

Czechia, More Resilient Than Ever

Adela Kleckova

No stranger to disinformation campaigns and other forms of foreign meddling in its internal affairs, the Czech Republic has undertaken yet another important initiative to build its resilience: a new, permanent, parliamentary committee for hybrid threats that will be established after the parliamentary recess in September.

That is no small feat: similar committees have been established in the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Singapore. However, the Czech Republic is the first member of the European Union to have established such a political body devoted solely to the assessment of hybrid threats (in EU parlance: “a wide range of methods or activities used by hostile state or non-state actors ... to target the vulnerabilities of democratic states and institutions, while remaining below the threshold of formally declared warfare.”)

The committee will be responsible for assessing systemic risks and identifying weaknesses in the Czech defense system, through closed-door meetings with representatives of relevant state institutions, academia, and the non-governmental sector. Based on these sessions, the committee will develop policy recommendations for parliamentary members and government officials on how best to overcome systemic flaws and, ultimately, how to increase the overall resilience of the Czech Republic.

The Russian and Chinese Hybrid Toolkit

In light of the latest annual reports from the Czech intelligence services, the committee could not have been formed soon enough. According to those reports, hybrid operations conducted on the territory of the Czech state are growing both in number and severity, and anyone following recent events will not be surprised to hear that Russia and China are the main actors of interest.

The “Konev Affair” that played out earlier this year well illustrates the continued practice of the Russian regime to interfere in the internal affairs of past Soviet-bloc allies, as if they are still satellite states. The decision of the local government of Prague 6 to remove an old statue of Soviet Marshall Konev from a square in Prague this spring led to a chain of disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and the mobilization of Czech far-left and far-right extremists.

On the other hand, the Chinese obsession with the Czech Republic is future-oriented. Given its convenient location in the heart of Europe and next to Germany—together with its membership in the EU—this country seems to epitomize, in the eyes of Chinese communist officials, an ideal entry point into the European continent and Germany in particular. The richest Czech businessman, Petr Kellner, has emerged as one of China’s

29 July 2020

strongest allies in Czechia. His consumer loan company, Home Credit, makes nearly one-third of its profit on the Chinese market. Hence, Kellner and his business in Asia is, to a great extent, dependent on good relations with Chinese political elites. Late last year, Czech investigative journalists revealed that Home Credit hired a PR firm to manipulate Czech politicians and the public in favor of China. The 2,000 hours of billed services included pressuring the media to withdraw critical articles about China and publish neutral or positive ones.

Elections to Monitor and Critical Infrastructure to Protect

So, what tasks lie ahead for the committee? Three main priority areas look likely to require its scrutiny in the coming months. The first is serving as an election watchdog of sorts for the local and Senate elections later this year, as well as the parliamentary vote in 2021, and keeping an eye out for any suspected Russian meddling. The second concerns the construction of new units at two nuclear power plants, Dukovany and Temelin—the most expensive state infrastructure project in Czechia’s recent history. With the strategic and economic importance of these tenders, both Russia and China are lobbying heavily for their national companies to win. Proponents of the committee are hoping it will help ensure a transparent and fair process.

A very similar situation concerns the construction of the Czech 5G network, with strong pressure exerted by China for the project to be entrusted to its national technology champion, Huawei, which has been accused of having deep ties to the Chinese military and intelligence agencies.

While both Russia and China have certainly been keeping the Czech security scene busy, the country has developed one of the best national resilience systems—not only in the region, but also in Europe (see, for example, the 2018 European Values report on “countermeasures by the EU28 to the Kremlin’s subversion operations.”) The establishment of the parliamentary committee represents the next logical step in the Czech mosaic of resilience measures.

In 2016, the Czech Republic conducted a thorough review of the state of its resilience capabilities, resulting in the National Security Audit. The document, to which 120 independent experts contributed, identified 10 types of threats that would most endanger the Czech state, and subsequently proposed a roadmap toward a more durable state. The establishment of the Center for Terrorism and Hybrid Threats and the National Cyber and Information Security Agency are two of the milestones. The latter organization is already well-regarded, its experts annually winning international cybersecurity competitions, such as the Estonian “Locked Shield,” and its members invited to the U.S. Congress to help create a cybersecurity exercise for U.S. stakeholders. These institutions will form the primary cooperative partners for the newly established committee.

As a result of this ongoing commitment to resilience and countering potential hybrid threats, the Czech Republic became the first EU member to openly speak out against Huawei-sourced 5G technology and carved out a role as a leader in the discussion of the future of 5G networks in Europe. Last year’s gathering of mobile technology leaders in Prague saw the release of the Prague Proposals, overlapping in many areas with the EU’s own official toolbox on 5G cybersecurity.

Such initiatives have been state-initiated and -implemented. But there are other pieces crucial to boosting resilience, including an active civil society, innovative forward-thinking research on hybrid threats, and independent media to monitor the government’s pledges and investigate potential security risks.

The main future challenge not only for Czechia but for other countries involved in this undeclared hybrid conflict is not to rest on their laurels but to continue the hard, daily work on maintaining and strengthening those resilience mechanisms. Just as the enemy never sleeps and continues to develop smarter, more vicious, and targeted schemes of attacks, so must our defense be flexible, adaptable, and always improving. Ongoing European cooperation, sharing best practices and learning from each other, is an integral part of that.

This article was originally published by Transitions on July 24, 2020 and can also be accessed by [clicking here](#).

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

About GMF

The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) strengthens transatlantic cooperation on regional, national, and global challenges and opportunities in the spirit of the Marshall Plan. GMF does this by supporting individuals and institutions working in the transatlantic sphere, by convening leaders and members of the policy and business communities, by contributing research and analysis on transatlantic topics, and by providing exchange opportunities to foster renewed commitment to the transatlantic relationship. In addition, GMF supports a number of initiatives to strengthen democracies. Founded in 1972 as a non-partisan, non-profit organization through a gift from Germany as a permanent memorial to Marshall Plan assistance, GMF maintains a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. In addition to its headquarters in Washington, DC, GMF has offices in Berlin, Paris, Brussels, Belgrade, Ankara, Bucharest, and Warsaw. GMF also has smaller representations in Bratislava, Turin, and Stockholm.



**Ankara • Belgrade • Berlin • Brussels • Bucharest
Paris • Warsaw • Washington, DC**

www.gmfus.org