



Cranks, Trolls, and Useful Idiots

Russia's information warriors set their sights on Central Europe.

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Following the **Feb. 27 murder** of liberal Russian opposition politician Boris Nemtsov, a number of Central European websites were quick to provide an explanation. “Whoever gains control of the Russian opposition will be on the receiving end of all the finances and subsidies given to the Russian opposition by the West,” **wrote** an anonymous author on the Czech site Aeronet. Several other sites **published** translations of a text blaming the murder on a Western conspiracy aiming to discredit Vladimir Putin. The article was written by the Russian commentator and politician **Nikolai Starikov**, a vocal Putin supporter.

Most of the websites that published Starikov’s writings in Czech and Slovak have existed for less than a year. Throughout the conflict in eastern Ukraine, these sites have systematically regurgitated Russian propaganda, spreading lies, half-truths, and conspiracy theories, often directly translated from Russian sources. In an effort to understand who runs these sites and why — and potentially to uncover financial connections to the Russian government — several Central European journalists and civil society activists recently decided to investigate them in greater detail.

The Czech weekly *Respekt* published a **feature article** about the mysterious “news” site Aeronet (also known as AENews). Started in 2001 by aviation fans, the domain have changed ownership several times. Since the summer of 2014 it has regularly published articles **accusing** the new Ukrainian government of fascism and **claiming** that American and British mercenaries were fighting in eastern Ukraine. It also **accused** unspecified proponents of a conspiratorial New World Order of exploiting the spread to Ebola to their own nefarious ends.

The company that owns Aeronet’s domain is incorporated in the Netherlands. According to Ondrej Kundra, author of the *Respekt* investigation, nobody from the company was at its address when he visited, nor did anyone in the building know anything about it. “The same situation is repeated in Bratislava, where the website’s IP address was registered,” he wrote. “Nobody is

here; there is no office nor employees. Neither is it possible to reach anyone on either of the two phone numbers — one U.K.- and one U.S.-based — that are listed on the website.” The editor of Aeronet signs his articles “Chief of the Carousel” or simply “VK” (an abbreviation of the Czech version of his pseudonym). A handful of contributors to the site do write under their real names, such as a certain Petr Cvalin, a member of the Czech Communist Party who was attracted to the website because of its “alternative views.” There is no direct evidence linking the Aeronet site to Russia, and its anonymous editor **calls** the site “a start-up project” funded by its own contributors, readers, and sympathizers. He does say that he sometimes travels to Moscow for business, adding that he has “friends in Russia.” This is unsurprising — the politics of the site’s content, the secrecy surrounding it, and its relatively professional appearance suggest that it is run by an individual or organization whose motives are closely aligned with those of the Kremlin.

In Slovakia, activist Juraj Smatana keeps an updated **list** of Czech and Slovak websites that churn out Russian propaganda. Like Aeronet, these sites are typically anonymous and difficult to connect to real individuals or organizations. Many of them, such as *Hlavné Spravy* (“Headline News”) and *Svobodné Noviny* (“The Free Newspaper”), have the appearance of ordinary news sites, mixing real stories with fabrications and wild conspiracy theories. Several of them **reported**, for instance, that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) discovered bodies with missing internal organs in eastern Ukrainian mass graves. The stories claimed that this had been confirmed by OSCE observers, and that evidence suggested that Ukrainian security forces were running illegal organ transplant centers in the region. The story turned out to be an outright lie: Neither the OSCE nor its observers have ever made any such announcements.

These sites don’t always peddle views that are clearly pro-Russian. Sometimes, as Smatana **noted** in a recent interview, their goal is simply to muddy the waters, to confuse, to ensure that “people don’t trust anyone.” In Central European countries, this flurry of misinformation has profoundly affected the dynamic of public debates and placed Russia’s critics on the defensive, forcing them to waste time debunking baseless claims. In November of last year, for example, Aeronet **published** a fabricated story claiming that a public protest against Czech President Milos Zeman had been organized by the U.S. Embassy in Prague, as part of an effort to instigate a Ukraine-like “Maidan” revolution. This story was quickly reposted by other, more reputable websites, prompting a number of foreign ministries to ask the Czech government whether it was true. The same sites also **disseminated** an alleged plan by the Russian central bank to back the ruble with gold in order to displace the U.S. dollar as the world’s dominant reserve currency. Despite its outlandish nature, the story went viral — even prompting a reporter from Czech public radio to treat it as a credible account. Besides the “news” websites, there are a handful of anonymous or semi-anonymous think tanks and foundations (such as the **Institute for Slavic Strategic Studies**) and a number of public figures who run their own sites spreading Russian propaganda. Perhaps the most prominent is former Slovak Prime Minister Jan Carnogursky, a former Catholic dissident and current member of the Valdai Club, a group that is periodically invited to meet with Putin and other senior Russian officials. Carnogursky’s **Slovak-Russian Society** recently **published** a list of “the worst Russophobes in Slovakia.”

Another is **Sergei Chelemendik**, a Slovak publisher of Russian descent and a former member of parliament for (somewhat ironically) the xenophobic Slovak National Party, whose own website has been long churning out Russian propaganda. Petr Hajek, longtime political advisor to former Czech President Vaclav Klaus, is the editor of *Protiproud* (“Countercurrent”), and also enjoys a public following. Unlike the pro-Kremlin “news” sites, *Protiproud*, a self-styled “counterrevolutionary magazine” which recently launched its **Russian edition**, does not hide the names of its contributors. Its content, including the flamboyant graphics and over-the-top headlines, appears even more fantastic than the seemingly serious content published by the fake “news” sites. It is replete with conspiracy theories about **Bilderberg and the New World Order**, stories claiming that the **Ebola virus** is a product of the global pharmaceutical industry, and Hajek’s own **diatribes** against gays, alongside a steady stream of **Russianpropaganda**. Asked by a journalist about Russian connections, Hajek**decried** the “witch hunt” against him and denied receiving “a penny” from Russia.

Opposition to same-sex marriage and other culturally conservative views commonly feature on most of these sites, which depict Russia as a bulwark against Western decadence. To be sure, the combination of pro-Russian views and social conservatism does not work everywhere. “In Poland, which is much bigger [than Slovakia or the Czech Republic], there is only a handful of such websites,” said Smatana. “And those that do promote an anti-gay agenda tend to do so from a traditional or Catholic perspective. They definitely don’t combine it with pro-Russian propaganda.”

Given Poland’s historic experience, such brazen pro-Kremlin sloganeering is unlikely to get much traction there. Instead, Putin’s regime seems to be using subtler means, such as **supporting** the country’s environmental movement, which has succeeded in bringing a temporary halt to plans for exploiting the country’s large reserves of unconventional gas. The reason: If Poland developed its own energy resources, it would be less dependent on imports from Russia.

The speed with which Russian propaganda is taking root in Slovakia and the Czech Republic shows that civil society in the small countries of Central Europe faces a formidable enemy. Recently Slovaks were jolted by **reports** that several of their compatriots have turned up fighting with the separatist “Donetsk People’s Republic” in eastern Ukraine — a story that, until recently, would have been unimaginable in a nation that sees itself as rather detached from the drama of world events. What precisely motivated the Slovak fighters to leave for Ukraine — and whether Russian propaganda in Slovakia may have played a role — remains unclear. But their example may herald bigger trouble to come.

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