

Hybrid threats posed by Russian regional influence in the V4 countries.

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Abstract

The research behind this paper aimed to investigate the existence of, and to analyse the mechanisms for counteracting hybrid threats in Visegrad countries (V4). Starting from the analysis of the most significant vulnerabilities identified in each Visegrad country, the author intended to test the potential for viability of a joint Stratcom-type mechanism, as part of a more complex response in hindering the efforts of hostile states to interfere in the internal affairs of the V4 members, based on the current institutional design and operational arrangements in place in the four Visegrad members.

Given its importance and pervasiveness in all the four countries analysed, the author chose to test this hypothesis in relation specifically to Russia's subversive activities.

Acknowledging that "(...) *Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have always been part of a single civilisation, sharing cultural and intellectual values and common roots in diverse religious traditions, which they wish to preserve and further strengthen,*" as stated in the 1991 Visegrad Declaration, the author researched the hypothesis that this union of identity could be a potentiating factor for a unified response to hostile activities perpetrated by Russia.

It was concluded that at the present moment, it is impossible to make a proper assessment of the viability of such a joint response mechanism. The limited awareness of the threat in V4 states and the subsequently limited individual response capacities – with few notable exceptions – do not offer the necessary set of circumstances that might be conducive to the development of a joint mechanism. The initial hypothesis therefore turns out as impossible to demonstrate.

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Analysis

1. The context.

By far the most relevant political and cultural group in Central and Eastern Europe, created with the purpose of furthering EU integration while advancing military, economic and energy cooperation with one another, the V4 is determined “(...) *to contribute towards building the European security architecture based on effective, functionally complementary and mutually reinforcing cooperation and coordination within existing European and transatlantic institutions*¹”. At the inception phase back in 1991, all constituent members – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland – were demonstrating high commitment to these values. Alongside the whole former communist bloc, the Visegrad countries were regarded as living examples of democratic resurgence, and even looked at with envy by other former communist kin. Meanwhile, differences between states in the region have been blurred both by objective reasons (accession to NATO and EU played an important role), and by less objective ones (democratic backsliding in some of the V4 countries). Imagining different other formats of cooperation (the modern *Intermarium*; the *Three Seas Initiative*) also played an important role in diminishing other countries’ appetite to invest efforts in prospecting the idea of joining V4.

The values embraced by Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in 1991 were reinforced as they became members of EU and NATO. Both organisations have urged member states to strengthen their capabilities in countering external, non-linear threats, in an effort to fight against the rise and proliferation of hostile activities conducted through non-kinetic means: cyberwarfare, information warfare, subversion.

This dual membership, to both NATO and EU, requires from the V4 countries a multisectorial, not just a military approach to countering hybrid threats and opposing an enemy oftentimes more powerful and skilled, at least in projecting its malign influence onto the region. Building societal resilience, strengthening the economy, protecting the political decision-making processes, defining clear foreign policy goals and designing a strong security strategy, are necessary measures, both for ensuring an adequate level of national security, as well as contributions to the NATO and EU security agenda.

Despite being at the very forefront of many current threats posed by hybrid war waged by powerful actors like Russia (including tactics of economic pressure, propaganda war, social destabilisation through inducing mistrust between governments and citizens and undermining rule of law etc.), the V4 group still shows little coordination in their strategic transformation and adaptation process. As hybrid threats are targeting a set of common, democratic values, and the very nature of the threat is that of a fluid, oftentimes transnational one (with no material boundaries, when the attack can be coordinated from or can make use of means present in another country than the one under attack), aiming at destabilising not just one specific country but the entire bloc/ region, coordination of response could be instrumental.

¹ Official page of the Visegrad Group, retrieved November 01, 2019, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about>

The poor understanding at the political level² of the need for reconsidering the security provision paradigm in line with the evolution of the global environment is maintaining the security structures stuck in obsolete organisational culture patterns. Not feeling incentivised to adopt modern concepts and paradigms, the governmental/ military institutions are also oftentimes disconnected from civil society, whereas the flexibility of modern security threats requires a whole-of-society approach.

The growing merger of external factors (hybrid threats) and of domestic risk vectors (rise of ideological extremism, illiberal tendencies, transactional politics) has left the V4 countries struggling to provide accurate responses to modern, multiple security challenges. The efforts so far are syncopated and their results difficult to assess overall. If times are difficult for the V4 to strategise common responses, with a unified voice, pressure lies on constituent countries' foreign policy and security institutions to come up with country-specific responses.

The capacity of national structures to identify and engage relevant stakeholders to create and consolidate conditions favourable for the advancement of national interests, through the use of coordinated activities (programmes, tactics, plans), and unified communication (themes, messages etc.), is generically called strategic communications (Stratcom). The role of Stratcom³ is crucial not just in raising awareness, building resilience and even creating engagement at the level of the general public, but also in coordinating efforts among institutions tasked with maintaining security - and communicating success.

2. The rogue player. Russia's regional interests and the role of hybrid activities in advancing them

In recent years, Russia has become more and more aggressive in its efforts to regain influence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), challenging NATO interests and unsettling rule of law and stability in these countries. The conflict in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea are only the most recent events where Moscow has demonstrated the ability to master an innovative mix of military and non-military means of effective hybrid warfare. Ultimately, Russia hopes to create a state of facts on the ground which will force Euro-Atlantic allies to negotiate any regional, or regionally relevant decision with Moscow, from a position of equal influence⁴.

Russia's use of information as a weapon is not a novelty; moreover, its recent intensification has gained extra impetus. The deliberately hostile Russian activity in the V4 countries is not limited to the so-called information war but includes a wide spectrum of non-military instruments. Moscow seeks to

² And even coupled – as the interviews conducted for this paper showed – with sheer lack of interest from many political actors regarding such complex topics, difficult to score political points on, since the results of the implemented measures are not immediate.

³ The concept features highly in the strategies of both NATO (more pro-active, centred on raising awareness and focusing on advancing the Alliance's goals and actions; see <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/about-strategic-communications>) and the European Union (more reactive, centred on countering disinformation about the Union's goals and actions; see <http://archive.eap-csf.eu/assets/files/Action%20Plan.pdf>) approach).

⁴ As it targets V4 countries not just as separate nations, but also as members of EU and NATO, Russia's interests and subsequent actions in the V4 region are inter-related with Russia's military and economic interests beyond V4. It sometimes follows Russia's interests in the V4 vicinity (Baltic region), or even more broadly (in CEE, or on an international scale). A good example would be the Kremlin's active measures to counter NATO activity on the Alliance's Eastern border (e.g. the missile defence system).

exploit every weakness that the V4 countries' economies might present, seeks to corrode and erode democratic governance through meddling in electoral processes and using local rivalries, tries to infiltrate political and security institutions⁵ and take advantage of social difficulties.

After the communist bloc disintegrated at the beginning of the '90s, the Central and Eastern European economies were expected to be the sphere least impacted by Russian influence. Virtually no one, starting with consumers and ending with economists and decision makers, wanted to take into account redesigning their economies while keeping Russia (itself in dire straits!) as a partner, let alone having Russia as a key stakeholder.

Reality, though, forced the countries formerly in the Russian sphere of influence to maintain some strong ties with Russia, whether economic, political or social. The energy sector dependencies (the very important percentage of imported gas from Russia throughout the region stands out, with Slovakia's imports in 2015 at a record 100% Russian gas⁶), the positive image that Russia - and especially Vladimir Putin - enjoys (as presented in a recent PEW Research study on *European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism*⁷), plain geopolitics or the seemingly growing appeal of the autocratic leadership model (primarily championed by Russia) were defining for the new relationship with Russia and allowed the Kremlin to keep or even boost its leverage in the region.

All these favourable conditions on the ground have facilitated Kremlin's increasingly daring and aggressive efforts to regain great power status, and revamp its influence in the V4 region. Subversion, propaganda, and even direct political interference are tools for projecting power, unsettling the status-quo and effectively determining political course of action (as presented in chapter 3 – The countries). The strong inclination to emulate the Kremlin's political behaviour that some V4 leaders are showing have prompted Vladimir Putin's Russia to boost its active measures in order to influence the V4 political environment. Russia is no longer constrained to relying on local extremist parties to echo its narratives (as was the case of Hungary's Jobbik, the second largest political party in Hungary, known for receiving financial support from Russia in the past⁸), but instead is enlisting mainstream governmental parties

⁵ Poland captures Russian Spy, media reports; retrieved November 01, 2019,

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/28/poland-captures-suspected-russian-spy-media-reports-a67939>

⁶ According to a E3G think-tank report from 2015, all the other three V4 countries are showing a relative dependency on Russian gas, Hungary importing 83% of its gas from Russia, Czechia 63% and Poland 57%. See

https://www.e3g.org/docs/E3G_Trends_EU_Gas_Demand_June2015_Final_110615.pdf

⁷ With the notable exception of Poland, in all other three V4 countries Vladimir Putin is considered the most trustworthy foreign leader. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/>

⁸ Belarusian oligarch allegedly passed Russian funds to Hungarian far-right; retrieved November 01, 2019,

<https://budapestbeacon.com/belarusian-oligarch-allegedly-passed-russian-funds-hungarian-far-right/>

and state leaders to do the job (Hungary's Fidesz, and its leader Viktor Orban make a good example^{9,10,11,12}).

The open dissatisfaction with key EU decisions regarding Russia (the imposition of economic sanctions after the illegal annexation of Crimea stands as the most relevant example) expressed on a number of occasions by Slovakia's¹³, Czechia's^{14,15} and Hungary's¹⁶ political leadership is creating a favourable context for Moscow to paint EU sanctions as unreasonable, and not beneficial for less powerful EU members¹⁷.

When it is less influential in shaping a pro-Russian attitude in the V4 countries, Moscow ~~struggles to produce~~ is pushing an anti-Western narrative portraying the EU agenda as an encroachment upon the sovereignty and interests of the state, driven by 'imperialistic' interests. The foreseeable goal of these actions is to destabilise the still strong pro-EU sentiment among the V4 societies¹⁸. This being said, it's goal is not to replace it with a pro-Russian one, but to sow confusion.

The case of Poland, is telling, as it powers up the Kremlin's agenda in the region in less evident and rather indirect ways. This is because paradoxically the agenda of the incumbent government, which is staunchly anti-Russian,, nowadays unwillingly aligns with Moscow policy to foster fragmentation in the EU and promote a sovereignist and socially conservative agenda. In turn, the Kremlin is consistently acting to derail democratic consolidation and Euro-Atlantic solidarity in the region, while creating a social context ripe for advancing its own interests. It aims to hold leverage over a part of civil society and other factors of influence, relying on pan-Slavic sentiments and the residual, romanticised positive attitudes towards Russia that a certain part of the region's populations are showing. A relevant

⁹ The two leaders have met more than five times after Russia illegally annexed Crimea. The last visit – Oct. 2019 – took place in the wake of relocation of the International Investment Bank HQ to Budapest, and Orban granting immunity to IIB's personnel.

¹⁰ Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban's special relationship; retrieved November 01, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/vladimir-putin-and-viktor-orban-special-relationship/a-45512712>

¹¹ Hungary's Orban denounces EU sanctions on Moscow; retrieved November 01, 2019,

<https://www.france24.com/en/20180715-hungarys-orban-denounces-eu-sanctions-moscow>

¹² Daniel Bozsik, Sandrine Amiel, AP, Eastern Bromance: Hungary's Orban and Russia's Putin set to meet, again; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.euronews.com/2019/10/29/eastern-bromance-hungary-s-orban-and-russia-s-putin-set-to-meet-again>

¹³ EU should drop Russia sanctions, Slovak PM says after meeting Putin; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-slovakia/eu-should-drop-russia-sanctions-slovak-pm-says-after-meeting-putin-idUSKCN1111A1>

¹⁴ Czech President, PM Clash Over Russia Sanctions For Crimea Annexation; retrieved Nov 01, 2019,

<https://www.rferl.org/a/czech-president-zeman-crimea-sanctions-russia-sobotka/28785176.html>

¹⁵ Czech president urges EU to end Russia sanctions; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20171121-czech-president-urges-eu-end-russia-sanctions>

¹⁶ Hungary PM Orban condemns EU sanctions on Russia; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28801353>

¹⁷ Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov's interview with Sputnik News Agency, on the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union web page; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://russiaeu.ru/printpage/en/node/3567>

¹⁸ Globsec trends 2019; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>

example is the activity of the Czech Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies¹⁹, a prominent member of the pro-Kremlin informal 'club' of civil society organisations and a constant and determined promoter of anti-Western, pro-Russian narratives.

When local efforts are not enough, Kremlin is promoting its narratives through its own, Russia-registered civil society-type tools. Russkiy Mir presence in Poland – even though producing only limited outcomes - stands as a relevant example in its oddity²⁰.

The Russophile sentiment inspiring a significant part of Slovakia's and Czechia's population is used for strengthening the Kremlin's position over the region and better advance its agenda, to blur the lines between fact and fiction to make fabrication undistinguishable from truth and overall break dialogue²¹. Although verifiable to a lesser degree, Kremlin's active measures in the V4 area are targeting security and political structures, too. The transactional way of conducting politics in the region have encouraged Russia to "lend favours"²² to local political leaders in exchange for their political Russia-favourable positions, especially within the Euro-Atlantic dynamics²³. The degree of this vulnerability in the region differs greatly, though. In Poland's case Kremlin's involvement at the political level is virtually non-existent, because of the staunch, Russia-averse sentiment in the society, replicated unanimously in the political agendas all the parties have embraced. At the other end of the spectrum is Hungary, where political messages and official positions favouring Russia (directly or indirectly) were expressed repeatedly.

The efforts that Putin's Russia is investing in winning the hearts and minds of societies in V4 countries are by no means new, yet the situation it is significantly different today. It is happening under circumstances of rapidly advancing technological change and innovation, instant communication, increased citizen involvement in information exchange over social media, especially during elections²⁴, as well as conflicting narratives between East and West (the so-called traditional values, which would bring the region closer to Russia and not to the West; the liberal values the West is allegedly imposing to the East while trying to subdue/eliminate the Eastern culture, oftentimes presented in antithesis to these values). As shown in chapter 3. of this paper, whenever this divide is present, Russia won't hesitate to instrumentalise it to advance its interests, should the situation allow). Just by way of example, in July 2018, the Sputnik Czech language website²⁵ had over 2,5 million visitors²⁶. Adding to

¹⁹ The official page of the organisation can be visited here: <http://www.isstras.eu/cs/>

²⁰ Promoting cultural activities and study trips to Russia for local, highly pro-Western elites.

²¹ According to the Slovak initiative konspiratori.sk, there are around 108 Slovak and Czech servers that spread untrustworthy content.

²² Preferential gas tariffs, relocation of a financial institution such as the International Investment Bank (IIB) in Hungary and others

²³ A snapshot of Russia – V4 political involvements is to be found here: http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/492_en-executive-summary.pdf

²⁴ European Elections in the V4; retrieved Nov 01 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/European-Elections-in-the-V4.pdf>

²⁵ The Czech language page of the Russian media organisation can be visited here: <https://cz.sputniknews.com/>

²⁶ Katarina Klingova, What Do We Know About Disinformation Websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia?; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/news/what-do-we-know-about-disinformation-websites-in-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia/>

this, local outlets such *Parlamentní listy*²⁷ (Parliamentary Letters) in Czechia have grown in audience to become relevant promoters of pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives.

Russia didn't invent the asymmetric means of war, but it is using them more and more – in a “minimum effort, maxim gain” kind of approach - taking advantage of all the vulnerabilities of the targeted countries. Russia's goal is to use social discontent as a weapon to undermine EU/NATO. What is more, it seeks to use nationalist/ populist tendencies, already-present in these countries, (and the associated narratives) to create deeper rifts.

Russia's portfolio of hybrid threats contains weaponisation of culture, wherever possible – through Russian cultural institutes and different other associations -, weaponisation of money – creating the appearance of discretionary access to financial resources for local, selected politicians -, weaponisation of information regarding the above-mentioned: the cultural bonds are presented as being stronger than they are, the importance of Russia's economic presence in V4 countries is portrayed as being more important than it actually is. The lack of/ poor communication of the values and success of the EU and NATO is making Russia's efforts both more successful and cheaper.

3. The countries. What makes them vulnerable and how strong is their determination to oppose Kremlin's hybrid threats?

Across the V4 members – as is the case with other countries in the West - there is no common definition or understanding of hybrid threats. Nor is there a common definition or understanding regarding who the enemy is that projects these threats.

Each country prioritises response to hybrid threats differently, taking into consideration its political/electoral agenda, individual affinities and envisaged political gains. Moreover, making cooperation between V4 countries even more complicated when it comes to formulating common responses to hybrid threats, each country has its own widely different structures dealing with hybrid threats (from cyber, to information), which they address depending on the different level of risk associated with particular hybrid means of aggression.

The only notable common initiative in countering a non-military threat (cyberattacks) materialised in 2013, when V4 countries together with Austria launched the Central European Cybersecurity Platform²⁸. That showed a good understanding of the cyber domain threats, and determination in dealing with them. More importantly, it demonstrated cohesion of the bloc when it came to sharing the same set of values in securing the region. Meanwhile the situation has changed, especially with respect to Russia, as various actors have been taking more Russia-favourable positions, not just within the V4 group, but Western Europe as well. Whether this has functioned as an obstacle to joint action or not, the Central European Cybersecurity Platform has not recorded any clear outcomes, and none

²⁷ The official web site of the organisation can be visited here: <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/>

²⁸ <https://www.nbu.gov.sk/en/cyber-security/partnership/central-european-platform-for-cybersecurity/index.html>

of the V4 experts interviewed during the research were able to suggest any concrete gains or steps ahead.

Even though it is by no means as structured and determined as the one regarding cyber threats, the common understanding of V4 countries regarding hybrid threats in general is contextualised in a hard security, military paradigm. In a joint statement adopted in 2018, on the margins of the Brussels NATO Summit²⁹, the ministers of defence of the V4 countries were acknowledging the importance of cooperation in countering hybrid threats. Even though the said cooperation is understood as being a requirement of both NATO and EU membership, no capabilities were committed to it, nor was a framework advanced for furthering the discussion on the matter. A row of independent, disconnected declarations were made throughout time by different political decision-makers (Polish, Czech and Slovak representatives being the most outspoken; not that much their Hungarian counterparts), pointing to the fact that at least the threat itself is well understood and addressed at a national level, though not with coordinated regional action.

To facilitate the formulation of responses to the threats, the hybrid threats in the V4 should be studied by identifying the gaps that can be used to create a “manufactured reality” (not by assessing the “damage done” or tactics employed). This means that V4 should look at the *demand* side of malign interference (the facilitating conditions in place and gaps which ‘invite’ Russian aggression), rather than at the *supply* side (hybrid measures perpetrated). Similarly, proactive systemic consolidation and defence planning (quite like in the field of regular, hard security) implies a realistic assessment of what the future targets might be, of the state of preparedness and a corresponding effort of adaptation. Once these vulnerabilities are discovered, this allows for defence not only against current threats, but also against potential future ones, coming perhaps from different actors.

In a nutshell, the Kremlin does not create conflicts in the countries it projects its hybrid threats upon, but rather identifies vulnerability gaps and tries to amplify them. They use pre-existing conditions (divisions within society that can be augmented, by sowing mistrust, creating a false conflict of values, etc.) and activates them to generate actual conflict³⁰. A snapshot of what these vulnerabilities look like for all the V4 countries can help in better understanding how the response should be prepared.

The hypothesis that vulnerabilities can be of various types and thus affect a number of different spheres of life led to the need for identifying the main areas in which vulnerabilities exist and hostile influence is conducted. Consequently, four domains were selected: *society, politics, economy, and foreign policy and security*.

²⁹ V4 Defence Ministers Adopted a Joint Statement on the Brussels NATO Summit; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/v4-defence-ministers>

³⁰ Propaganda Made-to-measure: How our vulnerabilities facilitate Russian influence; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.global-focus.eu/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Propaganda-Made-to-Measure-How-Our-Vulnerabilities-Facilitate-Russian-Influence.pdf>

Czechia

Even though **Czech society** showed a clear option for a pro-Western political orientation right after the communist regime fell, an option reiterated throughout the time and firmly expressed in the attitude towards the multiparty political system and the free market economy³¹. The sentiment of belonging to a pan-Slavic universe which inspires a relevant segment of the population³², alongside Russia, and the positive attitudes that a significant part of the population still have towards Russia are creating inroads for Kremlin's active measures. Existing fears, manifest, for instance, in negative views of 'the other' are easy to play upon by external actors looking for soft spots. With 66% of the population expressing a negative opinion of the Roma minority, and 64% having negative views of Muslim populations³³, Russia can use this to sow further divisions, either in the context of migration (i.e. the migration crisis), or of social discontents.

The Czech economy is showing little dependence on Russian capital. The foreign direct investment (FDI) and trade are in marginal numbers, relative to the numbers that it registers in relation with other EU members³⁴. Nevertheless, the Czech economy shows an important vulnerability when it comes to the energy sector. A subsidiary of Russian nuclear agency Rosatom, TVEL, is the sole supplier of nuclear fuel (at least until 2020) for both the Temelín and Dukovany power plants. Moreover, Russia's Rosatom is likely to express interest – and compete – for the new tender for the Dukovany power plant.

Czechia entered NATO in 1999, in the first accession wave after the lifting of the Iron Curtain and it became an EU member in 2004, in the first wave of EU eastward enlargement. Although its security and foreign policy alignment with the Euro-Atlantic values is uncontested, Czechia's political leadership voiced discontent with the EU (and to a much lesser extent to NATO) on a number of issues – from opposition to EU migration policy, to dissatisfaction with the economic sanctions against Russia³⁵ after the illegal annexation of Crimea. This position regarding EU decisions is not automatically equated with openness to Russia, but it is certainly to be understood as creating a facilitating environment for Russia's anti-EU narratives. For sure, opposition to the majority opinion within the EU can be a legitimate stand and part of the multinational negotiation within the Union. When such opposition is, however, a constant feature and it is expressed or promoted in ways that may cause divisions within the bloc (as is often the case, and not just with positions coming from Prague), this is likely to be identified by a hostile external actor as an avenue for undermining the EU as a whole. The Kremlin's active measures are targeting intensively the Czech political establishment and its

³¹ European public opinion three decades after the fall of the communism; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/pg_10-15-19-europe-values-01-017/

³² United we stand, divided we fall: The Kremlin's leverage in the Visegrad countries; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/548_final-publication-united-we-stand-divided-we-fall.pdf

³³ European public opinion three decades after the fall of the communism; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/14/minority-groups/>

³⁴ FDI in the Czech Republic: A Visegrad comparison; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/economy-finance/eb042_en.pdf

³⁵ See references on page 5 of this report.

components. With a still strong Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, one would say that Russia has already found its facilitator within the local political sphere. However, important supporters of the Kremlin's interests are other two prominent figures: the current President Miloš Zeman, and ex-president Václav Klaus, both known for their close links to the Russian political elites and satellite business community³⁶³⁷.

When it comes to addressing these vulnerabilities with efficient counter-measures, Czechia's is arguably in the front row of the Visegrad countries in developing dedicated capacities and facilitating a common understanding of the threats within the state apparatus responsible for managing the risks posed by these threats. Although Stratcom is not explicitly defined in any law or publicly available document, there seems to be a good understanding of the concept within state administration. As a direct consequence of the 2016 National Security Audit³⁸, the response to hybrid threats has been designed in a Stratcom logic: cross-governmental (the Office of the Government is leading the efforts of representatives/distinct units in a number of ministries, intelligence agencies and other state offices and responsible institutions), and it is intended as a unified and cooperative one. The political climate, though, has prevented so far the creation of a single communications strategy, implemented by all identified stakeholders.

Following the conclusions of the same Audit, a Centre Against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats was established in 2017 within the Ministry of the Interior, with the purpose of monitoring and analysing the hybrid threats that Czechia is facing. Due to the polarised political environment³⁹ the newly established Centre's activity (especially its counter-disinformation efforts) is under constant attack. The institution was dubbed "Ministry of Truth" by the Czech president.

Hungary

The spread of negative opinions regarding different minority groups in Hungary was garnered by far-right, nationalistic forces and transformed into political capital. Pro-Russian narratives – even though hardly pushed from outside Hungary's borders - successfully resonate with more than 60% of the population, if we were to look at the combined percentages of the first two political parties. Moreover, as shown in a Political Capital Institute report, "positive perceptions of Russia can tap into the 2.4 - 3.2 million geopolitically undecided population"⁴⁰.

³⁸ Czech Republic's National Security Audit, <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Audit-narodni-bezpecnosti-20161201.pdf>

³⁹ As was the case of president Zeman's statements in the aftermath of Salisbury incident, when a former Russian officer was poisoned using a nerve agent, Novichok. <https://www.euronews.com/2018/05/03/novichok-type-nerve-agent-produced-in-czech-republic-last-year>

⁴⁰ Larger than life – Who is afraid of the Big Bad Russia? - Hungarian country report; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, https://www.politicalcapital.hu/russian_sharp_power_in_cee/research_results.php?article_read=1&article_id=2414

As already stated in this paper, the main vulnerability for Hungary is its political environment being dominated by parties (and strong leaders) with overt pro-Russian attitudes and opinions. If until recently the most well-known Hungarian party with pro-Russian orientation was the far-right nationalistic Jobbik, now Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party is the main partner.⁴¹ Hungary's policy positions and its growing economic ties with Russia have raised concerns among analysts and politicians in Western capitals. Russia's economic leverage in Hungary, expressed through its presence in the nuclear energy sector (power plant Paks 2, where Russia covered 80% of the investment - around 10 % of the Hungarian GDP⁴² - through its Vnesheconombank) is exploiting a major vulnerability of the economy.

Viktor Orbán's favourable attitudes towards Vladimir Putin and his leadership model, his reluctance in following any Euro-Atlantic decision sanctioning violations of international laws by the Kremlin, is probably one of the most important vulnerabilities that Hungary has in front of subversive, hybrid actions, creating openings for subversion for Russia not just in Hungary, but in the V4 and EU as well. From a media perspective, Hungary is also the most vulnerable to outside influence, because most of its mainstream press is controlled by the government or owned by oligarchs close to the government, who tend to closely support whatever Orbán's agenda is⁴³.

With a National Security Strategy last updated in 2012, there is hardly a unified understanding and reaction of the state apparatus regarding threats which have a non-military, hybrid nature. However, the necessity of aligning its counter-measures with the importance and dimension of such threats was acknowledged at the end of October, 2019⁴⁴, when Hungary decided to join the European Centre for Hybrid Threats. The accession will become operational at the end of 2019.

Apart from cyber threats, which receive important attention from those involved in securing Hungary in front of malign foreign interference, the interviewed local experts on security were virtually unable to point to a document defining information-related threats as such. As per a GLOBSEC research on V4 countries Stratcom capacities yet unpublished, Stratcom is not defined, nor explained as such in any public official documents or laws. Moreover, simple institutional communication is mistakenly perceived as being specific Stratcom activities and, thus, reported as fulfilling the same goals.

⁴¹ Viktor Orbán: Era of „liberal democracy“ is over; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/viktor-orban-era-of-liberal-democracy-is-over/a-43732540-0>

⁴² United we stand, divided we fall: The Kremlin's leverage in the Visegrad countries; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/492_en-executive-summary.pdf

⁴³ As it can be seen on Hungary's country page on reporters without borders' web; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/hungary>

⁴⁴ Ferenz Adrienn, Joining the European Center for Hybrid Threats - Government decision - What does this mean?; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.jogiforum.hu/hirek/41043>

Formally, the Office of the Prime Minister is in charge of Hungary's strategic communication. In a highly controlled way, both formally through the National Communication Centre⁴⁵ and informally through all the other measures applied to the information environment in Hungary⁴⁶, a virtual monopoly on communication is in place. Anti-Soros campaigns, anti-migrant campaigns are presented as Stratcom efforts, subsequently signed into laws.

Poland

A distinctive case among the V4 countries when it comes to inclination to accommodate Russia's interests in the region, Polish society is the least vulnerable to the Kremlin's hybrid threats. Its traumatic past with Russia has created social resilience and relative opposition to anything coming from the Kremlin. Polish political class has instrumentalised these attitudes into actions looking to reduce new dependencies on Russia.

The country that fares best when analysing public perception, political landscape and media space, Poland is perceived as being the least vulnerable to outside influence^{47,48}. It is the most pro-US and pro-NATO country of the regional group, a strategic hub of US presence on the Eastern Flank, highly hostile to Russia (71% of Poles see Russia as a threat), with no mainstream parties that have an explicit pro-Russia platform. However, the existence of anti-establishment and anti-Western marginal political associations might render them as potential targets for Russian subversion activities. Promoting an openly nationalistic agenda are indirectly supporting the Kremlin's goal of sowing divisions within Polish society.

Although there are Polish state institutions implementing consistent activity in fighting hybrid threats – especially disinformation and cyber security attacks – there is still no formal coordination among institutional stakeholders invested with Stratcom responsibilities. Lacking an official, common definition of Stratcom, different institutions are operating with their own ones, adapted to their activity and responsibilities. The Ministry of Digital Affairs⁴⁹ understands it in coordination with NATO and EU efforts, while the Ministry of National Defence (MoD) is regarding it in a more internal-context oriented way, as a set of coordinated communication activities, following a well-defined strategy, implemented structurally at all levels of management and command. In its Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland, the MoD is indicating a thorough understanding of the nature of hybrid threats

⁴⁵ <https://nkoh.kormany.hu/index>, an entity under the Prime Minister's office, responsible for every public communication of every ministry under Orban's cabinet.

⁴⁶ 2019 World Press Freedom index; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

⁴⁷ Globsec Trends, 2019; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>

⁴⁸ United we stand, divided we fall: The Kremlin's leverage in the Visegrad countries; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/548_final-publication-united-we-stand-divided-we-fall.pdf

⁴⁹ The official web page of the Ministry of Digital Affairs can be visited here: <http://archiwum.mc.gov.pl/en/the-areas-of-our-activity>

and – probably, equally important – is defining Russia’s aggressive activities in the region as presenting a major factor of instability and insecurity⁵⁰.

Although Stratcom-specific activities are still disconnected and not formalised, the efforts of tackling hybrid activities threatening Poland’s security were not left without positive results. An informal phase in coordinating strategic communications efforts is already in place under Poland’s Government Centre for Security⁵¹. Nevertheless, a formal framework and set of definitions is yet to be developed (both the document defining hybrid threats and Stratcom response, and a centre of command under the Prime Minister’s chancellery are to become operational mid-2020), benefiting from the virtually overarching understanding regarding the need.

Slovakia

Russophile attitudes on the part of the Slovak population date back a long time in history⁵². Moreover, as was the case in all the communist bloc, during an important part of Slovakia’s modern history the West was portrayed as a constant aggressor. Russia’s positive image, as the guarantor of liberties and protector of Slavhood was initially more of a fruit of elites’ imagination than based on tangible realities. The need of a small country to be part of a larger security arrangement to provide it with stability determined Slovakia’s intellectual and political elites to set the foundation of pan-Slavism⁵³. This remnant, romanticised positive attitude towards Russia that the Slovak population is still entertaining can be transformed into an important vulnerability, exploitable by a more and more aggressive Kremlin looking for fulcrums in the EU and NATO. The strong cultural affinities with Russia are weaponised by Moscow, who is actively cultivating its Eurosceptic political players. The topics that have been exploited so far are the fear of refugees, as well as attitudes that go against liberal values⁵⁴.

As shown in the study *Vulnerability Index: Subversive Russian Influence in Central Europe* conducted by GLOBSEC⁵⁵, from the public perception point of view, Slovakia is ranked as the most vulnerable in the region. This is the country where 12% of the population (especially middle-aged and elderly people) has a clear pro-Russian orientation and the pan-Slavic heritage is still popular among the Slovaks.

To be clear, cultural and historical affinity with Russia, or any other non-Western actors, is not a problem in itself. However, since we are looking here at resilience and at the potential vulnerabilities

⁵⁰ Poland’s Defense Concept; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/defenceconcept-publication>

⁵¹ The official web page of Government Centre for Security can be accessed here: <https://rcb.gov.pl/en/about-us/>

⁵² Arguably, one of the first political essays presenting, explaining and justifying these attitudes is Ludovit Stur’s 1852 book *O národních písních a pověstech plemen slovanských* ("On national songs and myths of Slavic kin"). According to

⁵³ As was argued in a recent interview by Mr. Alexander Duleba, former Director of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association in Bratislava.

⁵⁴ Globsec Trends 2019; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/GLOBSEC-Trends2019.pdf>

⁵⁵ Globsec Vulnerability Index; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/GLOBSEC_Vulnerability_Index.pdf

to malign interference, this affinity can become one, under the current circumstances of global competition and resurgent tensions between Russia and the West. This is especially the case if and where such cultural or historic sympathies also translate into openness to the governance (non-democratic) model and socially conservative worldview which Russia proposes.

The lack of a central institution coordinating the Stratcom efforts of all key stakeholders with responsibilities in the security field is making the response to hostile actions to be reactive – not proactive – and uncoordinated. As of July 2018, Slovakia took an important step in setting the institutional framework in countering malign interventions by adopting the *Framework of the Slovak Republic on Countering Hybrid Threats*⁵⁶. However, a conclusion of this research⁵⁷ is highlighting the fact that an ununified way of prioritising hybrid threats among the representatives of state institutions is preventing a consistent and relevant response to malign interference.

Under the circumstances, conducting specific Stratcom activities and creating and disseminating this type of narratives are rather discontinuous activities. The only institution who has a well-defined, specifically designated Stratcom unit is the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs⁵⁸. The unit was established in 2017 on the basis of an internal decision and is the only one in the Slovak governmental apparatus that is actively conducting Stratcom activity, using the Stratcom terminology in their documents and advocating for policy changes in this field.

An individual, but more direct way of tackling disinformation campaigns is implemented by the Police Force of the Slovak Republic. As presented in an yet-unpublished GLOBSEC research on Stratcom capabilities in the V4 countries, the Police Force is conducting an effective campaign through its facebook account established in 2018, publicly communicating its efforts and results in fighting day to day disinformation spread on Slovak media. The initiative is worth mentioning for its potential to build bridges between government and civil society efforts, in what should be multi-stakeholder approach to fighting propaganda and disinformation.

4. The role for coordinated Stratcom dialogue in tackling Russia's hybrid threats.

Understanding the tailored pressure used by Russia on all these national fronts (society, economy, politics, and foreign policy and security), as well as the fertile ground which allows it to produce its effects should help us devise counter-measures and the potential antibodies in the effort of neutralising Russian hybrid threats.

Countering non-military influence means protecting and advancing democratic gains in the region, enabling stability, strong institutions, social peace and good governance, while preventing conflict. This

⁵⁶ Slovak Republic hybrid threats vulnerability study; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Slovak-Republic-Hybrid-Threats-Vulnerability-Study_Executive-Summary.pdf

⁵⁷ Drawn from the desk research, coupled with the opinions expressed by virtually all experts interviewed for this paper.

⁵⁸ The official web page of Slovakia's Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs can be visited here: <https://Www.Mzv.Sk/Web/En>

will help prevent the envisaged impact of hybrid threats, which goes as far as the loss of sovereignty of the countries in this region, and more immediately targets the loss of their sovereign right to choose their political order, their leaders, their international status and membership to Euro- Atlantic alliances. Mitigating Russia's efforts to discredit former communist countries' status within the European Union and NATO will secure both organisations' objective of promoting stability and prosperity all around their borders to create a safe and peaceful Europe. It will prevent the emergence of political, social and economic realities which may see the West enter into negotiations with Russia from a position of lesser power than it enjoys at present, whereby it may be forced to make painful concessions.

The ultimate magnitude of hybrid threats is difficult to assess, given the long-term, structural impact which they project. Hence, they require a two-pronged approach, with a *response* pillar (increasing costs for the enemy and fighting back) and a *resilience* pillar (increasing preparedness). Solely reactive solutions are counterproductive. A pro-active approach on the matter is necessary, which, in terms of Stratcom could be summarised very briefly as 'know one's weaknesses and communicate one's successes'!

Recommendations:

- Strategic communications might offer some good responses, at least to information warfare. Acknowledging the imperative of including them within the official duties and scope of work of a wide range of state institutions (from those covering security issues, to those responsible for public health and education) should be regarded as a priority.
- Prioritising the establishment and education of a strategic communication culture, first within governmental institutions and then assessing the possibility to include other, civil society stakeholders should also be regarded as a potential solution. The strategic communication should be regarded as a two-way, dialogue-type activity and not just as a platform for communicating institutional messages.
- Expanding V4 (and not only) states' international cooperation, by becoming actively involved members of the NATO and EU Stratcom and Hybrid structures in order to avoid duplications and capitalise on existing frameworks should be regarded as a prerequisite in building an effective shield against hybrid threats. The hybrid threats, more than many others, know no borders and replicate recipes already tested in other countries, so cooperation is necessary if we are to learn from previous experience and not risk a repetition of scenarios which have been successful in inflicting harm.

- A centralised institution established and invested with as much independence as possible, coordinating the Stratcom efforts of all the actors involved in countering hybrid threats should be created where it does not yet exist.
- Raising awareness about the threats and communicating the results of strategic communication efforts should target both public servants and society at large. A platform for discussions/ workshops should be created or facilitated/supported in order to engage an audience as wide as possible. Developing messages that are easily understandable, tailored to the specificities of every social category should be a priority.
- An institutional response, coordinating decisions and unifying ways of action in countering hybrid threats, creating a framework for this where there isn't one, should be the main goal for every state. As proposed above, broadening the circle of stakeholders in identifying efficient responses to aggression by including not just governmental/military institutions but civil society organisations, too, should be another important goal in creating a security environment in which the inherent vulnerabilities in a country will be difficult to weaponise by foreign actors, like Russia.
- In this effort of narrowing the communicational gaps and facilitating access to knowledge about hybrid threats, civil society organisations – with their flexible structures, and access to a vast international network of expertise and research – can and should play a role of honest brokers and facilitators of the internalisation and implementation of solutions consolidating a Stratcom culture. A good example is Globsec's Strategic Communication Programme's project titled *Increasing Capacities and Preparedness of Public Administration for Hybrid Threats (HYBRID)*.⁵⁹ The project provides not just a platform of dialogue on Stratcom matters but is also making available its good analytical capacities, by supporting a process of creating public policies addressing malign influence, seconding analytical efforts invested by state institutions in identifying the aggressors, monitoring the threats and formulating solutions for tackling them.

Conclusion

In view of the initial hypothesis underlying the current study, whereby we were setting out to assess the potential for coordinated Stratcom action among V4 countries, based on their current institutional approach, we can remark primarily that the four states differ widely in: first - perception of the threat (from open acknowledgement and identification of the enemy, in Poland, to virtual denial in Hungary); second - pre-existing social and economic conditions (from a certain degree of historic continuity in sympathy toward Russia in Slovakia, to firm anti-Russian attitudes in Poland); and finally - current structures and measures in place (from lack of internal coordination, but a significant Stratcom effort

⁵⁹ Increasing the capacity and preparedness of the public administration for hybrid threats; retrieved Nov 01, 2019, <https://www.globsec.org/projects/hybrid/>

in Poland; to a coordinated approach, but under constant ‘fire’ from the political level in Czechia; to almost no existing dedicated framework in Hungary).

These overarching differences reflecting at the same time political will, social conditions and organisational culture require first and foremost internal consolidation of the Stratcom dimension, which would, over a reasonably short time, allow them to better plug in to the existing NATO and EU mechanisms for cooperation, capitalising on the opportunities offered. It is also desirable that the four countries develop their understanding of the benefits of cooperation: both internally, with civil society actors, as part of a multi-stakeholder, whole-of-society approach, and with external partners.

Enhanced cooperation among the V4 Stratcom mechanisms would, if implemented at this point, suffer from shortcomings generated by the significant differences described among the individual countries and would probably amount to an empty shell put in place to demonstrate willingness to tackle the problem, but with low efficiency in practice. Coordination (though not necessarily only within the V4) remains a desirable end goal though, given the versatility of the threat, its transborder nature, its adaptation to local context of recipes first tested in other countries, etc. The first steps in that direction though are a unified understanding and definition of the threat, its goals and potential impact; and the creation of a functional national strategy, framework and culture that can be later harmonised with others.