

Report: Pro-Kremlin Disinformation about GRU Terrorist Attack in the Czech Republic

4 May 2021

Summary

On April 19, Semantic Visions (SV) published an early warning [diagnostic analysis](#) of how Czech disinformation media reacted to the government announcement that Russian military intelligence (GRU) was responsible for a deadly munitions depot explosion in the Czech town of Vrbětice in 2014. Preliminary data showed a dramatic surge in disinformation about the news within the first 24 hours of Prime Minister Babiš's announcement, notably displacing COVID-19 as the leading topic of disinformation for the first time in several months.

An updated analysis shows that this trend has continued over the last ten days as the diplomatic clash between Prague and Moscow has escalated. This report summarizes the evolution of the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign throughout this period, focusing on the response of Czech disinformation sources as well as domestic Russian media. The key takeaways are summarized below.

- Czech disinformation sources are pushing staunchly pro-Kremlin coverage of the GRU scandal, in line with their established history of Kremlin-aligned and anti-Western agitation. These sources frequently amplify Russian disinformation narratives and official Kremlin talking points, and support domestic political actors that advocate populist, pro-Kremlin positions, like the far-right SPD party, the Communist Party (KSČM), and the notoriously Putin-friendly Czech president, Miloš Zeman. However, despite their pro-Kremlin orientation, the majority of these sites have no evident links to the Russian state, and do not produce content in coordination with Russian media. Their primary drivers are profit (i.e., ad revenues) and social influence.
- Specifically, Czech disinformation media have sought to ridicule and discredit the official government account of what happened in Vrbětice, in particular the evidence of Russia's involvement. To this end, they have offered several alternative explanations as well as conspiracy theories about the government's motivations for pointing the finger at the GRU, suggesting that it is a ploy to escalate the conflict between Russia and the West, instigated by the United States. Other key narratives have centered on questioning the timing of the news and attacking the competence and credibility of the Czech security services.

- The Russian disinformation response to the disclosure of the GRU's role in Vrbětice was immediate and has followed the same blueprint as in other cases where Russia's criminal activity has been exposed, like the annexation of Crimea and the Skripal poisoning. Russian officials and pro-government media deny any Russian involvement in the explosion and dismiss the Czech government's response as an attempt to score points in Washington's "war of sanctions". Indeed, the dominant narratives in Russian media alternatively attribute the scandal to US puppeteering in the Czech Republic and the alleged "Russophobia" of Czech authorities. In this context, there is a noteworthy difference in the negative coverage of Prime Minister Babiš's government, which has mandated the diplomatic expulsions and considers the GRU attack an act of state terrorism, and positive coverage of President Zeman, who has falsely claimed that there is no evidence of Russian intelligence involvement in the explosion.
- Pro-Kremlin disinformation efforts in both Russia and the Czech Republic received a significant boost from a speech by President Zeman, made on April 25, in which he contradicted the official Czech government position about the GRU's involvement and suggested instead that the explosion may have been caused by the mishandling of ammunition. The speech was heavily promoted by Russian-language media, which praised Zeman for not "caving in" to pressure from the United States. Czech disinformation websites likewise endorsed it as a "voice of reason" amid all the "Russophobic hysteria".
- The Kremlin's disinformation campaign is unlikely to subside quickly, considering the strategic interests are at stake. Beyond dealing a major blow to Russia's intelligence infrastructure in Europe and unifying Western allies in stronger opposition to Russian subversive activity, this latest scandal jeopardizes two of the Kremlin's key strategic objectives: 1) to win soft power points through the provision of the Sputnik V vaccine to more European countries, and 2) to secure the contract for the Czech Dukovany nuclear plant, worth more than 10 billion USD, on behalf of Rosatom. Such control of critical energy infrastructure is a key vector of Russian political and economic influence in Europe.

Methodology

The report utilizes data generated by Semantic Visions' military-grade open-source intelligence (OSINT) system, which collects and analyzes 90 percent of the world's online news content. Currently, the system processes and synthesizes over one million news articles per day across 12 languages, drawing from over 900,000 global sources. In addition to articles from established online media sources, Semantic Visions also collects and analyzes content from webpages, including blogs, that publish articles and news reports covering a wide variety of topics including politics, the economy, business, security, and science, among others.

Logically structured informative articles of this type contain an average of over 3,000 characters. When processed by Semantic Visions' semantic analytical system, this type of content facilitates more informative analysis than simple Tweets or other social media posts, which are

significantly shorter and often lack the logical structure necessary for accurate sentiment analysis. Recognizing clients' interest in social media trends, Semantic Visions does monitor online social networks indirectly. By applying the collective knowledge and intelligence of hundreds of thousands of editors and authors to the social media space, Semantic Visions is able to extract deeper meaning from online content than other analytic tools, focused exclusively on social media, can provide.

In the analytical process, Semantic Visions leverages its own database, which consists of three billion news articles and blogs and 80 TB of granular and precise metadata dating back to January 2008. The system incorporates three levels of data generation and analysis: 1. raw data aggregation: an automated and perpetual collection of web-based text content into a large dataset of articles and global sources; 2. semantic analysis: automatic content understanding of each individual article and its sentiment; 3. big data analysis: the capability to distinguish critical signals from irrelevant noise and thus derive knowledge from millions of articles existing in multiple languages.

During the ingestion of online content, originally unstructured data is transmuted into structured metadata, which are further analyzed by proprietary semantic analytical tools. The data are analyzed on multiple levels, both through a semantic analysis (the process of drawing meaning from text) of each individual article and through a big data analysis (finding patterns and correlations) of the collected masses of data.

Semantic Visions' technology mimics how the human brain decodes textual information – using a language, its morphology, meaning of words, and contexts. It is through this process that unique narratives are identified, and disinformation trends are uncovered – typically well before the themes emerge in the social media space.

This report leverages data in Czech, Russian, and English to evaluate the scale of the disinformation response to news of the GRU attack in the Czech Republic and Russia. It is supplemented with a qualitative analysis of the disinformation narratives deployed in both media contexts.

How it happened: [Timeline of events](#)

On Saturday, April 17, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš announced the expulsion of 18 Russian diplomats who the Czech security services had identified as operatives of the Russian GRU and SVR intelligence agencies. He cited “well-grounded suspicion” that Russian GRU unit 29155 was involved in the 2014 munitions site explosion in Vrbětice, which killed two Czech citizens. Unit 29155 is notorious for its foreign “sabotage and subversion” operations, and has been credibly linked to the assassination attempts of former GRU Colonel Sergei Skripal in 2018 and Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev in 2015.

The same day, Czech police announced a search for two suspected Russian agents in relation to the Vrbětice incident – the same two men, according to their passports, who carried out the Novichok poisoning against Sergei Skripal in the UK and were [identified by Bellingcat](#) as GRU operatives Aleksandr Mishkin and Anatoly Chepiga. Mishkin and Chepiga received Russia's highest state award, Hero of Russia, in December 2014, shortly after the Vrbětice operation. A

Bellingcat investigation further [revealed](#) that a total of six operatives from Unit 29155, including its commander, were directly or indirectly linked to the sabotage of the munitions site as part of a broader effort to undermine Ukraine's ability to procure weapons to defend against Russia's military offensive in eastern Ukraine.

On Sunday, April 18, Russia retaliated by expelling 20 diplomats from the Czech embassy in Moscow. The Russian foreign ministry denied any Russian involvement in the case, and denounced the Czech decision as "unprecedented" and a "hostile act" contrived to please the "masters across the pond".

On Monday, April 19, Prime Minister Babiš triggered public outrage during a second press conference, in which he said that Russia did not attack the Czech Republic, but rather just "the goods of a Bulgarian arms trader, who was probably selling these arms to parties fighting Russia". This interpretation of the attack was rejected by other Czech leaders, many of whom labeled it an act of state terrorism in violation of international law. Pro-Kremlin sources immediately capitalized on the gaffe: within minutes of the remarks, RT's homepage led with an article titled "Czech PM says Russia did NOT attack country, alleged blowing up of munition depot was 'not act of state terrorism'". Babiš clarified his comments the following day, apologizing for using the term "goods", and declared the attack a "heinous and completely unacceptable terrorist act".

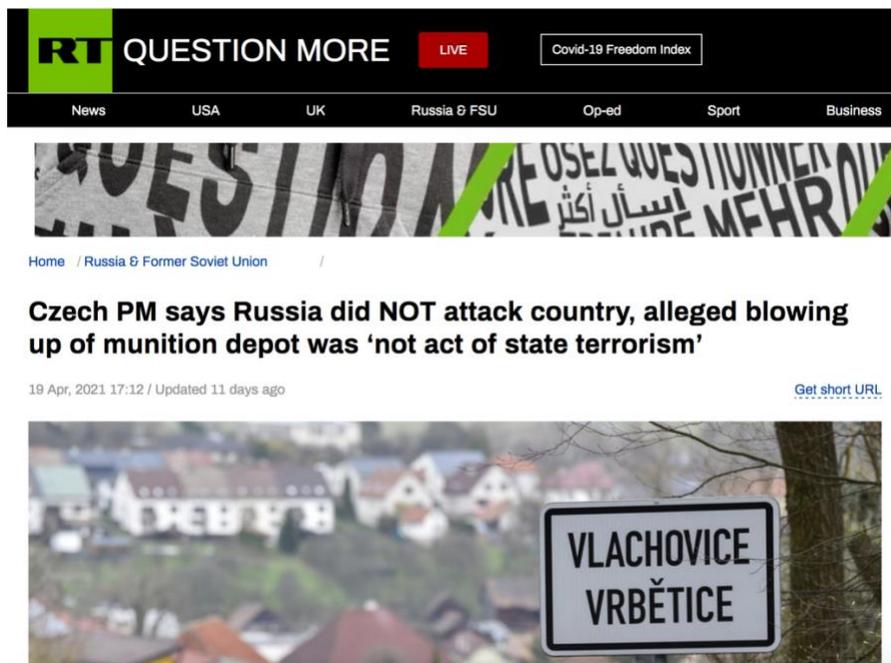


Figure 1: Screenshot of leading article on RT's homepage, April 19

On Wednesday, April 21, newly appointed Czech Foreign Minister Jakub Kulhánek issued an ultimatum to Russia in response to the escalatory expulsion of Czech embassy staff from Moscow. Kulhánek [stated](#) that unless Russia reverses the expulsion, the Czech Republic will downsize Russia's embassy in Prague to parity with the Czech embassy in Moscow. With no reaction from Moscow by the noon deadline on April 22, Kulhánek confirmed that some 60 Russian diplomatic staff must leave the country by the end of May. Russia's embassy in Prague

has long been the largest in the country – about twice as large as that of the United States – and, according to Czech counterintelligence, serves as a major hub for Russian intelligence activities throughout Central Europe thanks to its disproportionate size. This reduction, which will cut the Russian diplomatic presence to the same count of seven diplomats and 25 staff that the Czech Republic now has in Russia, is expected to deal a devastating blow to those capabilities. In response, Russia's foreign ministry demanded a further reduction in the Czech embassy's staffing level, claiming disparity in the numbers of local employees.

Meanwhile, during the night of April 20-21, Czech police forces executed raids across the Czech Republic against members of paramilitary organizations. At least five people were arrested on suspicion of traveling to eastern Ukraine to fight on behalf of Russian forces, or of planning such a trip. While Czech police said that these arrests were unrelated to the Vrbětice incident, the GRU operatives working under diplomatic cover who were expelled on April 17 were known to have had longstanding ties to Czech pro-Russian paramilitary organizations.

On Sunday, April 25, Czech President Miloš Zeman gave a televised speech in which he contradicted the government account of what happened in Vrbětice and said that there was “neither proof nor evidence” that GRU agents Mishkin and Chepiga were involved. Zeman is known for his longstanding pro-Kremlin attitudes and affinity for Russian President Vladimir Putin; his advocacy for Russian political and business interests in the Czech Republic has generated strong domestic opposition and even accusations of treason. In his 11-minute national address, Zeman claimed that there are two possible theories about what caused the 2014 explosion: either that Russian intelligence was indeed involved, or that the blast was caused by improper handling of ammunition, which authorities surmised in the original investigation.

In response to Zeman's comments, the Czech government reiterated that the evidence demonstrating the GRU's involvement in the attack is “very convincing”. Prime Minister Babiš clarified that the government is pursuing only one line of investigation based on this evidence. Opposition leaders accused the president of undermining national security and spreading disinformation on behalf of Russia. Indeed, as this analysis shows, Zeman's remarks have provided significant fodder for pro-Kremlin disinformation sources in the Czech Republic as well as Russian domestic media.

The disinformation campaign in the Czech Republic

The Czech disinformation ecosystem is characterized by a strongly pro-Kremlin slant: Czech sources frequently amplify Russian disinformation narratives and official Kremlin talking points, as well as promote domestic political actors that advocate pro-Russian positions (e.g., President Zeman and his allies, representatives of the far-right SPD party and the communist KSČM party). Previous pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns in the Czech Republic have seen domestic disinformation outlets echo the same deceptive narratives pushed by Russian media, as demonstrated for instance during last year's diplomatic spat [surrounding the statue](#) of Soviet Marshal Konev in Prague.

The present pro-Kremlin campaign that is taking shape around Vrbětice follows the same pattern: Czech disinformation outlets are framing their coverage of the incident in explicitly pro-Kremlin terms, and utilizing the same manipulative tactics that are characteristic of the Russian disinformation playbook. This approach is popularly known as the [4D model](#): Dismiss the critic, Distort the facts, Distract from the main point, and Dismay the audience. However, while Czech-language Russian sources like Sputnik News also contribute to the milieu, domestic Czech disinformation websites do not produce content in any apparent coordination with Russian sources. Indeed, Czech disinformation content often tends to be more extreme and unsophisticated than its Russian counterpart; at times, its militant conspiracism even contradicts the messaging of Russian state media.

According to SV data, a network of approximately 20 websites is responsible for 90% of all the disinformation content on the Czech internet. Of these sites, only one – the Czech-language arm of Sputnik News – has established links to the Russian state.

Understanding the Czech Disinformation Landscape

Russia and China, together with domestic protagonists in both politics and media, are the primary producers and amplifiers of disinformation in the Czech Republic. Russia and China are motivated by geopolitical goals – namely to undermine democracy and the Czech Republic’s transatlantic orientation, as well as to gain strategic influence with national elites. Domestic protagonists are driven primarily by political and commercial interests. Populist parties and politicians deploy disinformation in pursuit of power, and are supported by a network of “alt-news” or extremist sites that are in the disinformation business primarily for profit (ad revenues) and social influence.

The result is a symbiotic ecosystem in which foreign and home-grown disinformation build on each other and coalesce around key narratives, broadly based on the rejection of liberal-democratic values. Even where their practical goals differ, Czech disinformation actors are united in their anti-Western, anti-systemic, and anti-progressive attitudes. Key topics include migration, NATO- and Euro-skepticism, US opposition, and the culture war against “liberal elites”. In terms of distribution, the primary vectors of disinformation are social media, “alt-news” websites, and chain emails.

From COVID-19 to the GRU

Semantic Visions’ [preliminary analysis](#) found that on April 17, the same day as Prime Minister Babiš’s announcement, immediately began pushing false and manipulative messages about the news, notably reorienting their focus from COVID-19, which has been the priority topic for disinformation over the last several months. This trend has persisted for the last two weeks, through April 30, as visualized in the graph below.

Only one day after Babiš’s announcement, the GRU terror attack (green) surpassed COVID-19 (yellow) as the dominant focus of disinformation in the Czech media sphere. On April 18, the number of disinformation articles published about the GRU attack was

more than 3.5 times greater than about COVID-19 (68 versus 19). As the Vrbětice disinformation campaign gained steam in the subsequent days, the quantity of COVID-19 disinformation saw a corresponding drop, to an average of 17 articles per day through April 26. For comparison, the average daily number of disinformation articles about COVID-19 from March 1 to April 16 was 39. After April 26, the intensity of the Vrbětice coverage tapered, and COVID-19 regained some of its lost ground. While a leveling out of the initial disinformation response is to be expected, the progression and durability of the disinformation campaign will become evident with time, and adapt to new political developments around the case.

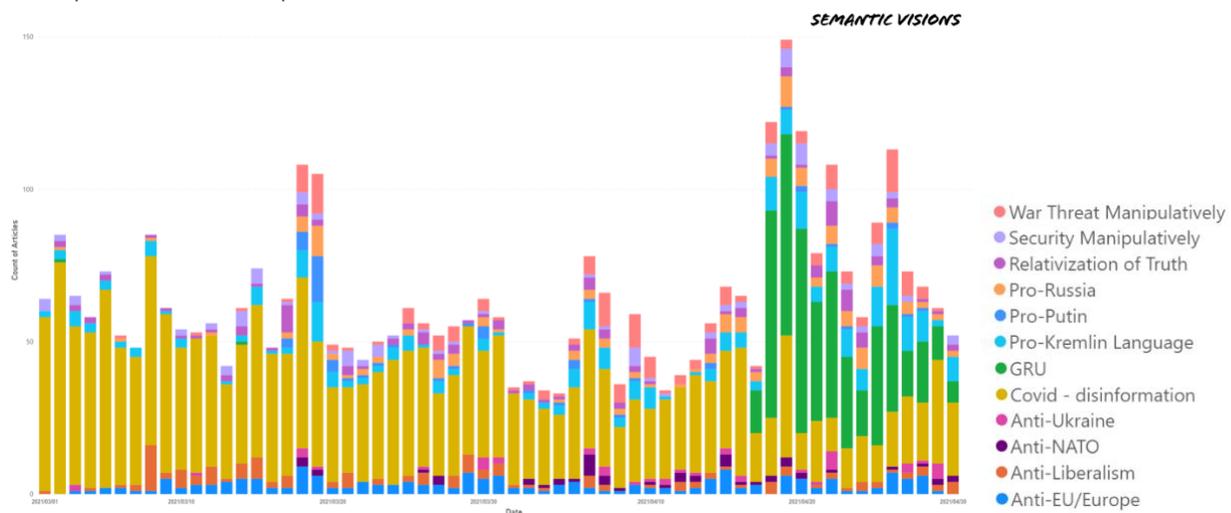


Figure 2: Number of articles published per day, by topic, by Czech disinformation sources

In the first days following the government’s announcement, Czech disinformation sources primarily sought to ridicule and discredit the official account of what happened. To this end, they offered several alternative explanations: e.g., that it is a ploy to escalate the conflict between Russia and the West, that the explosion was a false flag operation, and that the government is merely trying to distract from its own mishandling of the pandemic. A major line of attack was the timing of the news: questioning why it took seven years for this information to come out, and suggesting that there must be an ulterior motive driving the allegations. A secondary narrative also sought to cast doubt on the competence and credibility of the Czech security services – specifically the Czech counterintelligence agency (BIS) and its director, Michal Koudelka. A frequent claim, even preceding the present case, is that BIS is controlled by the CIA. Indeed, longstanding disinformation attacks against BIS and Koudelka have been fed by President Zeman himself, who has publicly denigrated the agency’s work on exposing Russian and Chinese influence operations in the Czech Republic. By contrast, Czech disinformation media afforded positive coverage to Russian officials and statements, including those of Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova and the Russian embassy in Prague.

As days went on, the anti-Western and pro-Kremlin framing continued, with consistent efforts to deflect responsibility from Russia, for instance by arguing that it would have nothing to gain from such an operation. Instead, Czech disinformation sources coalesced around the narrative that

the whole affair stinks of a conspiracy concocted by “Russophobic” forces. One outlet even suggested that the 2014 explosion may have been a US provocation. A related narrative to emerge in this context has focused on the Dukovany nuclear power plant, suggesting that the ulterior motive for the incident is to exclude Rosatom, the Russian state atomic energy corporation, from the tender.

A disinformation boost from the Czech president

On April 25, Czech disinformation sources and the Kremlin itself received a gift in the form of President Zeman’s speech, during which he contradicted the government account of what happened in Vrbětice and claimed that there are two possible theories about what caused the 2014 explosion: either that the GRU was involved, or that the blast was simply caused by improper handling of ammunition. Zeman’s address was itself a case study in disinformation, and drew upon several narratives that were already circulating in Czech disinformation media. Specifically, he attacked the credibility of BIS and Director Koudelka, and expressed disdain for the work of intelligence agencies in general, including the CIA. In this context, he trivialized the whole affair by implying that it might simply be a “spy game”. He also cast doubt on the question of Russia’s involvement in Vrbětice, claiming that there was no evidence placing the two GRU agents at the munitions site at the time of the explosion.

Zeman’s performance was predictably lauded by Czech disinformation websites, which presented it as a “voice of reason” amid all the “Russophobic hysteria”. More importantly, Russian-language media also immediately picked it up, praising Zeman for not “caving in” to pressure from the United States. RT headlined the speech with an article titled “No evidence of Russian intelligence involvement in ammo depot blast, Czech president says amid spy scandal with Moscow”. The next section explores this impact on the Russian disinformation response in greater detail.

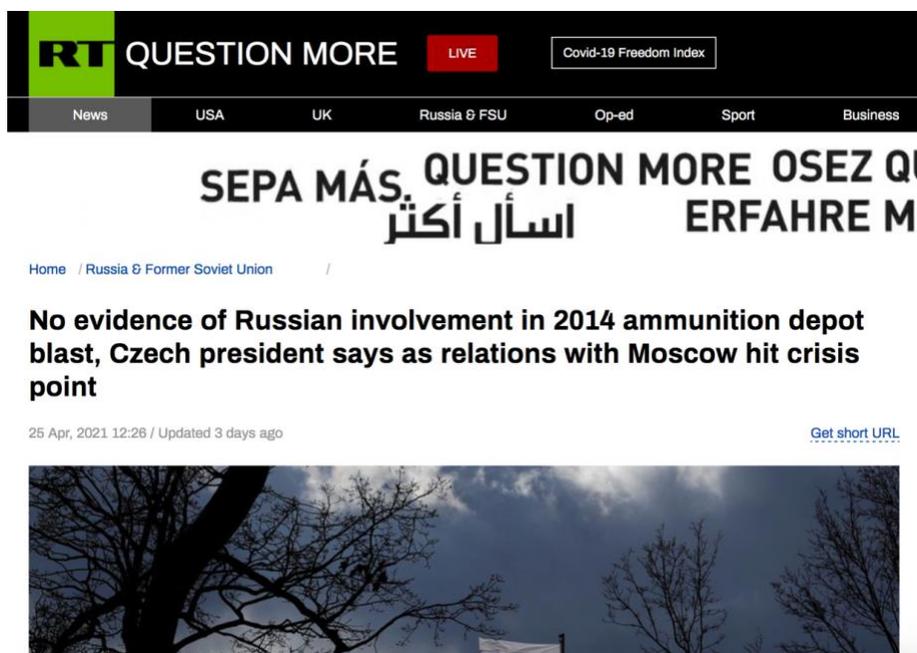


Figure 3: Screenshot of RT's coverage of President Zeman's speech, April 25

The Russian disinformation response

The Kremlin often pursues its most aggressive disinformation campaigns whenever it perceives its vital interests to be under threat: in other words, when facts about its criminal enterprising come to light and threaten to derail its strategic objectives. The Kremlin counters such inconvenient exposure by rewriting reality to deflect blame from Russia, undermine critical consensus, and prevent the target(s) of the campaign from taking defensive action against the Kremlin's interests. The prominent disinformation campaigns surrounding, for example, [the annexation of Crimea](#), [the downing of Malaysian flight MH17](#), and [the Skripal poisoning](#) all exemplify this strategy: in all three cases, the Kremlin was implicated in grievous crimes and violations of international law that threatened negative consequences for Russian strategic objectives and the continued ability to act with impunity abroad. As a result, the Kremlin launched intense disinformation offensives aimed at changing the narrative to its advantage, including casting doubt on official investigative procedures, promoting speculative and contradictory theories of what really happened, and blaming its victims for the crimes in question.

The Vrbětice affair is on par with these examples in terms of its significance to the Kremlin. Beyond dealing a major blow to Russia's intelligence infrastructure in Europe and unifying Western allies in stronger opposition to Russian subversive activity, this disclosure jeopardizes two of the Kremlin's key strategic objectives: 1) to win soft power points through the provision of the Sputnik V vaccine to European countries, and 2) to secure the contract for the Czech Dukovany nuclear power plant, worth more than 10 billion USD, on behalf of Rosatom. While the Czech government had been mulling the purchase of Sputnik V, with Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hamáček even planning a much-criticized trip to Moscow to negotiate the deal, those plans have now been officially canceled. Likewise, the Czech government has declared Rosatom to be excluded from the tender for the Dukovany plant. This decision in particular is excellent news from the Czech and European security perspective, and a blow to the Kremlin's strategic ambitions in the Czech Republic. Russian control of an integral segment of Czech critical infrastructure would have given the Kremlin significant political and economic leverage for decades to come.

Disinformation as crisis management

The significance of the Vrbětice affair to Russian authorities – and by extension, the urgency of countering the facts of the case with disinformation – is exemplified by the scale of Russian domestic media coverage of the topic. The graph below compares total media coverage of the Vrbětice case in Czech, English, and Russian. The Russian coverage notably far exceeds and at times more than doubles both the Czech and English, illustrating the high priority nature of the case.

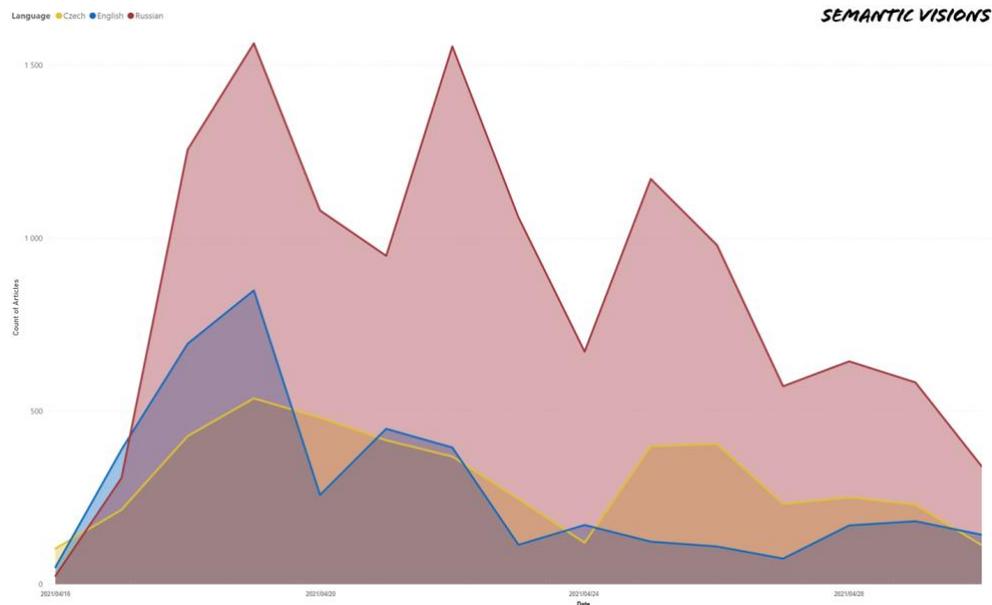


Figure 4: Total articles about Vrbětice published per day in Czech, English, and Russian

This level of attention makes sense in the Russian domestic political context. For Putin and his allies, regime stability (that is, preservation of power) is the number one concern, followed by secondary strategic goals like restoring Russia to great power status, expanding its sphere of influence, and influencing the global balance of power and institutional order to the Kremlin's advantage. When these goals are threatened by international exposures of the Kremlin's crimes, propaganda and disinformation are deployed both domestically and abroad to manage the reputational fallout. At home, this strategy typically emphasizes portraying Russia as the victim of hostile foreign conspiracies and "Russophobic" agitation. Russian officials and pro-government media have followed this same pattern in their coverage of the Vrbětice case, denying Russia's involvement and suggesting that the Czech government is only attempting to ingratiate itself in Washington's "war of sanctions".

Russian state media reacted quickly to the Czech government announcement, denying Russia's involvement and threatening that the consequences for the Czech Republic's "unwarranted aggression" would be significant. They further claimed that the Czech Republic is following the "Russophobic course" of the US, and even pushed the absurd conspiracy theory about an alleged "US coup" in Belarus, for which the Czech announcement was supposedly a distraction. The Dukovany nuclear plant tender and the Sputnik vaccine were named as explanations for the Czech Republic's actions, suggesting that anti-Russian opposition forces in the Czech Republic orchestrated the affair in order to sabotage Rosatom's bid and the procurement of Sputnik doses.

Zeman to the rescue

However, one Czech politician has received consistently positive coverage from Russian media: Czech President Miloš Zeman. As noted previously, Zeman has a long track record of being one of the Kremlin's most loyal and prominent [Trojan horses](#) in Europe – a term that is used to describe high-ranking statesmen who promote the interests of the Russian state within their own

country and the EU more broadly. Zeman regularly advances the Kremlin’s disinformation narratives both domestically and internationally: for instance, he has falsely claimed that Ukraine is fighting a “civil war” and that the Novichok nerve agent used to poison the Skripals could have originated in the Czech Republic. This legitimization of the Kremlin’s lies has earned Zeman significant favor within the pro-Kremlin disinformation ecosystem, both in the Czech Republic and in Russia itself.

The present case is no exception. Zeman’s April 25 speech, in which he made a litany of misleading claims undermining the Czech government’s conclusions about the GRU’s involvement in the Vrbětice explosion, received strong amplification in Russian-language media. Zeman’s remarks have been framed in almost universally positive terms, supporting the Kremlin’s own denials about Russia’s involvement in the explosion. Zeman is presented as a national hero and praised for not “caving in” to pressure from the United States and “Russophobic” forces in the Czech Republic.

The immediate media response of the speech is depicted in the graph below. Within minutes of the televised address, which began at 11:00 Central European Time (CET), Russian-language media was abuzz with coverage of the speech, and notably outpaced both Czech and global English-language media by a significant margin, in a trend that lasted over 24 hours. The contrast between Russian and English-language coverage of Zeman’s speech is particularly noteworthy in light of the standard content output ratio between these two languages. According to the SV database, the output of global English-language media at any given time is approximately five times greater (5:1) than that of Russian-language media.

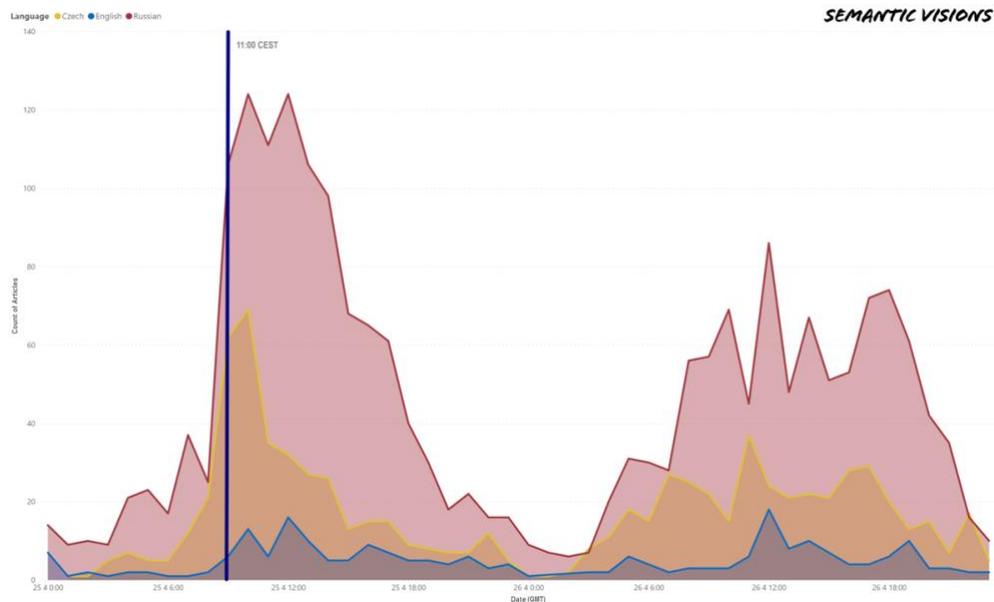


Figure 5: Media coverage referring to Czech President Miloš Zeman in the hours before and after his national address

To further gauge the impact of Zeman’s speech in the Russian context, we compared it with the media response to Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš’s original announcement about the GRU attack on April 17. The two graphs below visualize the significant disparity in coverage devoted to the Czech prime minister and the president by English and Russian media, respectively, with the changing intensity of coverage linked to their respective speeches about the GRU attack.

Predictably, both the global English-language media and Russian-language media reflect a sharp spike in coverage of Prime Minister Babiš following his April 17 announcement. While the Russian coverage is slightly higher in terms of overall quantity, the scale of the media reaction is shown to be comparable in both languages. By contrast, the coverage of President Zeman’s speech on April 25 reveals a stark divergence between the two languages: the magnitude of the Russian-language media reaction is more than eight times that of the global English-language media. This disparity underscores the utility of Zeman’s performance for the Kremlin’s domestic disinformation campaign around the Vrbětice case.

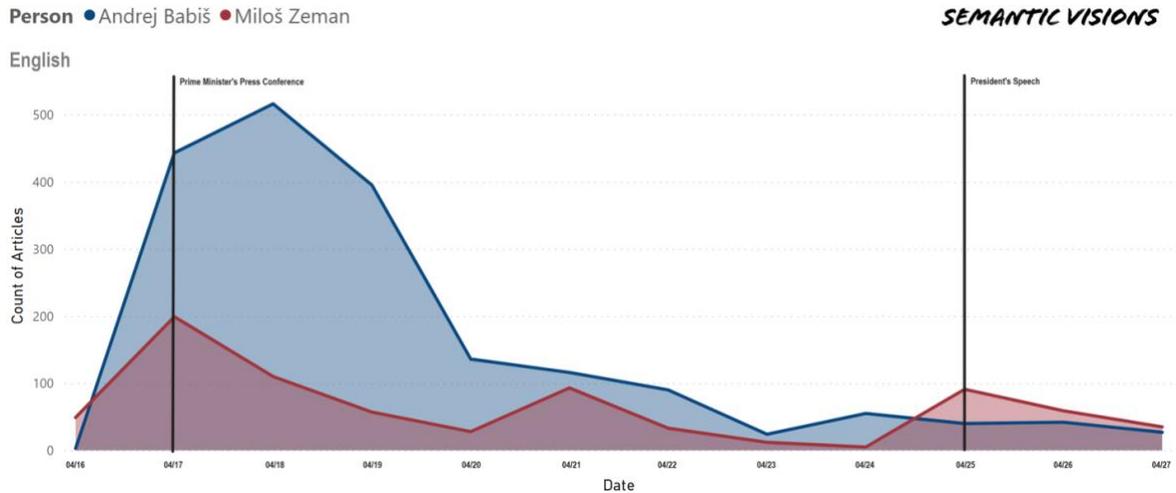


Figure 6: Global English-language coverage of the Czech Prime Minister and the Czech President in context of the GRU attack

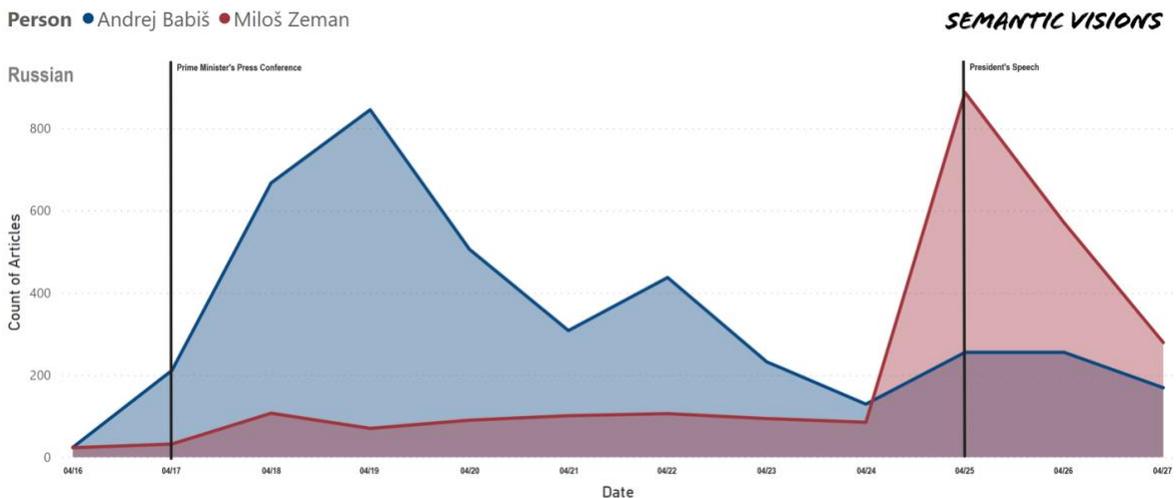


Figure 7: Russian-language coverage of the Czech Prime Minister and the Czech President in context of the GRU attack

RT and Sputnik

Finally, beyond the Russian domestic coverage, we also looked at the activity of RT and Sputnik News, Russia’s two flagship disinformation outlets for international audiences. This activity is visualized in the two graphs below. The largest spike in coverage for both RT and Sputnik occurred on April 18, the day after Prime Minister Babiš’s announcement. For RT, the most

prolific coverage of the topic has been produced in Russian, while for Sputnik, the Czech-language arm has predictably been the most active. Arabic coverage was also considerable for both RT and Sputnik, coming in second place for each (however, it should be noted that even under normal circumstances, RT's and Sputnik's Arabic-language branches consistently produce a high volume of output). Russia increasingly sees Arab audiences as a priority target – at present, RT is notably the second most watched news channel among Arabic-speaking audiences. Particularly in context of the Syrian war, the Kremlin seeks to foster an image of Russia as peacekeeper in the region.

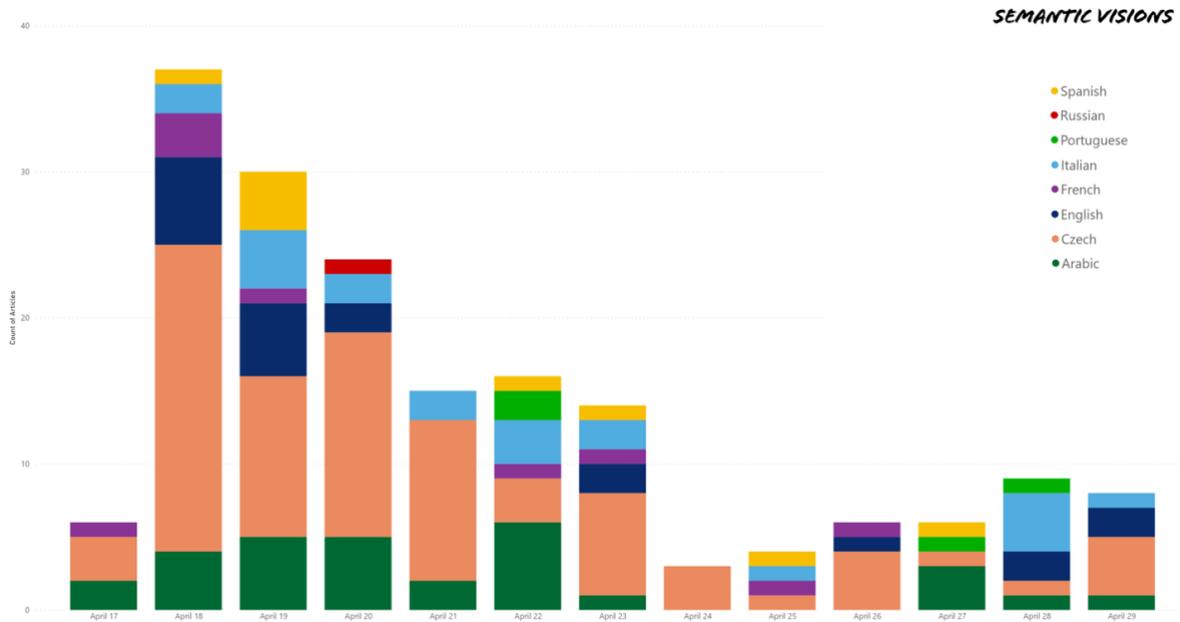


Figure 8: Total articles about Vrbětice published per day by Sputnik News in different languages

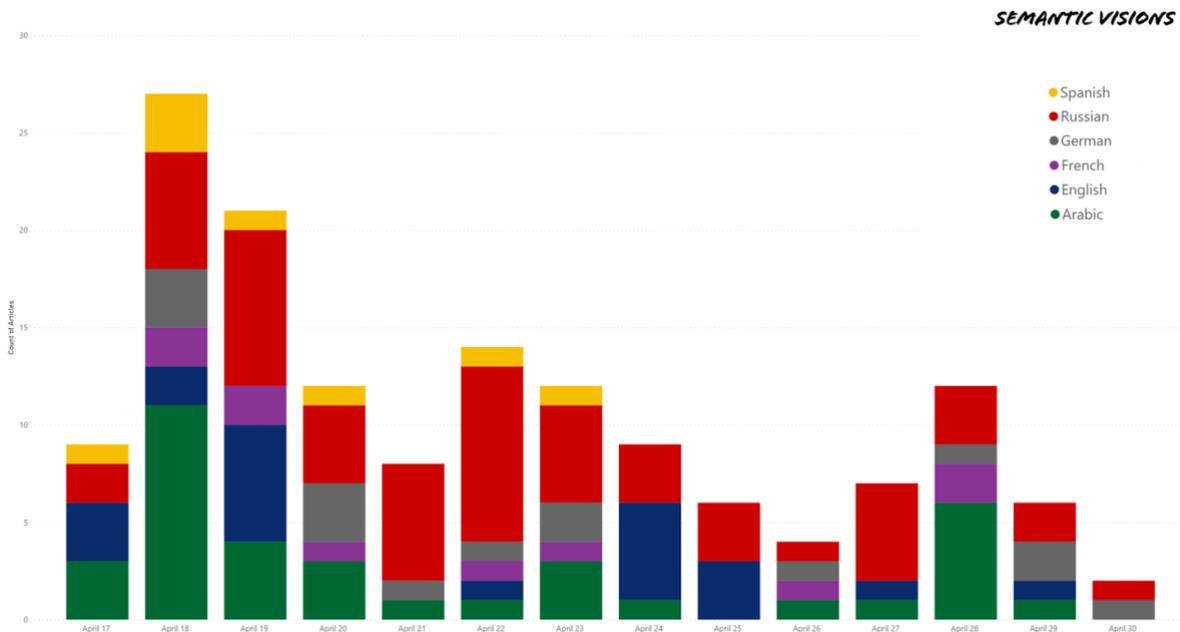


Figure 9: Total articles about Vrbětice published per day by RT in different languages

Conclusion and Forecast

The Czech Republic's disclosure of the GRU attack in Vrbětice has dealt a major blow to the Kremlin's strategic interests in Eastern Europe; a region that Russia sees as traditionally belonging to its sphere of influence. In the Czech Republic, the Kremlin has long invested significant effort into cultivating sympathetic political and business interests – including the current president – to protect its foothold in the country and insulate itself from pushback against its influence operations. In particular, as the Vrbětice case confirmed, the Russian government has used Prague as a key intelligence hub for sabotage and subversion operations within Eastern Europe, primarily vis-à-vis its strategy in Ukraine. The Czech government's resolute response to revelations of Russian state terrorism on its soil – namely downsizing Russia's embassy in Prague and excluding it from the Dukovany nuclear tender – is an unexpected and aggravating consequence for the Kremlin.

If precedent is anything to go by, we should expect that the Kremlin's disinformation campaign about Vrbětice – and the exposure of related GRU activities in Europe – will continue to evolve. While the initial intensity of the coverage will taper, as the data already shows, the ongoing disinformation response will adapt to developing events around the case and the response from European countries. As of time of writing, the Baltic states, Slovakia, and Bulgaria have expelled Russian diplomats in solidarity with the Czech Republic, while the European Parliament has passed a resolution calling on EU countries to coordinate further expulsions. Follow-up investigations by authorities and research groups are also exposing additional disturbing details about the GRU's operations in Europe. On April 28, Bulgarian prosecutors announced that they are investigating links between several explosions in Bulgaria between 2011 and 2020 in connection with the GRU attack in Vrbětice and its attempted assassination of Emilian Gebrev in 2015. If the international fallout continues to grow, the Kremlin will likely escalate its disinformation efforts both domestically and abroad in an attempt to control the narrative, stifle opposition, and protect key strategic interests. These efforts will also accompany the Kremlin's ongoing diplomatic confrontation against Western leaders, demonstrated most recently by the sanctioning of eight EU officials on April 30.

About Semantic Visions

[Semantic Visions](#) (SV) is a Prague-based data analytics and risk assessment firm that administers a proprietary military-grade Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT) system. SV's team has over 15 years of experience in OSINT data collection and semantic understanding of textual information across the world's top languages. SV is one of the world's only organizations to see the big picture of the global online news sphere, emphasizing situational awareness and threat detection. In particular, SV has extensive practical experience in detecting disinformation, propaganda, and related digital threats. In March 2019, SV took first place in the US-UK Tech Challenge for its development of proprietary technology that can identify and track disinformation and propaganda around the globe.

SV risk solutions have been successfully integrated into the world's largest business commerce network SAP Ariba, which drives over US \$3 trillion in commerce – more than Amazon, eBay, and Alibaba combined. SV delivers real-time risk detection that covers millions of companies and thousands of geolocations.