



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 22/2018

The Prague Manual

How to counter the Kremlin's influence in Europe

by *Veronika Víchová and Jakub Janda*

In April 2018 the *European Values Think Tank* issued the *Prague Manual*. This publication categorizes EU Member States according to whether they politically acknowledge the Kremlin's political influence as a threat, whether governmental countermeasures exist, and whether and to what extent there are publicly known counter-intelligence activities. Based on this ranking, the manual proposes different sets of priorities and specific steps for governments, civil society, and donors. This Working Paper is a summary of the conclusions brought forward in the *Prague Manual*.¹

More than four years after the annexation of Crimea, one year after “post-truth” has been voted Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries, in a time when both the United States and the United Kingdom are investigating the scope of the Kremlin's meddling into their internal affairs, it makes little sense to further discuss whether or not the Russian Federation's current regime poses a threat to Western liberal democracies. Our focus should shift to a more productive debate: What can be done about it?

There have been several studies and policy papers produced by European and American experts suggesting steps to counter the Kremlin's hostile, subversive influence. Amongst these recommendations we often find calls for more transparency on social media platforms, for support of day-to-day fact-checking projects, and for an improvement of the strategic communication of Western governments and European institutions. But we must also realize that one size does not necessarily fit all.

The impact of advocating for some of these countermeasures to be taken by European countries will continue to be underwhelming if we do not take the specific characteristics of these countries into consideration. It would be far from constructive to try to persuade the Greeks to send a representative to the European External Actions Service's *East StratCom Task Force* (a small EU unit collecting cases of disinformation), just as it would be redundant to explain to the Finnish government that we need to improve media literacy. Therefore, let us examine how the stages of penetration of Kremlin influence into European countries actually manifest, and what the proper responses are.

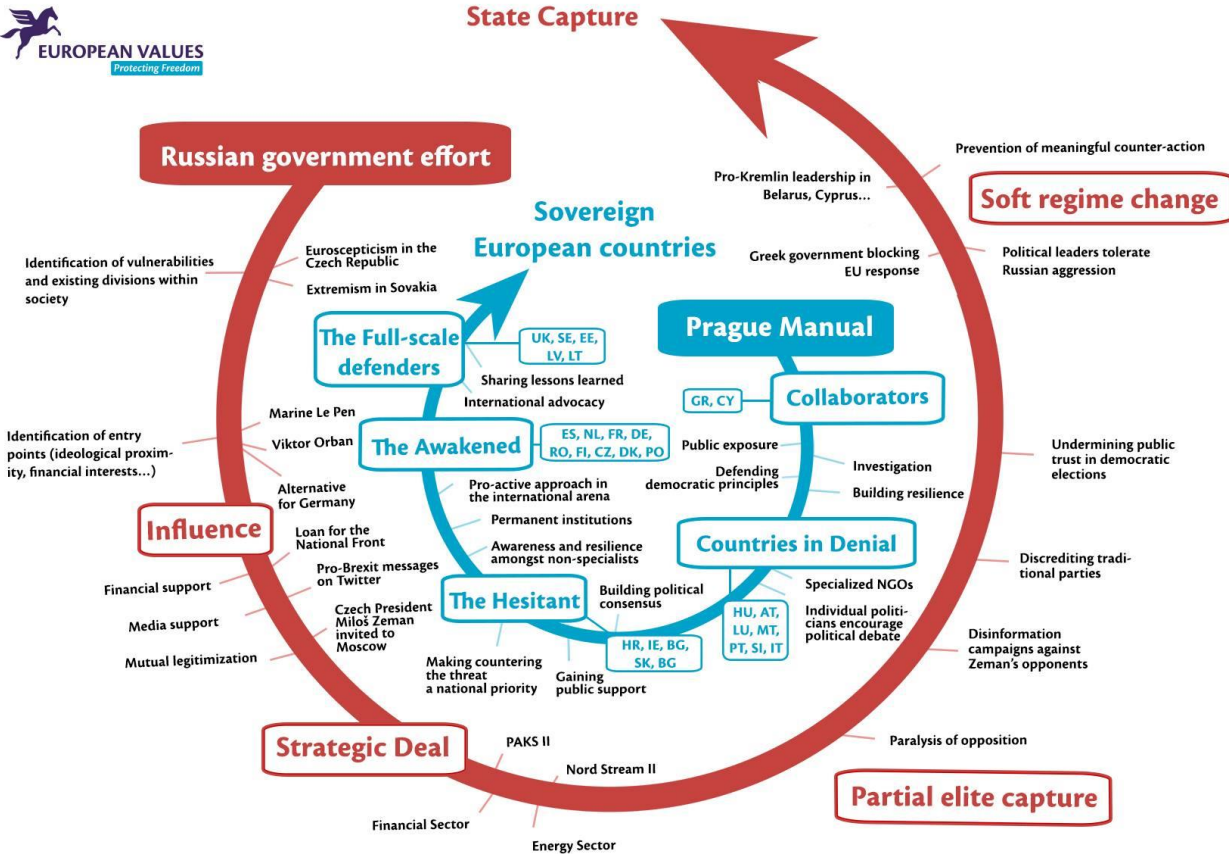
In our previous research, we have categorized the EU Member States according to three criteria: their political acknowledgment of the threat of hostile influence, the countermeasures on the governmental level which have already been implemented or which are being planned, and their publicly known counter-intelligence activities. We used open source data for this categorization, looking into strategic and policy documents produced by the government or specific ministries, annual reports of intelligence services, statements by political representatives, and other publicly accessible data.

¹ The Prague Manual is available online: <https://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/prague-manual/>

The stages of Russian government efforts to influence EU countries

In order to understand what exactly we are dealing with in different regions, it is necessary to look into the gradual process of Russian efforts to exert a hostile influence on European countries. In most European regions, the Kremlin has already managed to complete the first phase – identifying vulnerable entry points on the political level. Existing societal divisions are being used to tailor specific narratives and disinformation campaigns to achieve the desired impact. Politicians (mainstream ones in the ideal case, more far-right or far-left politicians and activists if the mainstream is not responsive) are being chosen based on their ideological views, financial situation, or any personal issues which might make them susceptible to the Kremlin’s efforts.

FIGURE 1. Phase overview provided by the Prague Manual



These politically active figures are then usually supported in various ways. This can be done through funding, but more commonly a symbiotic relationship is established through media support and mutual legitimization (like invitations to Russia or the occupied parts of Ukraine, or bilateral meetings with Russian representatives in exchange for tolerant views towards Russia’s aggressive policies and/or calls for lifting the EU sanctions). The breaking point comes when the Russian Federation is capable of negotiating a strategic business deal, usually in the economic or energy sectors, between Russian state firms and domestic companies. Such deals might seem lucrative to some, but their real goals are political more often than not. After such a deal is in place, it is usually only a matter of time before the Kremlin and its proxies paralyse any opposing forces in the country on the governmental or non-governmental level. The final goal is then to conduct a soft regime change – to change European countries into submissive allies which will be preoccupied with domestic problems and will not consider Russia and its foreign policy a priority issue.

However, as we can see in some of the European cases, this process is not irreversible. Depending on the stage a certain country is in, there are different steps that can be taken by different branches of society – non-governmental organizations, the media, the government, but also foreign donors who wish to improve the state of play. Unfortunately, once Russian influence has deeply penetrated a state, the variety of suggested steps becomes more and more limited.

Priority steps for countries which do not realize or admit the extent of the threat

In some EU Member States the political acknowledgment of the threat of the Kremlin's political influence is non-existent or very low, based on their strategic documents and political statements. This situation is often a result of close economic relations, sympathy with the practices of the Kremlin or stronger political forces who take a pro-Kremlin stance in parliament or government. A lack of meaningful action preventing and countering the spread of Russian political influence on the governmental level is notable not only in countries that generally deny the threat. It is also visible in countries which for different reasons (varying from geographical location to historical neutrality) consider Russian disinformation and subversion a problem solely limited to Eastern Europe, not one affecting their own security.

1. The main active role must be played by civil society. Civil society plays a crucial role in countering the Kremlin's subversive attempts in general. However, in countries where the Kremlin has already managed to establish strong relationships with the government elites and has silenced most of the opposition (like Cyprus and Greece), non-governmental organizations and journalists are the only players which can and should push against this threat. Their activities might be limited and unwelcome to politicians. However, through investigation of pro-Kremlin players and narratives, day-to-day fact-checking and advocacy activities, they can help expose the scope of the problem publicly, not only for the domestic audience, but also internationally. At the same time, civil society must defend basic democratic principles and push the political representation to ensure fair elections or transparency of political financing.

2. Collect evidence of disinformation and present it to individual, concerned politicians. In some of the countries where the government does not straight-up collaborate with the Russian regime, but denies that any problem exists (like in Hungary and Austria), civil society can also reach out to individual politicians and work with them. If they have enough information, they can further help increase transparency, or at least mention key issues in the media and in appropriate political forums. Donors should focus on collecting data from countries in denial, which would show which disinformation campaigns have an impact on local citizens and to what extent they can change their political behaviour.

3. Coordination, division of labour, and mutual support. In order to reach their goals, civil society representatives must act systematically and coordinate with each other. Cooperation does not need to be formal, but at least an exchange of information, division of labour, and some strategic planning is necessary if their goals are to be met and the situation is to be improved.

4. If there is a lack of political will, start with resilience-building. Through intensive and systematic advocacy, national governments of affected countries (like Ireland or Belgium) could be persuaded to put the threat of the Kremlin's influence on their agenda and start to conduct at least provisional prevention and preparatory measures, for example, like reviewing existing legal tools which might be enforced better in case of a direct disinformation campaign. If a sufficient political consensus is created, the threat of Russian influence operations can be codified in strategic documents not just in Eastern Europe, but also as a security issue across the European Union.

Priority steps for countries which at least partially recognize the extent of the threat

From monitoring the state of play in the EU, we can see that Member States often start planning more comprehensive, tactical, or strategic countermeasures only after they have come face-to-face with Russian influence. The political acknowledgment itself is not sufficient. Often states come up with new initiatives after suspicions of election meddling have emerged as in the case of the UK and Brexit, or when serious disinformation campaigns concerning domestic affairs have been exposed like in the Netherlands during the investigation of the downing of flight MH17 in 2014. In Germany the cyber attacks against the Bundestag and the alleged rape case “Lisa” in early 2016 have caused increased threat awareness.

5. Establish specialized institutions, but only after proper preparation. After these countries have conducted an extensive review of their security policies, legal tools, and vulnerabilities – and if they have managed to create a common understanding of the threat amongst security and political circles – they should be ready to establish permanent institutions for countering the Kremlin’s hostile influence, coordinating strategic communication, and other interconnected areas. Such institutions need strictly defined goals and competencies and need to address the exact domestic situation. These institutions cannot be created overnight, and their purpose must be well-communicated to the public. Usually, these units are subordinated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, or the Ministry of Defence. Ideally, each security-related ministry would have its own *StratCom* unit within a coordinated framework. However, that is usually not the case. In order to show that the Kremlin’s subversion is a matter of national security, the Ministry of Interior is usually the best place to start.

6. Legislators should raise public and political awareness. In addition to the government, legislative bodies can also play a role in defending their countries against hostile influence. Parliamentary committees can conduct investigations, public hearings, and contribute to overall public and political awareness and understanding of the nature and scope of the problem. Most of the European national parliaments have ways of setting up such an ad hoc investigative committee, but with the exception of the UK, so far no country really uses this ability to expose the Kremlin’s activities and pro-Kremlin players.

7. Support of European platforms is crucial. If the countries feel a genuine concern, they should also make sure to have representatives in the relevant international institutions. A good example is the European External Action Service’s *East StratCom Task Force*, which still depends on seconded national experts, and which significantly contributes to the level of understanding, exposure, and analysis of Russian disinformation.

What about the forerunner countries?

There is a rare group of EU Member States which have been aware of the threat the Kremlin’s practices for quite some time and which have therefore managed to build their resilience effectively. In other words, the level of political acknowledgment of the threat, the scope of governmental countermeasures and the publicly known counterintelligence activities is highest amongst these other countries. States like Lithuania and Estonia have been investing significant resources into strategic communication, media literacy, and other measures, along with systematically cooperating with civil society. They offer some best practices for the rest of Europe.

8. Transfer your knowledge and experience to the less-aware. The role of these countries should be clear – advocacy in regions with less awareness, sharing experiences, and pushing for a more coordinated European response. They could also promote the idea of systematic polling, which would test the most common disinformation narratives across Europe regularly. This data could potentially show how methods differ from country to country, which of them are the most effective, and how they change over time.

Conclusion

Some European countries, the United States, and several international organisations have already shown that they are willing to design, improve, implement, and support initiatives and strategies that would help counter the Kremlin's political influence across Europe. However, the Russia is still becoming bolder and continues to interfere in Europe without misgivings. This means that we must make sure that when we counteract the Kremlin we do so in a well-planned response, tailored to the domestic environment, filling the gaps in the existing system. One size does not fit all and the initiated measures must correspond with the most current needs of each country. Otherwise they might become redundant or, even worse, counter-productive. Hence the main purpose of the Prague Manual, is to outline the basic priorities for different regions and policy-makers.

Veronika Vichová is Coordinator and analyst of the Kremlin Watch Programme at the European Values Think-Tank. Jakub Janda is Director of the European Values Think-Tank. This article reflects the authors' personal opinions.