and to which Russia is simply a more relatable actor. There are no such shared memories with the West that would create a strong bond between the CEE and the Western community. Western institutions also have problems with addressing the Russian mass-manipulation campaigns or attempts on the content-level,³⁷ since Western communication operates mostly based on rational, fact-based, positive campaigns, which have proven to be insufficient against the best negative viral contents that are widely shared on social media and/or in everyday gossip-filled communications produced by the Kremlin. All these factors make grassroots communication in the CEE especially vulnerable to mass-manipulation attacks as explained above.

VULNERABLE RESILIENCE?

The analysis of grassroots communication paints a contradictory picture in terms of resilience. We could well say the West has won a battle, but it takes very little to lose the war, considering the four fragile elements of grassroots resilience revealed by our data:

1. Russia's image is determined by only an active "core" of a few thousand individual users scattered all around in local society, which means that it would not take too much resources to reshape the existing narratives.
2. The pro-West or anti-Russian narratives utilized in grassroots communication are greatly dependent on national, independent mainstream media capable of delivering balanced reporting on world events against the backdrop of fringe, partisan media and political communication. A healthy media market is harder and harder to maintain due to financial hardships of traditional media and autocratic attempts to control the sector, for example in Hungary. Non-pluralistic media environments create a fertile ground for foreign interference.³⁸

37 NATO Review, 'Cooperating to counter hybrid threats', NATO Review, accessed 27 February 2019, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2018/Also-in-2018/cooperating-to-counter-hybrid-threats/EN/index.htm>.

38 Vulnerability Index- Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe <https://www.globsec.org/publications/vulnerability-index-subversive-russian-influence-central-europe/>

3. Social Media platforms, having an increasing impact on public opinion, are at least as much important for democratic discourse as they are a source of the most outrageous conspiracy theories and extremist movements online.
4. Central-European anti-Russian perceptions are still greatly influenced by negative historical narratives on 1968 or 1956. However, direct personal experiences are vanishing with older generations and local political involvement is needed to keep the memory and shared understanding of these social traumas alive. Soviet nostalgia is still strong in these societies.

What makes Russian sharp power and media influence so dangerous is its capability to attack the very foundations of grassroots communication.

One of the most often used strategy of Russian propaganda involves “individual targeting” of an individual or a group on social media with the aim of influencing their behaviour by feeding them or their followers’ carefully crafted messages and narratives by a network of designate sites, bots, trolls.³⁹ Mass-scale hostile influence operations seek current political hot topics or other usually divisive social issues on social platforms to infiltrate online communities and amplify existing divisions. They can use the segmentation of online communities to make use of the echo-chamber effect by amplifying in-group sentiments around issues or increase a conflict between groups already attacking each-other.⁴⁰

Based on our research, foreign malign influence would need to “divert” or “substitute” only a few thousand individual users’ interactions to fundamentally change the perceptions and characteristic of anti-Russian public groups. Thus, anti-immigration conspiracy theories and theories accusing the West of creating “shadow governments” are directly targeting the geopolitically unoriented or non-aligned masses in the CEE to alienate them from the West based on the deepest psychological drivers of insecurity and inferiority. In this process, the Kremlin’s strategic communication can bypass the elite-based Euro-Atlantic discourse, since the Czech vulnerability to Euroscepticism, the Slovak vulnerability to Pan-Slavic ideology or the Hungarian vulnerability to the foreign policy of far-right revisionism are given, self-reliant features of local societies and grassroots discourses.

39 Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, ‘Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation’, The Computational Propaganda Project, accessed 11 December 2018, <https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/troops-trolls-and-trouble-makers-a-global-inventory-of-organized-social-media-manipulation/>.

40 Bhuvanesh Sharma and Swarna Parma, ‘Impact of Social Media on Voter’s Behaviour-a Descriptive Study of Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh’, 1 2017, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29416.26880>.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Each state needs to define the critical communication infrastructure that encompasses both elite, “top-down” vertical, and grassroots, “horizontal” communication channels.
- Mainstream media needs to be strengthened and provided with the necessary skills to withstand or uncover hybrid warfare efforts to serve as a point of reference to opinion-leaders in grassroots communication.
- Free and easily accessible social media communication platforms need to cooperate with NGOs and European authorities to avoid mass-manipulation campaigns targeting the local populace through their own domestic technical capabilities. This cooperation is way more developed in the West than in the CEE.
- Western institutions and politicians should acknowledge and target the feelings of “insecurity” and “inferiority” in Central Eastern Europe as an important driver behind pro-Russian sentiments.