CZECH

IN THE ERA OF DISINFORMATION

ELECTIONS

Czech Presidential Elections in the Online Space (1ˢᵗ round)

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Introduction

As part of the project „Czech Elections in the Era of Disinformation: Presidential Elections 2023", the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) monitored the public online debate about the presidential elections and individual candidates from October 2022 until the first round of the elections, which took place on January 13 and 14, 2023. Specifically, we analyzed the Facebook communication of the candidates themselves and how other political parties and thei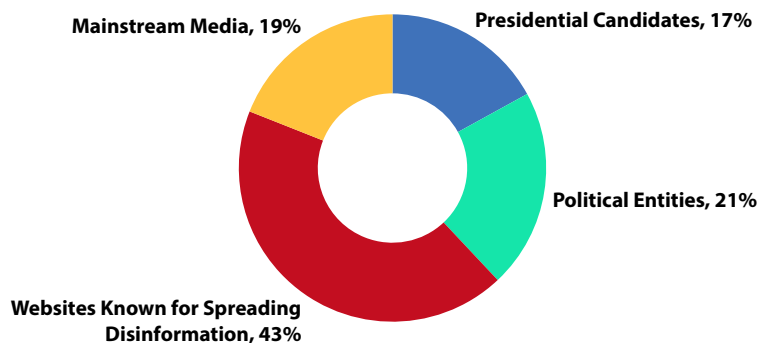r leaders commented on them, based on the 100 posts with the most interactions.[1] This analysis was complemented by monitoring of the debate about the candidates on websites known for spreading disinformation. We monitored a total of eleven websites: Parlamentní listy, CZ24 News, AC24, Protiproud, Aeronet, Tadesco, Pravý prostor, D-Fens, Zvědavec, Otevři svou mysl a Sputnik News.[2] The last category monitored was mainstream media,[3] with the aim of exploring penetration of manipulative narratives from fringe platforms into the political mainstream.

General Overview of the Elections

During the monitored period, the names of the presidential candidates appeared in a total of 1,853 texts, with 1,242 of them directly devoted to the pre-election campaign, which represents 67% of all texts. Websites known for spreading disinformation were the most active regarding the topic of the presidential elections, publishing up to 43% of content directly related to the elections. The most active website was undoubtedly Parlamentní listy. On the contrary, the presidential candidates, paradoxically, mentioned the elections directly the least. However, this can be explained by the fact that the monitoring started in October, when the final list of candidates was not known yet. It was published on November 25, when the Ministry of the Interior admitted nine out of 21 candidates to the presidential elections. On December 13, the Supreme Administrative Court of the Czech Republic decided on additional participation of the IT entrepreneur Karel Diviš as well and excluded Denisa Rohanová, a Czech activist who focuses on helping people in debt. Just before the first round of the elections, the Czech trade union activist Josef Středula withdrew his candidacy.

Activity of Monitored Sources on the Topic of Elections

- Mainstream Media, 19%
- Presidential Candidates, 17%
- Political Entities, 21%
- Websites Known for Spreading Disinformation, 43%

Regarding the communication of the candidates themselves on Facebook, the most active of them, and at the same time with the highest number of interactions, was Andrej Babiš during the entire monitored period

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1   In this case, interactions mean reactions, comments, and shares.

2   These websites were selected based on their number of visits and share of problematic content, on which there is a general and long-term consensus in the expert community (see, for example, the list konspiratori.sk or the report of the European Values think-tank).

3   Using the Pulsar Media Monitor tool, we selected 100 articles from news sites with the highest visibility reached each month.

(who officially announced his candidacy at the end of October). Of the total number of 400 candidates' posts with the highest number of interactions, the share of Andrej Babiš's posts was up to 66%. His posts were basically devoted to two topics — the election campaign, during which he shared his private photos or videos of his supporters, and secondly posts in which he criticized the current government or the presidential candidates, supported by the government, which were, alphabetically, Pavel Fischer, Danuše Nerudová and Petr Pavel. The second most active candidate was Petr Pavel with 23% of posts with the highest number of interactions. The other candidates remained largely in the background on Facebook.

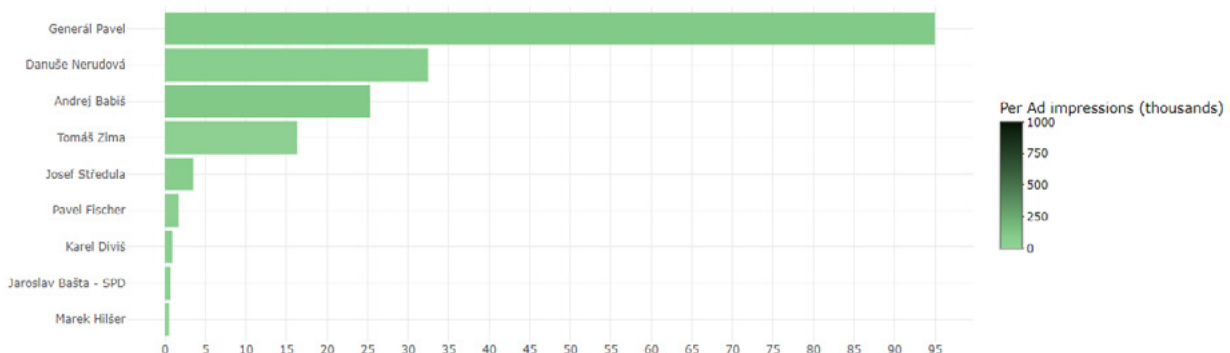**Communication of Presidential Candidates on Facebook**
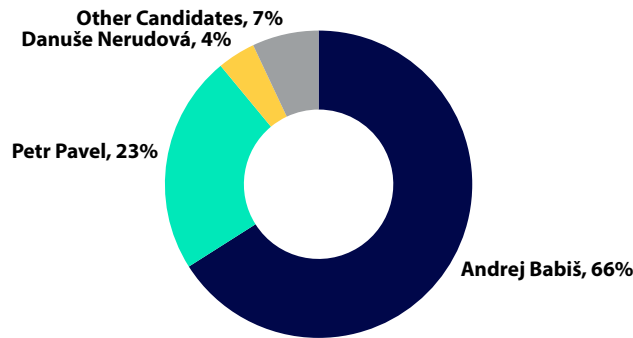
The media monitoring organization MEMO 98 also looked at the Facebooks of the candidates and found that Andrej Babiš also led in the total number of interactions, reaching 3,702,016 interactions between October 9 and January 14, while his opponent in the second round, Petr Pavel reached almost three times less (1,292,535). They were followed by Danuše Nerudová (494,122) with a larger difference.

As for the Facebook campaign, according to the MEMO 98 findings, Petr Pavel spent the most on the online campaign (CZK 1,741,963/€73,113.67), followed by Andrej Babiš (CZK 1,414,948/€59,388.20) and Danuše Nerudová (CZK 1,389,831/€58,333.99). Based on our monitoring, it can be concluded that the investments in the Facebook campaigns were not proportional to their relative reach.

Also interesting are the findings of Transparency International in cooperation with the Association for International Affairs (AMO) who focused on the impact of political posts in the framework of the presidential campaign on Facebook, based on data from the META Ad Library collected since July 1, 2022. At the beginning of December, the paid posts of the mathematician and entrepreneur Karel Janeček, a candidate rejected by the Ministry of the Interior, had the largest number of views, 47 million. An intriguing result was also achieved by the profile of the entrepreneur Tomáš Březina whose candidacy was also ultimately rejected by the Ministry of the Interior. While he had „only" 20.74 million views across his 43 promoted posts in early December, he gained an average of 482,300 views per ad, outrunning all his competitors. Tomáš Březina paid an average of CZK 52,800 for each ad which is five times more than what his competitors paid. As for Andrej Babiš, despite the slightly lower number of total views, he managed to get each of his ads to a relatively large number of users.

Data as of January 24, 2023 – an updated graph with more detailed data can be found here.

Main Topics

The communist past of the presidential candidates, in particular Andrej Babiš and Petr Pavel, was initially looming as a major topic of the elections which resonated in the online space especially at the beginning of the monitored period. However, it was Petr Pavel's past that was discussed the most when claims from his former classmate appeared in the media, according to which *„Pavel was very loyal to the communist regime and defended its interests."* This topic quickly caught the attention of websites known for spreading disinformation, and also among political entities, especially among right-wing parties such as Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). The leader of this party, Tomio Okamura, began highlighting the past of the SPD candidate, Jaroslav Bašta, as part of the anti-campaign. Even before the official announcement of his candidacy, Andrej Babiš also addressed criticism of Petr Pavel's past, but then, according to him, *„he started an active campaign in which he is not running against anyone,"* and thus the narratives about rival candidates until the first round of the elections no longer resonated in his posts. However, even Andrej Babiš himself did not avoid criticism of the past, especially from members of the government coalition. Both mentioned candidates commented on their past, but this topic did not resonate significantly in the online space in the following months.

Anti-government narratives spread by Andrej Babiš and right-wing parties, especially the SPD leader Tomio Okamura, dominated the monitored categories. According to Andrej Babiš, criticism of the government led to his candidacy when he announced that *„the way the Czech government does very little to help people in our country means to me that I have to try to become president."* At the same time, he combined criticism of the alleged lack of aid with criticism of financial aid to Ukraine and the current *„economic and social crisis into which the government of Petr Fiala has plunged us."*

In most of his posts, Tomio Okamura called for support for Jaroslav Bašta, and at the same time emphasized that *„none of the other candidates, including Andrej Babiš, wants to dismiss Fiala's government."* This statement by

Jaroslav Bašta and the topic of the possibility of the president dismissing the government appeared in the media, while constitutional lawyers agree that the president cannot dismiss the government at his will. Tomio Okamura also often combined criticism of the government with highlighting the candidates supported by the five-party coalition.

The topics of current problems such as war and crisis were not mentioned very frequently in connection with the presidential candidates, but Petr Pavel sometimes used them in his campaign, who, as part of his motto *„Let's return order and peace to the Czech Republic"* and emphasized that *„at the time of the war in Ukraine and economic crisis, you need a president who will not panic".* Just before the first round, Andrej Babiš also commented on the war and claimed he would organize a peace summit at Prague Castle as part of his overall peace-themed campaign.

At the same time, on websites known for spreading disinformation, the questioning of the final list of candidates according to the Ministry of the Interior appeared in connection to the rejection of some alternative candidates[4] due to errors in the signatures, as well as the topic of alleged election fraud, in which patriotic candidates are allegedly thrown out and a pre-selected candidate wins. Skepticism towards democratic processes and a sense of discrimination by patriotic representatives continue to persist on this scene.

The usual polarizing topics from previous elections, such as migration or Czech membership in the European Union, were not discussed very often in this presidential campaign. At the beginning of December, however, the question of the possible adoption of the euro currency appeared in the pre-election debate, on which the candidates were supposed to express their opinion. Tomio Okamura responded to this in his posts on Facebook, criticizing those candidates who took a positive position to adopt the euro. The adoption of the euro remains a sensitive issue in the Czech Republic.

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4   The right-wing platform Pravý prostor lists, for example, Karel Janeček, Tomáš Březina and Karel Diviš among the alternative candidates.

Narratives and Sentiments Towards Candidates Among Political Entities (Parties and Party Leaders)
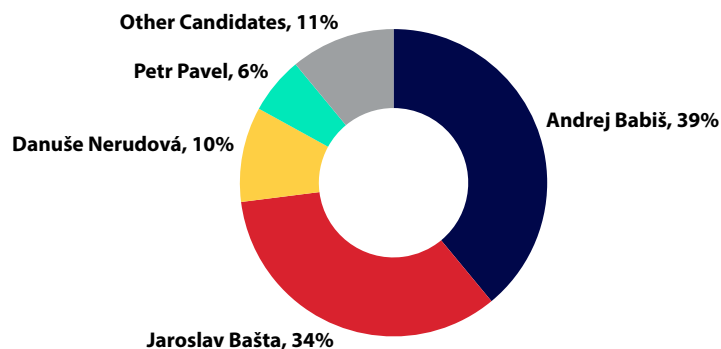
Andrej Babiš dominated the number of mentions among political subjects as well. Over the entire monitored period, he appeared in 39% of posts from political entities, and in the first two months he had a significant lead over the other candidates. Not far behind him with 34% of mentions was Jaroslav Bašta, who, on the other hand, dominated the posts of political subjects closer to the elections. However, the author of a significant part of the mentions of Andrej Babiš was his ANO political movement. The online debate altered during November, when Andrej Babiš still led in the number of mentions, but mostly negative ones from members of the government, for example because of the mentioned communist past of the candidate. One of the governing parties, Civic Democratic Party (ODS), also shared an analysis according to which Andrej Babiš is aiding Russian and Chinese interests in the Czech Republic.

During the following months, the number of political posts was dominated by Tomio Okamura (SPD leader),

whose posts accounted for 45% of all posts during the monitored period while being among those with the highest number of interactions. In December, 73% of the political posts belonged to Tomio Okamura. Thanks to the popularity of his posts, Jaroslav Bašta appeared in 34% of posts over the entire monitored period, while almost all of these mentions were positive and supportive of the candidate. The non-parliamentary right-wing Tricolour party also contributed to the number of positive mentions with its support.

The other candidates were significantly behind in the number of mentions. With a total 10% of mentions, Danuše Nerudová received the most attention during December, while all of these mentions were negative. The author of the significant majority of them was Tomio Okamura who criticized the candidate especially in connection with her controversial case at Mendel University.

The Most Mentioned Candidates Among Political Entities

Other Candidates, 11%
Petr Pavel, 6%
Danuše Nerudová, 10%
Andrej Babiš, 39%
Jaroslav Bašta, 34%

Narratives and Sentiments Towards Candidates In the Mainstream Media

Mentions of Andrej Babiš dominated even in the last of the monitored categories — in the mainstream media, while his name resonated throughout the whole monitored period. A drop in mentions occurred during December, but Andrej Babiš was still the most frequently mentioned candidate compared to others. The coverage was mostly neutral or quoted the candidate, some texts provided space for members of the ANO movement, especially from Alena Schillerová, and their support. This

candidate was mentioned negatively, especially during November, when the expert opinion that Andrej Babiš polarizes the Czech society penetrated the media.

Initially, some articles also wrote negatively about Petr Pavel, when a statement of his former classmate that Pavel was not telling the truth about himself reached the media. However, in the following months, after the topic of the candidates' past receded, Petr Pavel

was written about rather neutrally or the media shared his views, including that Andrej Babiš is a threat. In this context, it was mainly written about whether Petr Pavel would possibly support Danuše Nerudová.

Nerudová, with a total share of 7% mentions, received rather negative mentions for the already mentioned

case regarding diplomas during her leadership of the Mendel University. In neutral sentiments, the mainstream media wrote about this candidate mainly in connection with the resignation of Josef Středula and his official support of Danuše Nerudová, or the support she earned from students.

The Most Mentioned Candidates in the Mainstream Media

Other Candidates, 34%
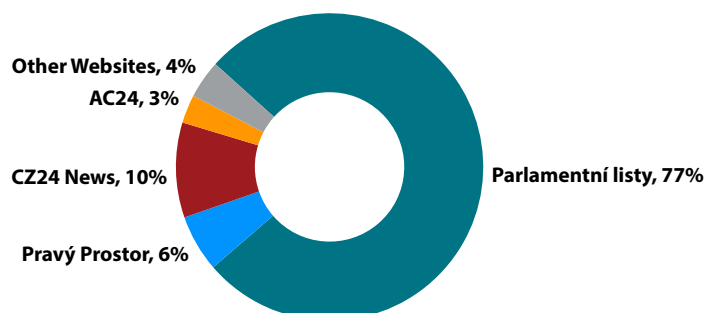
Andrej Babiš, 49%

Danuše Nerudová, 7%

Petr Pavel, 10%
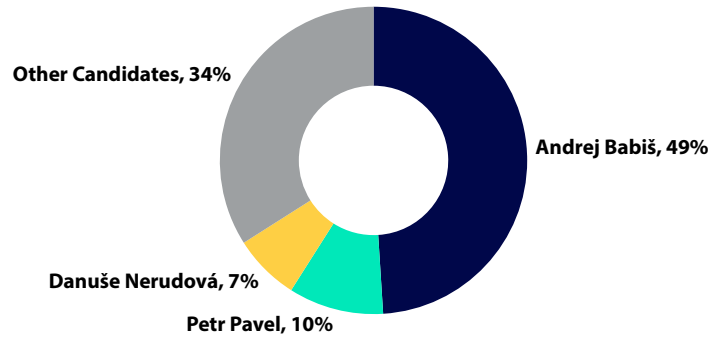
Websites Known for Spreading Disinformation

Of the websites known for spreading disinformation, Parlamentní listy was particularly active with 77% of all analyzed articles about presidential candidates. This medium is still the cornerstone of the Czech gray media ecosystem. The website gives space to all parts of the political spectrum, including extremists. It also provided space for interviews with candidates who did not penetrate the mainstream media significantly. An example is Jaroslav Bašta, who complained „*that he does not get*

enough space in the media and has to fight with the media barrier." Manipulative narratives often appeared on the CZ24 News website, which, however, took part of its content from the Parlamentní listy website and generally operates as an aggregator of content from other platforms. The right-wing platform Pravý prostor was also relatively active. It was on these two websites that the aforementioned suspicions about approved candidates from the Ministry of the Interior appeared.

The Most Active Websites Known for Spreading Disinformation

Other Websites, 4%

AC24, 3%

CZ24 News, 10%

Parlamentní listy, 77%

Pravý Prostor, 6%

Andrej Babiš was also the most frequent subject of debates on websites known for spreading disinformation. He dominated the number of mentions during almost the entire monitored period, with the exception of December, when Danuše Nerudová was mentioned most often. Sentiments about Andrej Babiš were more or less balanced. The opposite case was Danuše Nerudová who received predominantly negative sentiments. The subject of criticism was once again the case regarding diplomas at the Mendel University.

Not only Danuše Nerudová, but also Petr Pavel was regularly mentioned on these websites by the nationalist and Eurosceptic presenter and former politician Jana Bobošíková who withdrew her own presidential candidacy. She accused Petr Pavel, for example, of his alleged connection to the USA. Negative sentiments about

Petr Pavel dominated throughout the whole monitored period.

Support for Jaroslav Bašta also spread on websites known for spreading disinformation, especially on the websites Parlamentní listy and Protiproud. They reported on the unification of Czech patriots, because *„for patriotic voters who reject the continuation of the reign of national destruction, there is essentially no other choice than Jaroslav Bašta.“* However, we could observe an interesting discrepancy of opinions on the website Pravý prostor. While one author on this website wrote about Jaroslav Bašta as *„the only real patriotic candidate“*, another included him among the *„Candidates of the National Front“,* among which he includes *„everything rotten and reeking on our political scene“*, including Andrej Babiš, Danuše Nerudová and Petr Pavel.

The Most Mentioned Candidates on Websites Known for Spreading Disinformation

Andrej Babiš, 29%
Petr Pavel, 16%
Danuše Nerudová, 14%
Jaroslav Bašta, 8%
Other Candidates, 33%
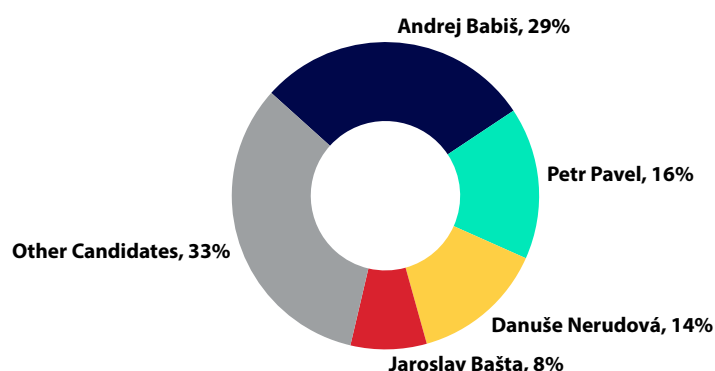
For a long time, the superspreaders of disinformation focused mostly on Petr Pavel. His name started appearing in disinformation content many months ago, around the time his candidacy began to be talked about. Disinformers tried to portray him as an agent of the United States, a *„pretty face“* who is dangerous because of his military background because he will drag Czechs into war, or with changing loyalty. From the analysis of the Czech Elves group, it follows that Petr Pavel together with Danuše Nerudová were the main targets of disinformation campaigns, especially after they began to catch up with Andrej Babiš in polls.

Just before the first round of the elections, disinformation about possible mobilization in the event of the election of certain candidates began to spread online. *„If the following candidates are elected, they will declare mobilization (presidential competence) and you will go to the eastern front into the trenches!“* writes the Manifest initiative, which was created during the COVID-19 pandemic to criticize vaccination and COVID-19 measures.

The candidates who, according to the authors of the posts, *„publicly declared that they will call for mobilization“* are Danuše Nerudová, Petr Pavel, Marek Hilšer and Pavel Fischer. However, this was disinformation, since the Czech president does not have the authority to declare mobilization on the basis of his own decision.

Chain Emails

Similarly to the parliamentary elections, the presidential elections did not escape the Czech disinformation specialty — chain emails. According to the findings of our project partner HlídacíPes.org, Petr Pavel was once again the main target for the authors of these emails before the election. *„Elect General Petr Pavel, and we will be completely in America's hands. Please spread as much as you can, it's more anti-Czech crap, directed towards an American military base in the Czech Republic,"* reads one of the chain messages circulating on the Czech internet and emails before the presidential elections. Attached to the message is a photo of Pavel with a comic speech bubble, which you can see below. It contrasts with how much support Andrej Babiš gets in similar emails.
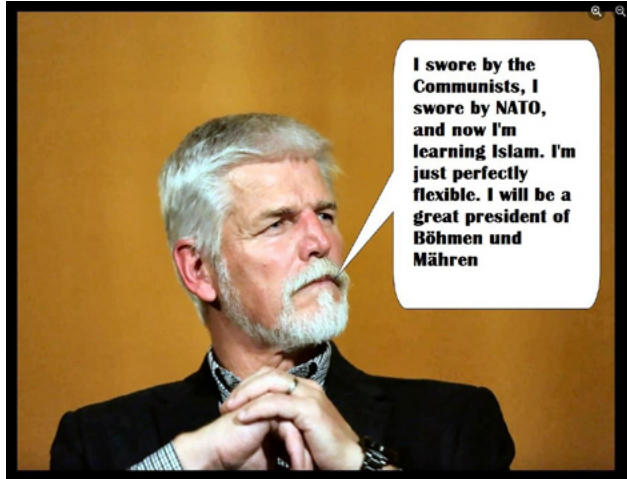
Source: Twitter

Even Danuše Nerudová did not escape the interest of chain emails' For example, a message was spread about her by an alleged unnamed former classmate from Brno: *„Absolutely unscrupulous careerist who became the youngest rector in the Czech Republic in her forties. I don't understand how Nerudová could become a professor,"* the email reads. In the case of Nerudová, a photo of her with the controversial mayor of the Prague Řeporyje district, Pavel Novotný, was mainly spread via chain emails. The photo was accompanied by a fake quote:

Source: HlídacíPes.org

On the other hand, disunity prevailed on the disinformation scene surrounding former PM Andrej Babiš. He was criticized, for example, because of his government's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic, but some chain emails also defended him. Part of the disinformation scene supported him simply because he represented the lesser evil for them, even though there were articles criticizing him on websites known for spreading disinformation. However, in most chain emails, Andrej Babiš was present as a positive political actor.

According to the findings of HlídacíPes.org, the claim that the Czech government led by the ODS was preparing to cancel the direct election of the president was also spread by chain emails before the presidential elections. *„Mr. Petr Fiala, the chairman of the ODS, came up with the idea that it is necessary to cancel direct elections,"*

writes the author of the report, adding that with 108 votes in the parliament, the government is doing this with the intention of ruling indefinitely. The email was caught by the chain message monitoring of the Czech Elves initiative. In fact, the direct election has never been

discussed within the current government coalition. The direct election of the president was also criticized on the CZ24 News website, according to which *„direct election is an ever-increasing circus, which unfortunately we will never get rid of."*

Candidates' Approach to Disinformation

As part of our research, we also looked at whether the candidates themselves addressed the problem of disinformation, or whether they used strategies and tools to combat it in their communication. Examples of such strategies include prebunking and debunking. Prebunking means alerting people in advance to the fact that they may become a target of information manipulation, helping them recognize such cases and counter them. On the contrary, debunking is a reaction to already existent information manipulation, its detection and explanation of reality. Prebunking has the potential to have a longer-term impact in that it gives people the tools to deal with disinformation on their own, while debunking can come after the „damage" has already been done.

The prebunking tactic was chosen by the teams of Danuše Nerudová and Petr Pavel when they themselves published manipulative messages directed against them. Danuše Nerudová, in her „10 reasons why (not) to vote for Danuše Nerudová," responded primarily to the narratives spread about her in chain emails, such as that she allegedly graduated from the Aspen Institute, that her husband is Andrej Babiš's lawyer, that she wants mandatory vaccinations or the introduction of tuition and fees in the health sector.

Petr Pavel jumped on a similar train and already in October, in his communication on Facebook, he commented on claims about his past. Then in December, he published a list of slander he expects in the campaign — including that he allegedly collaborated with the StB[5] or the Russian secret services, or that he used to beat his first wife. He also used his website to clarify his past, where already in 2020 he published documents about his activities under the previous communist regime. Before announcing his candidacy on September 6, 2022, he also placed documents on the website which the Archive of the Security Forces only made available at a later time. He also spoke publicly about his membership in the Communist Party. No similar coordinated activity was noted from the other candidates.

However, it is difficult to measure the impact of the use of these strategies on voters' decisions, just as it is difficult to quantify the impact of disinformation itself. In addition, sociological research has shown that it is more the a priori attitudes toward candidates (such as disappointment) that influence what manipulations we believe, rather than the other way around.

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5   State Security or StB was the secret police force in communist Czechoslovakia from 1945 to its dissolution in 1990. Serving as an intelligence and counterintelligence agency, it dealt with any activity that was considered opposition to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and the state.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As part of our monitoring, we did not detect a clearly co-ordinated disinformation campaign, either by domestic or foreign actors. Attempts to defame candidates on the basis of frequent exaggeration and manipulation of their past were mainly evident. Compared to previous elections, a positive development was greater media activity in the field of so-called real-time fact-checking, i.e., quick refutation of spreading false information, which has a more significant impact especially in the case of mainstream media with a large audience. Certain positive developments were also seen in the increased use of prebunking and debunking[6] strategies by some candidates, although the real impact of such activities remains unclear. There were still attempts to question the democratic process of elections in connection with the approval of candidates by the Ministry of the Interior and the framing of elections by anti-system actors as a battle between nationalists and globalists, i.e., „servants" of external actors, which was also seen in the parliamentary elections in 2021, but in a greater extent. Czech society's lower awareness of the president's powers was also evident which was used in manipulative claims about whether the next president would dismiss the government or declare mobilization.

The longer-term observation that narratives spread by fringe platforms do not penetrate the mainstream media to a greater extent has also been confirmed. However, the problem is when political actors use them in their communication or campaigns, gradually dragging them into the political mainstream and using them to gain political points. This was true in the case of anti-government narratives or precisely the topics of involvement in the war in Ukraine. Facebook served the most in this direction, as it is still the most used social network in the Czech Republic and, at the same time, the most favored one by spreaders of disinformation.

Based on our findings, we have developed the following recommendations:

– At the level of state institutions, we did register any existing strategy or law that addresses the problem of disinformation in the specific context of elections. A legislative basis would help to counter this issue comprehensively. It should be possible to prosecute actors who spread disinformation (not only) related to the elections in a long-term and systematic way. At the moment, some space is provided by the possibility of criminal prosecution of spreading an alarm message, but this only covers a small part of the problem.

– Our monitoring confirmed the activity of websites known for the long-term spreading of disinformation even during elections. It is important to ensure that such platforms cannot profit from the spread of disinformation, alarm messages, or hate speech. One way is to prevent their income from advertising which should be partially addressed by the upcoming government plan to combat disinformation. This plan mentions ads commissioned by government institutions, but demonetization efforts should be extended to other entities as well.

– The current elections have shown that it is necessary to work on educating the population about the powers of the president (as well as other constitutional officials), and thus prevent the future misuse of insufficient information in political campaigns and disinformation content. This effort should also include future voters in primary and secondary schools. For eligible voters, the information campaign could also take the form of a combination of clips on public television, radio, public transport and posters in public places.

– A whole-of-society approach of strengthening cooperation between the state, civil society, but also social media themselves is an important long-term strategy for countering disinformation. It is essential to support an effective division of labor in terms of monitoring, analysis, prebunking, identifying disinformation spreaders, their prosecution or debunking (which should not be prioritized over more proactive approaches).

For verified information about presidential elections and the candidates, follow our fact-checking partners Demagog.cz and HlídacíPes.org.

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6   Explained in the previous chapter.

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