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Political Fact-Checking in the Czech Republic on the Example of demagog.cz and manipulatori.cz Portals

Abstract. Variety of portals and fact-check initiatives in the Czech Republic is an interesting phenomenon, created as a result of a political tangling, information war, changes in contemporary media, economic and social issues. In comparison to other countries from the Visegrad Group, these portals have developed significantly. This is understandable considering the complex social and political situation in the Czech Republic as well as the development of new forms of communication. What is happening in this country can be considered as a kind of testing ground for the creators of fake news and fact-checkers. On the one hand, it is the struggle of various secret services and interest groups (mainly pro-Kremlin, pro-Russian) that have an influence on public opinion by using techniques of manipulation and control of society. On the other hand, they are more and more advanced journalistic and scientific projects operating in the network, dealing with fact-checking. The article focuses on portal demagog.cz that verifies statements made by politicians and portal manipulatori.cz that checks facts and examines public debate in the Czech Republic.

Keywords: manipulatori.cz; demagog.cz; fake news; fact-check; Czech Republic

Introduction

Fake news and disinformation are more and more predominant in the public Czech discourse and they become a real problem. The political transitions, parliamentary election campaign, occurring of the elements of hybrid war, as well as changes on the Czech media market have caused the growth in the amount of fake news in the public sphere.

Traditional media are increasingly disappointing in terms of reporting (not only) political reality. They limit themselves to offer messages, more and more often without checking their truthfulness. We observe less and less reliable analysis based on facts,

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and more and more publications based on guesses and sensations, which marks declining confidence in the media. The priority is given to speed, not the quality of the message, which is not conducive to the growth of public discourse and civil society. In this situation, it is understandable that fake news – the balance between facts, opinions and speculations, fiction is gaining the audience. On the other hand, there are more initiatives to balance these processes – it is often journalism combined with activity of academics, non-profit and NGOs.

Media of the third sector that is related to NGOs have not been much developed in Czechia and have not been of great importance until recently. Today they have developed to such an extent that they are essential in the creation of fact-checking structure. They are not dependent on the editorial office's programme or the will of a given medium owner. It is important that a lot of fact-checking activists emanate from journalism. They had worked in traditional media; however, they resigned to protest against monopolizing the Czech media market by the concern owned by Andrej Babiš.

In 2014 and 2015, in the Czech Republic Internet network (as well as in the world), non-real and conspiratorial news about the economy and politics began to appear on an unprecedented scale. After the Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the war in Ukraine they intensified. These were not just e-mails such as "chain letters" or phishing attempts, but also information affecting politics as well as public opinion. They were to activate mistrust of democracy, political elites, Western institutions and the so-called mainstream media, inciting hatred against specific groups (mainly refugees and Roma). It was and still is associated with the activities undertaken by the secret services of Russia and the groups associated with this country as well as with the deeper Czech social and political issues. The most important points include: the economic divisions fuelled by pro-Kremlin and interest groups (province vs. Prague and big cities), the big problem of corruption (also political), the increase in the importance of populist and nationalist movements – political dominance by populist Andrej Babiš and created by him ANO 2011 formation. An important factor affecting the aggravation of the quality of public debate is also the controversial presidency of Miloš Zeman, which brings up extreme emotions in the Czech society[1].

All this contributed to a strong society polarization, sustained by various types of information published in traditional and new media (above all in social media). Often this information was manipulated and untrue, driven by emotions, not facts. For this reason, many independent projects functioning in the network were created, that stand against the publication of false or manipulated messages. Initiatives have

[1] President Miloš Zeman is very eurosceptic and pro-Russian. He is known for his controversial statements and behaviors resulting from, e.g. alcohol problems and close ties to people cooperating with Russia. It is mainly about his advisers and consultants from the electoral staff – Vratislav Mynář and Martin Nejedlý (see: Dudek 2015; Fajnor 2017; Wasiuta 2018).

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been created to counteract fake news taken by journalists and academics. As in other countries, also in the Czech Republic, fact-checking understood as a process of problem or information investigation in order to verify the facts (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2017) has become the support mainly for the deteriorating investigative journalism.

The analysis may be characterized as a cognitive one and the aim of the analysis is the description of particular portals that may be classified as fact-checking. This paper is the introduction for the in-depth case study and it is aimed at exploration of a new phenomenon based on already existing data. The description may be the basis for further analyses concerning the development of fact-checking organizations. It is a fairly new phenomena and scientists have recently started analytical and theoretical work (Amazeen 2017; Graves, Cherubini 2016; Graves, Konieczna 2015) in order to explain the development of fact-checking, how it is related to the authority relations and media transitions. Hence, it is worth describing a phenomenon in question and answer some questions which may result in inducement for in-depth analyses in the future. The analysis (including the sociopolitical context) was aimed at answering the questions that concern reason for the fact-checking portals development in Czechia, how this kind of services works, what are the similarities and differences between them, what is their role in the politics and on the media market.

In the article, the subject of the analysis will be the Czech sphere dealing with broadly understood fact-checking, and special attention will be devoted to two mentioned websites. The first of them – demagog.cz – verifies the facts using the fact-check method and checks statements made by politicians. They are evaluated in the category of truth, falsehood, misleading information or lack of verification. The second one – manipulatori.cz – is aimed at checking the facts, analyzing political debate in the Czech Republic and improving the quality of public discourse.

The situation in the Czech Republic in the context of fake news

Media in the Czech Republic have the least reliance among all public institutions. The level of trust in them varies between 30 and 35%, depending on the type of media, and trust in alternative media increases (30%) (Tuček 2017).

There are many reasons for such a situation. One of the more important is that the scenery of the Czech media has changed dramatically thanks to Andrej Babiš – a businessman, who first dominated the Czech business, then the media, now politics. Babiš is called "Czech Trump", and before starting political activity, he had significant business influence – he is the second richest man in the Czech Republic. In 2013, he bought the Mafra[2] media group – the publisher of the majority of the Czech press and

[2] Purchase of Mafra by Andrej Babiš was associated with the beginning of his political activities. A millionaire has connected to his business empire a group of new and traditional media. Mafra are

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the largest daily newspapers such as *Mladá Fronta DNES*, *Lidové noviny* and *Metro*. Likewise to business, he quickly began to build a Mafra monopoly on the Czech market, which resulted in marginalization of smaller, non-owned by syndicate media[3]. What is important, Mafra's media became non-objective, actively participating in the election campaign of the billionaire and its ANO party. According to the Reporters Without Borders report from 2017, the concentration of media ownership in the Czech Republic has reached a critical level (Reporters Without Borders 2018). Many journalists who once worked in the concern, in protest against this situation have left and got involved in the fact-check projects.

Although Babiš is no longer formally in power[4], the Mafra media continued to run a campaign for the Czech parliament in 2017, which presented the billionaire and his party ANO only in a good light. The campaign proved to be effective – Babiš won the election. Although the ANO group does not have a parliamentary majority (it has received almost 30% of support), it exercises power with Prime Minister Babiš, though earlier as a deputy he has lost immunity and criminal prosecution is being continued against him.

Another reason for the lack of trust in the media is the international situation, which has a significant impact on domestic affairs. Czech intelligence services amongst the 10 biggest threats to the state mentioned a hybrid war which combines conventional and other military means using non-military tools (BIS 2015, 2016). This is about Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns (in fact located in the category of information war[5]), which are considered one of the biggest threats to Czech internal security. Czech counterintelligence – the BIS Intelligence Agency (*Bezpečnostní*

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the largest newspapers in the Czech Republic such as the ones mentioned above, commercial radio and television (e.g. TV ÓČKO) and numerous Internet portals, including opinion-forming iDNES, lidovky.cz, or projects related to e-commerce and cellular network and dozens of other media-related ventures. Mafra media have a great influence on Czech public opinion, hence the controversies appeared and there are attempts to limit their impact.

[3] The activities of Babiš in the field of business and politics are part of the principles of berlusconization and media oligarchization (see: Pešek 2013).

[4] In 2017, a law on the conflict of interests was passed prohibiting members of the Czech government from owning more than 25% of shares in the media and related companies. Their enterprises cannot apply for state subsidies or public procurement. The act was called "lex Babiš" because it was supposed to force Mafra's owner to give control over his influential newspapers and other media if he wanted to sit in the government (see: Groszkowski 2017). The billionaire transferred the official management of the Mafra corporation to the trust fund to avoid a statutory conflict of interest. Babiš is no longer the owner of the group, but has maintained much influence. This is evidenced by, among others, the "tape scandal" in which the billionaire was recorded, issuing instructions to the journalists group about embarrassment of Prime Minister Sobotka.

[5] Information war will be understood as actions taken to achieve information advantage in relation to the opponent. It will be the information processing and fabrication, influencing information systems and computer networks, which is supposed to lead to disinformation in societies and their mutual antagonism (see: Lelonek 2017; Łuczuk 2017).

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a informační služba) – monitors attempts to build a network of people with similar views among politicians, public officials and lobbyists. It points out that what happens about influencing politics and Czech society is the result of a large-scale hybrid war conducted mainly against Ukraine, NATO and the EU. In the 2015 and 2016 BIS reports (BIS 2015, 2016), it is emphasized that Russian information operations are conducted in the Czech Republic, and focus on:

1. Strengthening pro-Russian groups and parties – today mainly populists, nationalists, xenophobes and "against the system" people, e.g. Andrej Babiš ANO 2011, supporters of President Miloš Zeman, SPD Tomio Okamura, etc.

2. Weakening the strength of the Czech media and their information potential by powering disinformation and spreading propaganda – mainly related to EU and NATO policy. It is done mainly with the support of active pro-Kremlin websites spreading fake news. The best known are: parlamentnílisty.cz (has nothing to do with the Czech parliament, which distanced itself from the website), AC24.cz, prvnízprávy.cz, aeronet.cz, novárepublika.cz, sputnik.cz (Czech branch of the international media center of the Kremlin), světkolemnás.cz, lajkit.cz, czechfreepress.cz, českoaktuálně.cz, svobodnénoviny.eu (in total, about 40[6] have been identified so far), and active groups on Facebook and others[7].

3. Fuelling social tensions – polarization of society, mainly by promoting social attitudes related to Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, fuelling distrust to democracy, division into "Prague and the province", or preservation of the conservative family model.

These operations are carried out through a campaign of disinformation, manipulation of public opinion, agents' activities affecting decision makers and cyberattacks[8]. In such a situation, the growth of polarization of Czech society, conflicts and fragmentation of the Czech political scene as well as high popularity of fake news content is noticed. According to STEM, 25.5% of Czechs believe in disinformation and 24.5% believe alternative sources of information (Janda, Blažejovská, Vlasák 2016). The described processes greatly influenced the election success of the populist party ANO, which today exercises power in the coalition of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) with the support of President Zeman's party – the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM).

[6] Disinformation and manipulation are spread, mainly proclaiming worship for Russia. Lack of transparency – no names of authors and owners are given, sources of financing are not indicated. Wider discussion of these websites in Janda and Víchová (2016).

[7] Not only Czech intelligence deals with identifying websites that disseminate fake news. An interesting project is the website kospiratori.sk based on the initiative of the Slovak advertising industry. It created a list of websites that publish unreliable material that manipulate and misinform in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. To date, 117 pages have been identified (see: konspiratori.sk 2018).

[8] More about this subject – Janda and Víchová (2017).

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Fact-check in the Czech Republic

Up against threats to the quality of public debate and the rise of disinformation in recent years, several projects have been created in the Czech Republic that attempt to counteract this trend. In comparison with other Visegrad Group countries, the Czech Republic became the unquestioned leader. Even though the first advanced fact-checking portal (demagog.sk) was created in Slovakia, not many organizations of this kind developed there, as it happened in Czechia[9]. In other Visegrad Group countries, the situation is similar, as there are not many fact-checking initiatives: the portals on investigative journalism and news verification, namely OKO.press and demagog.pl were created in 2016 in Poland. In Hungary, there is a portal urbanlegends.hu that verifies urban myths, rumors, frauds and also presents how to verify such news. However, it is an exception as the attempts to create other initiatives dealing with politics were blocked by Victor Orbán's government. Thus, the Czech case is an exception and the development of fact-checking initiative may be observed.

The portals described not only carry out activities related to fact-checking, but also deal with education and research, create cooperation networks with schools (especially with universities), experts, journalists, other non-profit organizations both in the country and abroad. The weakness of this activity is that it largely depends on external financing, especially from European, American or regional foundations. However, on the other hand, it gives independence from local authorities, which is important for its credibility and quality. An important factor is also the fact that the majority of Czech fact-checkers originate from the journalistic environment, which is why cooperation with the media is easier for them – not only due to the previously acquired professional skills, but also the knowledge of the environment and the social ties that connect them (this is particularly seen in the case of the manipulatori.cz described hereinafter).

The leading fact-check portals in the Czech Republic are manipulatori.cz and demagog.cz, but it is also worth to mention other initiatives briefly. These are most often portals that attempt to verify information appearing in the public sphere. The best known are[10]:

1. Hoax.cz (created in 2000) – the oldest project. It publicizes and explains the mechanisms of counterfeiting going around the Internet (phishing scams, lotteries, fake viruses, etc.). The database of scams is updated regularly. It has a section delegated to falsehood and manipulations in politics. There is no page on Facebook and Twitter.

2. StopFake.cz (multilingual, international project created in Kiev, 2014) in the Czech version. It disproves false information, provides facts related to the conflict in Ukraine. It is also a platform for analysing Russian propaganda on the international forum. In the case of StopFake.cz, this is the tracking of Russian propaganda and

[9] More about fact-checking in Central Europe – EUFACTCHECK (2018), visegrad.info (2018).

[10] Data from social media Facebook and Twitter – status as of 7 September 2018.

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fake news cases mainly in the Czech Republic. Facebook: 1,587 people like it, 1,608 followers; Twitter: 372 followers.

3. HlídacíPes.org (2014) – an information medium created in opposition to Andrej Babiš and media oligarchization. Project Institute of Independent Journalism founded by journalists once related to with Mafra and public media. It mainly deals with the abuse of power, the problems of democratic development, the influence of foreign intelligence in the Czech Republic (mainly Russia and China), and above all, investigative and fact-checking journalism. Facebook: 15,339 people like it, 16,026 followers; Twitter: 11,900 followers.

4. Zvolsi.info (2016) – an educational project for youth in the Czech Republic and Slovakia created in the Department of Political Sciences of the Masaryk University in Brno. Type of online guide in the field of disinformation and propaganda for young people, learning skilful and conscious (critical) use of the media – with emphasis on checking information, identifying fake news. Facebook: 13,570 people like it, 13,719 followers; Twitter: no page.

5. Factczech.org (2016, cooperates with manipulatori.cz) – an educational vortal to help journalists identify and verify fake news. It runs educational campaigns for citizens. Facebook: 444 people like it, 464 followers; Twitter: 198 followers.

6. Kremlinwatch.eu (2014) – a think tank dealing with Russian propaganda, disinformation and Kremlin influence in the Czech Republic and the European Union. Facebook: 2,813 people like it, 2,902 followers; Twitter: 6,482 followers.

7. Neovlivni.cz (2015) – database of contents from the Kremlin in the Czech Republic. It includes not only pure and overt propaganda, but also media that offer unofficial Russian propaganda subjects in the world in standard articles. It deals with investigative journalism, and recently with political and business connotations of Andrej Babiš. Facebook: 19,256 people like it, 20,325 followers; Twitter: 17,700 followers.

Although most of them are initiatives with relatively little experience, based on the observation of interest in social media, it can be concluded that they gain systematically more and more public and increase significance in public discourse.

Demagog.cz

The projects presented above, dealing with identifying and counteracting fake news, are a very interesting phenomenon and require greater attention. However, due to the subject of the following article, the focus was on two leading projects directly involved in the issues discussed here. The first of these is the demagog.cz portal – a leading fact-check project in the Czech Republic operating since February 2012.

The project is directly related to the demagog.sk initiative and functions as a slightly modified version of the Slovak original. It did not require too many changes due to the fact that it operates in quite a similar way in terms of cultural and historical

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aspects of the countries[11]. Demagog.sk was a pioneer among fact-checkers in Central Europe. It was established in 2010 in Slovakia on the initiative of Mateja Hruška and Ondrej Lunter – students from the Masaryk University in Brno – and the Slovak Governance Institute – SGI (Inštitút pre good spravlovanje spoločnosť) (Hincová Frankovská, Sloboda, Turcsányi 2015). The immediate causes the portal was created were the parliamentary election (spring of 2010), the formation of the nationalist Slovakian National Party (SNS) and an election campaign largely based on populism and emotions. Its creation was inspired by the activities of such organizations as PolitiFact, FactCheck.org and The Washington Post Fact Checker. The project quickly succeeded – it was often quoted in the media, its methodology was available in the Czech Republic, Georgia and Poland.

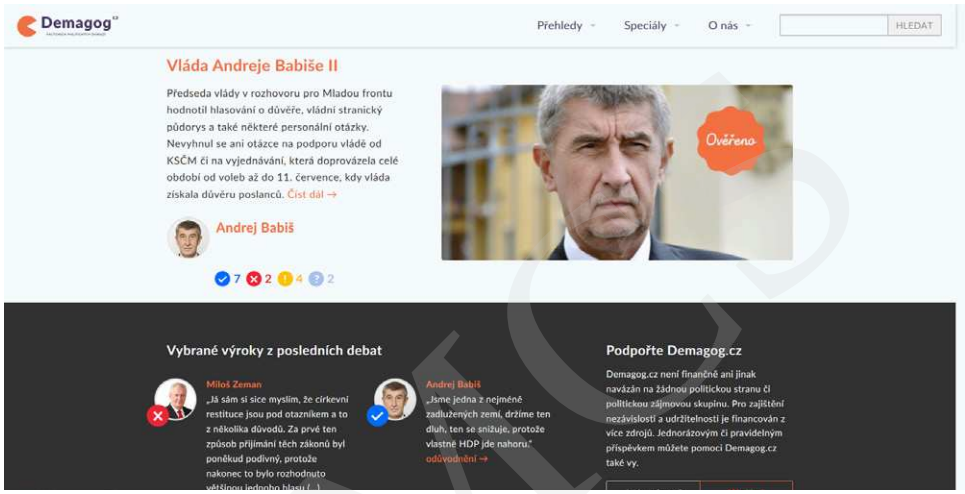
Demagog.cz, like the Slovak prototype, is a non-governmental and non-profit organization, largely based on the work of volunteers coming from Czech universities and declaring that they are not affiliated with any political option. Demagog.sk, like its Polish and Czech versions, is financed, among others, from the International Visegrad Fund of the European Commission, Open Society Fund, the Czech national agency Mládež v akci, the US embassy grants. In its ethical code, the demagog.cz team declares that it is not affiliated with any political party (Demagog.cz 2016).

As it is declared by the founders of the Czech project, it aims to study long-term changes in public discourse, public sphere education, and it helps to understand the news in the age of information chaos in the Czech Republic. This applies in particular to the verification of what the Czech political elite is saying: pointing to truthless and manipulative expressions that limit public space (Demagog.cz 2018a). The creators of demagog.cz declare that they are independent and use publicly available methods, taking into account the standards of journalistic work (Demagog.cz 2016). They also do not have institutional background like Slovaks (SGI) and formal links with such institutions as, for example, the Masaryk University or the Charles University in Prague, where most volunteers and co-workers come from. Its activity is mainly based on the work of volunteers, using available Internet platforms, e.g. Facebook or e-mail. Gratification is not money, but the possibility of apprenticeships and internships, education and creation of social capital. At the head of the project there are 10 people, 34 volunteers, trainees cooperate with them (Demagog.cz 2017c). Demagog.cz is a member of, among others, International Fact-Checking Network.

[11] The situation was adequate for other countries of the Visegrad Group – Poland and Hungary. In 2014, in relation to elections to the European Parliament, attempts were made to create a demagogue version in the entire Visegrad Group. There was established (existing until today) a Polish version of demagog.org.pl on the initiative of the Jagiellonian Club in Cracow. In 2015, the demagog.hu – a Hungarian version (created by the students from the Budapest University Eötvös Loránd) – was to be launched, but due to organizational and political reasons, the project was suspended.

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Photo 1. Home page of demagog.cz



Source: demagog.cz, 15.06.2018.

Methodology of demagog.cz

Demagog.cz deals with public statements of politicians and other public figures, especially in political discussions. Substantive and objectively verifiable statements are examined and the aim is to check their truthfulness. Political, ideological and value judgments, predictions of some actions are not evaluated. It is justified because, on the one hand, as an organization declaring to construct a civil society, it would be limitation to freedom of speech, and on the other hand, it is difficult to grade evaluating judgments and set a kind of "norm" – what is right or wrong. As it is declared by the creators of the portal, they want to disprove falsehood and teach critical thinking. Therefore, the facts, data, numbers, historical events, statements, past actions of public persons (mainly votes in the parliament or opinions on specific topics), which are objectively verifiable, are examined. The website uses up-to-date and public sources – primarily public online resources, professional studies and publications (Demagog.cz 2014). As its creators declare, expert topics are discussed with experts and each justification goes through the control of two other people (experts in a field) who check the actual and methodological accuracy, correctness, coherence and logic of the statement (Demagog.cz 2014).

The analysis is based on legal provisions and studies. Due to the work of volunteers, statements of politicians are verified, the results are compared with the available objective data and classified into four categories: real, false, misleading (manipulation), unverifiable (Demagog.cz 2014).

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1. False – it is stated if the statement is inconsistent with commonly available data or information. It can also mislead the public by using incorrect indicators, selective data or providing information without pointing to sources or in the wrong context.

2. True – using the appropriate information in the correct context, coming from a reliable and representative source. Its credibility must be confirmed by a reliable and representative source. It is allowed to examine not entirely true statements with a slight deviation: the figures have a 10% threshold, "unless it is a number in which we do not tolerate inaccuracies (number of deputies) or when the politician itself ensures that it is accurate" (Demagog.cz 2014).

3. Misleading (manipulation) – intentional actions using statements between true and false, using the right facts, but in a faux or incomplete dimension, misrepresented, taken out of the original context. These are non-factorial arguments, fake conclusions, incorrect comparisons, using, for example, incomparable or incomplete data.

4. Unverifiable – information that cannot be proofread anywhere in publicly available sources. They cannot be confirmed or excluded, they contain statements that are too general or imprecise.

Demagog.cz content

The portal analyzes: information appearing in very popular and significant for the public opinion programs, such as *Otázky Václava Moravce* broadcasted on public television – ČT1; debates and current journalistic programs on TV Nova, Prima TV and Czech public radio ČRo; political discussions and interviews contained in *MF DNES* or *iDNES.cz* and other printed newspapers and websites. The material is very extensive: in 2016, 1,543 statements were analyzed, and in 2017 – 1,239.

Table 1. The most popular politicians on demagog.cz from January to June 2018 (Demagog.cz 2018b) (as of 14 June 2018)

Politicians and their formation	Number of statements	True	False	Misleading	Unverifiable
Miloš Zeman – Strana práv občanů (SPO)	663	364	142	72	83
Jiří Drahoš – Nez.	140	111	7	3	19
Andrej Babiš – ANO 2011	577	258	94	90	133
Ivan Bartoš – Česká pirátská strana	115	82	9	10	14
Jiří Pospíšil –TOP 09	154	99	17	18	20
Total	1,649	914	269	193	269

Source: Author's own study.

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The website is divided into three sections: "Reports", "Special events", and "About us". Reports contain short statements and longer analyses of the current monitoring process of policy statements. Special summary reports were published in special events: "Promises of the ruling coalition. Special analysis of the election promises of the government of M. Sobotka (2014–2017)" (Demagog.cz 2017b) and "Promises of Miloš Zeman" (Plaček, Kunc 2018). The government of Prime Minister Sobotka (social democrat coalition, ANO and KDU-ČSL movement) was analysed in terms of what politicians were doing and their statements were reviewed. The analysis was carried out on August 20, 2017 after the last meeting of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament. This was related to the parliamentary elections of 20 and 21 October 2017. According to the declaration, the authors of the report wanted to convince how the coalition fulfilled the obligations set at the beginning of the term of office (included in the program statements and the coalition agreement). 156 promises have been identified in various areas concerning: security, law, health, foreign policy, economy, education, agriculture and environmental protection. It was examined whether the rulers were able to fulfil these promises on the basis of objective information. The promises were divided into: fulfilled, unfulfilled, and partly fulfilled (Demagog.cz 2017a):

– fulfilled, e.g. "We will liquidate the second pension pillar" (which happened);

– unfulfilled, for example, regarding the lack of increase in the tax duties for individuals or the fact that the government will attempt to improve legislation – talking about the organization of the referendum that did not happen. The authors point out that it was a very vague promise, where there was no specificity and it could not be verified objectively;

– partly fulfilled – the government promised wider access to culture and the introduction of free enter days to the monuments. In fact, they have not been introduced in case of all monuments.

The report resulted in the statement that the government of Prime Minister Sobotka met 51% (69 promises), did not meet 38% (63), and partly fulfilled 11% (14) from what he described in the coalition agreement.

In the second report, published on 23 January 2018, 41 pre-election promises made by Miloš Zeman were examined. They were submitted during the election campaign 5 years earlier when he was elected president for the first time. They were divided into three categories: promises regarding staff changes, constitutional competence of the president, and others. Types of promises:

– fulfilled (*splněné sliby*) (20 promises) – they concerned, for example, greater activity of the president when it comes to participation in nominations of constitutional court judges or district courts judges;

– violated (*porušené sliby*) (14) – promises that the president has violated (he did not fulfill as promised) or promises he fulfilled, but in a different form, time and scope than he undertook, e.g. not interfering in the ambassadors nomination or not considering advisors who are not experts in a specific field;

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– unfeasible (*nesplnitelné sliby*) (3) – those that the president could not meet due to limitations of his constitutional power or other restrictions, for example, in the promise to pass the law on proving the origin of income and property, including the possibility of confiscating illegally obtained assets – it was not possible, because such eligibilities have the legislature;

– unrealized (*nerealizované sliby*) (4) – the president did not take any steps to fulfill the promise, or there were no circumstances that would allow him to refer to the promise, for example, the one concerning tuition fees in schools or premature resignation of the president from office.

The portal's activities are transparent, which can be seen in the "About us" section containing complete information:

– What is Demagog.cz? (cz. *Co je to Demagog.cz?*) – about the project, its creation and people creating it;

– How do we rate? (cz. *Jak hodnotíme?*) – research and methodology;

– Guidelines for readers (part of cz. *Výtky k hodnocení*) – about where and how readers can contact in the case of verifying information, which they want to provide to the portal;

– Finance;

– Ethical code;

– Frequently asked questions;

– Workshops offer;

– *Czech this out!* – a project to strengthen cooperation between selected non-profit organizations in the region (Ukraine, Slovakia, Poland), to exchange experience and find ways to improve the project's internal functioning;

– Contact.

As mentioned before, demagog.cz is a copy of the Slovak project – both when it comes to evaluation methods, as well as organization of work, or web design. Czech employees, just like Polish ones, were trained by Slovaks. However, despite this, a large autonomy is given for each national version, which means that everyone can create their own applications and versions of the site that simplifies work in a given area (for example, in the case of demagog.org.pl[12]). The aim is to create tools that will enable automatic detection of false information using artificial intelligence as well as a wider usage of network and volunteering through social media. According to the chairman of the board demagog.org.pl Małgorzata Kilian, "We are also working on solutions that would place our fact-checking directly during the reading of information articles. (…) Readers would not have to go to our website to find out if the statement is false or not" (Rudnik 2017). This is particularly about how to share the evaluations posted on Dema-

[12] There is less data and statistics in the Polish and Czech versions, they are less developed than the Slovak one. The Polish demagogue analyzes not only the statements of politicians but also their electoral programs.

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gog using the Share the Facts widget (also used by PolitiFact.com, The Washington Post and FactCheck.org). It makes it possible to spread reports on the Internet, i.e. it makes it easier for web-search engines to improve content recognition and distribution. The information is displayed as verified on Google and analyses are automatically transferred to the Twitter profile from Share the Facts.[13]

Manipulatori.cz

A completely different fact-checking venture is the Czech portal manipulatori.cz, founded and run mainly by journalists Petr Nutil and Ondřej Fér. The project was created in 2015 in the peak of the European refugee crisis, when a wave of false or distorted information about the subject came through the Czech media. It is more an information than research medium but has a significant share in identifying and describing all phenomena related to fake news, still financed from own resources and advertising. It is a media platform focused primarily on social and political issues from the very extensively understood public sphere. It contains analytical and journalistic texts on manipulation, propaganda and counterfeiting present in the Czech and foreign media. With support of the publicly available sources, documents and facts, it attempts to check and unmask false information. The content of the site is constantly updated and contains data related to disinformation both in the Czech Republic and abroad. So far, over 700 texts have been published (as of 8 September 2018).

Photo 2. Home page of manipulatori.cz



Source: manipulatori.cz, 15.06.2018.

[13] See: Share the Facts, http://www.sharethefacts.org/, 15.06.2018.

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Manipulatori.cz is focused on following public lies, distorting facts, spreading hatred and describing issues related to widely understood political marketing and public relations. It is declared that its authors want to support a critical debate on social and political events in the Czech Republic, seek to improve public discourse and also want to follow psychological phenomena that "silent intellect in man, arouses evil and irrationality" (Manipulatori.cz 2018).

The portal is divided into the following sections (as of 18 June 2018):

1. Studies (*studie*) (88 texts) – analyses, reports, discussions and comments, e.g. the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic report summarizing the situation regarding the political development of the extremist scene or a 6-part text on the specifics of war propaganda (Větrovec 2015).

2. Fake news (*hoaxy*) (107) – defined by the authors as tricks, *hocus pocus* (Manipulatori.cz 2015). It is a database containing an explanation and justification as to why they were considered to be fake news. It concerns such topics as, for example, "Demonstration against Babia was paid by George Soros' OSF", "Immigrants in Germany demolished the city".

3. People (32) – descriptions or interviews with influential people of the political and public sphere in relation to fake news, for example, a description of false information about the career of the presidential candidate in 2018 by Jirí Drahoš (Cemper 2018b).

4. Politics (107) – deals with political campaigns and politicians, here is one of the most popular texts about politician Tomio Okamura, who along with his xenophobic party SPD[14], wants to spread the newspaper *Na vlastní oči* in Prague. The authors of the portal expose the publisher, who in the earlier elections took part in political and electoral campaigns (in 2016 and 2017) misleading public opinion, and who is probably related to Russia (Cemper 2018c).

5. Psychology (30) – the most educational part of the website, describes the mechanisms of social psychology related to false information, ways of social manipulation, e.g. the Lucifer effect, lack of ethics in psychology, or how radical attitudes are developing inside people.

6. Communication – 78 texts on the subject of widely understood social and political communication, election campaigns, social media, rhetoric, social changes, media content especially with taking into account fake news, e.g. the text on: *havlismus* or the political heritage of Vaclav Havel (Šmíd 2015) in the Czech media and political debate; reasons for spreading deceptions (HateFree Culture 2016); Trump's tactics regarding fake news (Cemper 2017).

7. History – 35 texts mostly about the history of the Czech Republic and Czechoslovakia regarding censorship, unknown facts, and the history of propaganda, e.g. the text about the pogrom of Jews in 1945 (Moderní Dějiny 2015a); anti-American

[14] The SPD in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies won in 2017 over 10% of votes.

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propaganda in communism (Moderní Dějiny 2015b); the oldest Czech fake news (Nutil 2017a).

8. Tech (47) – contains texts on technological issues, mainly concerning the Internet and Internet community, e.g. texts about: the e-shop cheating customers (Nutil 2017b), the analysis and identification of extremist groups on Facebook (Šlerka 2016), discussions on the *iDNES* newspaper portal about the links between Russia's supporters and those who are against Islam (Pilnáček 2015).

9. Monitoring – 83 reports on specific events, activities in the public sphere, e.g. reports on: the fact that Twitter has begun blocking disinformation websites (Cemper 2018a); on the media enjoying the highest trust in the Czech Republic (Proti projevům nenávisti 2018a); on the activities of Nela Lisková – advocate of Miloš Zeman, the Donetsk Republic and the fight against Black's (Proti projevům nenávisti 2018b).

10. Lexicon – is a constantly updated set of 41 terms. They cover basic concepts and passwords that appear throughout the portal, such as: hoax, sources and statistics, books, facts, conspiracy theories, etc. All contain links to individual texts on the site.

11. Video – 21 reports from events, speeches, fragments of videoblogs, instructional videos, e.g. lecture on critical thinking as a skill (Redakce manipulatori.cz 2016), guide to visual verification of photos and videos (Proti projevům nenávisti 2018c), report from the conference on manipulation of fear and civic engagement (Redakce manipulatori.cz 2016).

12. From the editorial office – team of editorial office, information about the portal in the media, the possibility of an apprenticeship, editorial support by notifying about fake news by readers, page likes on Facebook, followers on Twitter or financial support for the portal, which is maintained with its own funds and advertising.

Manipulatori.cz cooperates and supports similar projects such as hoax.cz, Watchdog or Faktus. In 2017, the portal joined forces with the Proti projevům nenávisti (Against Hate Display) research team established in 2013 (Proti projevům nenávisti 2018d), hatefree.cz which tracks the manifestations of racism, homophobia, xenophobia, discrimination and hate speech, and which, in a special section, deals with fake news.

Another initiative of the portal is the creation of the popravdě.cz party before the second round of presidential elections in 2018. The team headed by Petr Nutil followed disinformation during the presidential campaign. It found 39 lies about Jiří Drahoš, 15 lies about Miloš Zeman, 13 lies during TV debates. The initiative resulted in relatively high media interest, but it was a short-term project, because it included two weeks of the campaign between the first and the second round – from 12 and 13 January 2018 to 26 and 27 January 2018. Currently, the team declares that it deals with monitoring the impact of e-mails spreading disinformation and actively fights against their spread.[15]

[15] Facebook: 1,313 people like it (1,391 followers). Twitter: popravde.cz does not have a profile.

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Reaction

Every day, Czech politicians refer to information posted on both of the websites discussed, most often in social networks or through comments on the Internet. They also correspond to traditional media, sometimes by direct statements or official responses in the form of press releases or letters. Less often by e-mail or telephone. These reactions are described in both projects on an ongoing basis. Demagog.cz does so on the occasion of the assessment of further statements or in discussions – on the website https://demagog.cz/diske/, on Facebook and Twitter. Manipulatori.cz has a separate department – http://manipulatori.cz/reakce-na-clanky/.

One of the most interesting reactions of politicians is the website established during the parliamentary election campaign by Andrej Babiš (mujdemagog.cz) under the significant slogan: "Do not believe what they said about me. None of this is true" [*Neuvěříte, co o mně řekli. A nic z toho není pravda*]. The then candidate for the prime minister of the Czech Republic, following demagog.cz, wanted (on his own) to make the fact-check by criticizing the statements of the adversaries and evaluate their truthfulness (Břešťan 2017). In fact, it has nothing in common with fact-check – no sources of information are given, chosen without specific criteria, Babiš quotes himself, he takes information from the context.

Undoubtedly, the interest in analyses of the discussed portals is increasing. It was particularly visible in 2017, when the government of Prime Minister Sobotka had serious issues with maintaining the coalition, and more importantly, with an ongoing parliamentary and presidential electoral campaign, which, in general, increased interest in politics.

Table 2. Presence of information related directly to demagog.cz and manipulatori.cz in the Google search engine (as of 15 June 2018)

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Demagog.cz	57	65	175	163
Manipulátoři.cz	2	8	26	33

Source: Author's own studies.

In 2018, the turnout of news in the media on the discussed analyses is even more intensive. It happened due to the January presidential election, issues in forming a new government by the winner of the elections of Andrej Babiš (ANO 2011) and the increasing polarization of the Czech society (see: Noch 2018; Dębiec 2018).

The events of recent years have caused that Czech Republic citizens' interest in social media increased, which is the effect of the previously described less and less trust in traditional media and changes in the technology usage. This trend can be noticed on the example of Facebook and Twitter.

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Table 3. Interests of demagog.cz and maniulatori.cz in social media

Date	Demagog.cz		Manipulatori.cz	
	Facebook	Twitter	Facebook	Twitter
15 June 2018	29,251 people like it; 29,768 followers	17,012	14,307 people like it; 14,856 followers	1,068
11 September 2018	29,339 people like it; 29,873 followers	17,600	15,029 people like it; 15,635 followers	1,210

Source: Author's own study.

Based on the presented data, it can be predicted that social interest will not descend in the near future. Probably fact-check services, such as manipulatori.cz, will upgrade their offer and, thus, maintain interest of both politicians and other recipients.

Summary

The Czech example shows that the combination of disinformation and socio-political events can seriously undermine the quality of public debate. Fact-check services are a response to these processes and an attempt to stop them or at least publicize them. These portals, for sure, are to educate and inform, affect public opinion, but also try to enforce greater responsibility for the content of political public speeches and, thus, improve public debate. However, due to the speed of showing up information, the "manual" verification is no longer enough. Tools that will automatically pick up disinformation must be implemented, e.g. using machine learning or networking in various subjects.

The variety of fact-based sites in the Czech Republic can be considered a very interesting phenomenon, created as a result of a complicated politics confluence: information war, the issue of changes in contemporary media, economic and social problems. Compared to other countries from the Visegrad Group, these types of sites have developed to a significant extent, which is understandable taking into account the complex, socio-political situation of the Czech Republic. They also reflect the development of civil society. It seems like a kind of testing ground for the creators of fake news and their opponents. As in the optic lens, there can be observed trends that occur all over the world, and thus, on the one hand, the fight with special services (mainly Russia, but China or other countries should not be forgotten) trying to influence public opinion and introduce the so-called reflexive management (see: Wojnowski 2015) – using techniques of manipulation and control of society. On the other hand, there are fact checkers (of different provenance)[16] who try to oppose this. It is difficult to accurately

[16] It was not the purpose of this text to identify the origin of the creators of anti-fake websites, but for some of them the connection with secret services of other countries is being discussed. It is the

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estimate the impact of both parties on socio-political processes, because the usage of fake news in the public sphere in such a wide dimension is quite a new and very dynamically developing phenomenon. Undoubtedly, fact-checking will become more and more important for the values maintenance by democratic societies, especially since it is an activity conducted under the conditions of a multidimensional information war, whose techniques and strategies are being constantly improved.

Due to the fact that fact-checking is a fairly new phenomenon, there is the lack of complex comparative data and there are a lot of questions to be answered in future, hopefully. The development of Czech fact-checking organizations is the effective example of making public opinion aware of: the gravity of the fake news problem, the issue of verifying facts and conveying them to the public (as the interest is growing) and also emphasizing the importance of education, critical thinking and identifying disinformation. It is indicated by broad educational projects for young people (among which the most famous is zvolsi.info action), or creation of a unit that takes care of verifying fake news and publishing information about them at the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic in 2017.

The technology development determines the growing need for fact-checking portals development. As has been mentioned before, the paper is the starting point for description of this new and very diverse phenomenon. Therefore, it is too soon to draw conclusions on its influence in the long term. In the further research it is advisable to pose the question of how they will cope with more and more excellent techniques of information and disinformation creation. Inevitably, facts will be verified on-line and this process will be automated as it will be hard for information recipients to cope with a huge amount of data. The question concerns the way it will influence the quality of public debate. Additionally, there are questions that should constitute the basis for future analyses: Will the fact-checking remain neutral and impartial or will it be used in political battle, manipulating of public opinion and hybrid wars? If so, what will the finance transparency of fact-checking organizations look like? How will the methodology and facts verification by experts change? What will be the role of journalists and volunteers in the process?

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case, for example, of the StopFake.org website, where accusations of connotation with secret services of Ukraine and the EU appeared.

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