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Elections and pre-election campaigns are a fertile ground for manipulative discourse and disinformation about the candidates and the elections themselves. These malicious activities carry the risk of manipulating the electoral process and undermining democratic institutions. On the occasion of the Czech presidential elections, which will take place in January 2023, the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) in cooperation with Demagog.cz and HlídacíPes.org present the project „Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation: The 2023 Presidential Elections“. The goal of this initiative is to monitor the online public debate about the presidential elections and individual candidates and subsequently verify, or „fact-check“, information and spread awareness of manipulative statements and disinformation on this topic.

On the eve of the Czech parliamentary elections in 2017, the „lithium case“ related to the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) showed that disinformation can have a relatively significant influence on pre-election events if, as part of the pre-election campaign, the disinformation is transferred from fringe platforms to the public debate by the candidates themselves.¹ At the time, the ČSSD became a victim of disinformation according to which the party planned to siphon off money from Czech lithium reserves, for which it was sharply criticized.²

The last presidential elections in 2018 also did not avoid disinformation circulating about the individual candidates. Jiří Drahoš, who stood against Miloš Zeman in the second round of the elections, became their main target. Drahoš was accused of serving behind-the-scenes powers,³ he was presented as a welcomer of refugees who planned to Islamize the Czech Republic, or as a former agent of the communist State Security (StB).⁴ On the other hand, there were speculations related to the current president Miloš Zeman about his health, or even about the fact that there is no need to vote for him in the first round, because he automatically advances to the second round.⁵

Based on this experience from previous elections, it can be expected that this time, too, the presidential elections and the candidates will be targeted by disinformation with a potential impact on the elections results. We are already witnessing these activities on social media and in chain emails. For example, there is a claim that Prime Minister Petr Fiala wants to cancel the direct election of the president on the grounds

1 https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8406_502-prezidentske-volby-2018-analysis-cj.pdf

2 https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8399_500-parlamentni-volby-2017-analyza.pdf

3 https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/dezinformace-e-mail-prezident-volby-drahos-zeman_1802090600_ogo

4 https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8406_502-prezidentske-volby-2018-analysis-cj.pdf

5 https://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/8406_502-prezidentske-volby-2018-analysis-cj.pdf

that „the ordinary plebs (i.e. citizens) do not have sufficient intelligence and ability to elect a person of sufficient quality, which is said to be proven by the election of the current president.“⁶ Concerning specific candidates, General Petr Pavel, former Chair of the NATO Military Committee and Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Army, has been „enjoying“ most of the attention of disinformation actors so far. The General is allegedly a „tentacle of American democracy“⁷ acting against the interests of the citizens of the Czech Republic, and many speculations focus on the financing of his campaign, into which non-transparent money from a secret society flows from America, allegedly.⁸

Conspiracy theories about the influence of globalist forces on pro-Western, pro-democratic candidates also accompanied the parliamentary elections last year, and it is already becoming clear that even the presidential elections will not avoid them. Other potentially popular topics and targets for manipulation are the war in Ukraine and the related energy crisis. The misuse of these topics in the political struggle entails the risk of undermining Czech solidarity with Ukraine, especially if the manipulative activities focus on the general dissatisfaction of the population with the current economic situation and their fears about an uncertain future.

That is also why PSSI together with partners Demagog.cz and HlídacíPes.org will monitor (not only) the online debate about the presidential elections and draw attention to related cases of disinformation. Demagog.cz and HlídacíPes.org will engage in regular fact-checking of information circulating about the elections and candidates, while PSSI will provide monthly analytical reports on the overall pre-election debate. Our research will include statements of announced and potential candidates, statements about them from the Czech political scene, but also how the elections are addressed in mainstream media and media known for spreading disinformation. In addition to individual cases of disinformation, we will monitor popular topics of pre-election debates, public attitudes towards individual candidates, and also how the candidates themselves react to disinformation campaigns in the online space.

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6 <https://eldariel.cesti-elfove.cz/emails/19777>

7 <https://eldariel.cesti-elfove.cz/emails/19765>

8 <https://eldariel.cesti-elfove.cz/emails/19737>