Hybrid Warriors:
Transforming Czech Security through
the 'Russian Hybrid Warfare' Assemblage

JAN DANIEL and JAKUB EBERLE*
Institute of International Relations, Prague

Abstract: This article analyses the ascent of 'Russian hybrid warfare' (RHW) as a notion that transformed the understanding of national security in the Czech Republic in the short period of 2014–2016. It argues that the emergence of RHW as a specifically understood prime security threat was the result of contingent and often unruly social interactions across different settings, rather than a linear and centralised response to Russia's actions. To capture this process, the concept of 'assemblage' is introduced and then defined as a temporary constellation of a variety of different actors, both public and private. Building on research interviews and documents produced in the RHW field, the authors then proceed in three steps. First, they chronologically trace the gradual emergence of the Czech RHW assemblage from a variety of different actors—bureaucrats, NGOs, academics, journalists—after Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014. Second, they unpack the inner workings of the assemblage by identifying the key actors and asking who did the assembling and how. Third, they look at how different actors were able to reinforce and/or transform their identities by being part of the assemblage, with an emphasis on the effects this had for the distinction between the public and the private.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, disinformation, assemblage, Russia, Czech Republic

On 1 December 2016, the then Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and Minister of the Interior Milan Chovanec called a press conference to present the results of the National Security Audit (NSA). This unprecedented, year-long process of evaluating the country's preparedness to face security threats was summarised in an extensive analysis of risks and a set of recommendations to avert them. One of the main conclusions was that the NSA 'discovered new modern threats in the cyberspace, or hybrid threats' (Prime Minister Sobotka cited in Nováková [2016a]) and these 'so-called hybrid threats and the related disinformation attacks' need to

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* Direct all correspondence to: Jan Daniel, Institute of International Relations, Nerudova 3, 118 50 Prague, Czech Republic, e-mail: daniel@iir.cz; Jakub Eberle, Institute of International Relations, Nerudova 3, 118 50 Prague, Czech Republic, e-mail: eberle@iir.cz.

be addressed in a 'more comprehensive' manner [Nováková 2016a]. To this end, the document called for the establishment of the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (Centrum proti terorismu a hybridním hrozbám / CTHH). With this, the issue of 'hybrid threats' or 'hybrid warfare', which was at the periphery of security vocabulary until early 2014, had been deeply ingrained in the official language of state authorities and even led to the creation of new bureaucratic bodies. Furthermore, as the public debate that followed from the announcement and President Miloš Zeman's subsequent accusations that the CTHH was established to censor the internet [Zeman 2016] demonstrated, the issue now also resonated with the wider public. In less than three years, the contested and ambiguous notion of 'hybrid warfare' transformed the understanding of Czech national security.

The focus of this article is this change in security policies and the shared notions of security and dominant threats to it that happened in the Czech Republic in 2014–2016. Building on debates in security studies and international relations, we approach threats as social constructs [Campbell 1998; Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998]. Siding with the sociological and anthropological approaches within this broader field [Bigo 2014; Villumsen-Berling 2015], we focus on the often mundane processes through which the meaning of security is produced and renegotiated in interactions of a number of different actors—politicians, bureaucrats, academics, journalists, and NGOs.

In line with this tradition, we do not aim here to delimit what 'Russian hybrid warfare' is (for various attempts at this, see Charap [2015], Kříž et al. [2015], or Renz [2016]). Instead, we look at the ways in which the notion of 'Russian hybrid warfare' was *used* to unify a certain field and enable particular political effects by means of it being constructed as an existential threat. While the actors analysed in this article might slightly differ with regard to the definition and understanding of RHW, most of them would be largely comfortable with the official approach as outlined in the Security Strategy, which conceptualises hybrid warfare as a combination of 'conventional and non-conventional military means with non-military tools (propaganda using traditional and new media, disinformation intelligence operations, cyber attacks, political and economic pressures, and deployment of unmarked military personnel)' [MFA 2015b: 13]. Most of the actors would also agree that it is the non-military aspects, with a particular focus on propaganda and disinformation, that are the key concern in the Czech context, and that Russia is their primary originator.

The ascent of RHW in the Czech Republic was not driven only and exclusively by state security agencies, nor were these agencies merely responding to pressures from civil society. On the contrary, this process was made possible only through a series of interactions between actors from both the public and private spheres. In fact, Minister Chovanec himself mentioned the participation of 'over 120 experts *from the public service and academic environment*' in the preparation of the NSA (cited in Nováková [2016a], emphasis added).

Taken together, the socially constructed nature of RHW as a security threat and the engagement of public and private actors in the process through which it

emerged invite highly relevant questions. The speed of the articulation of RHW, the involvement of diverse actors, as well as the often messy and horizontal nature of the interactions suggest a different process than in the traditionally understood policy cycle [May and Wildavsky 1978; Howlett and Ramesh 2003]. To capture the ways in which different public and private actors temporarily coalesce around particular issues, interests, or narratives, how they work together to produce certain outcomes and how their identities are transformed in this process, novel and more flexible concepts and approaches are needed. We argue that the notion of assemblage can shed new light on public–private interactions, as it allows us to capture also the more unruly and disorganised aspects of public-private policy-making. In this study, we understand assemblage chiefly as an analytical device, which, through its interpretative engagement with different sources of data, enables us to organise the case around a particular narrative. We are not aiming to establish a universally generalisable argument that would apply across different contexts. Instead, what our article seeks to do is to map the Czech case in detail and, more broadly, to demonstrate the utility of assemblage as a concept for analysing policy-making. In addition, we offer a few observations about the ambiguous and unstable boundary between the public and the private.

The article proceeds as follows. We start by outlining the concept of assemblage and showing its relevance for broader discussions on public/private interactions. We then reconstruct the Czech 'Russian hybrid warfare' assemblage, as it emerged in 2014–2016, around three different axes. First, we follow the chronological logic of its emergence in 2014–2016, asking how its different elements were pieced together so that they were able to articulate RHW as a prime security issue. Second, we turn to the inner workings of this assemblage, mapping its core actors and connections so as to address the question of who did the assembling and how. Third, we offer a critical perspective on how different actors reconstituted their identities via their performance within the assemblage and what effects this had for the distinction between the public and the private.

Assemblage: the relational and open emergence of actorness

Assemblage thinking has become one of the most rapidly developing ways of capturing complex interactions in anthropology [Ong and Collier 2005], human geography [Müller 2015; Dittmer 2017], or international relations [Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Acuto and Curtis 2014; Bueger 2018]. Building on these diverse approaches, we treat assemblage primarily as an analytical concept, which allows us (1) to meaningfully organise the data at hand, including some basic methodological guidelines, (2) to productively rethink the problem of public–private interactions, and (3) to pursue a theoretically-informed critical intervention into the debate on RHW [for a similar approach see Sassen 2006; Abrahamsen and Williams 2011]. In contrast to other approaches to the construction of security threats, our study goes beyond the sole attention to securitising speech acts

[Buzan, Waever and de Wilde 1998] or the Bourdieusian focus on field struggles and symbolic domination [Bigo 2013]. Neither of these allows us to fully capture the often unruly dynamics of constantly (trans)forming relations between actors, and the effects these may have. Moreover, assemblage enables us to highlight the performative aspect of actors' practices, relations, and their public and private identities. In this regard, we are inspired above all by the recent Dittmer's [2017] and Bueger's [2018] readings of the concept, which unpack the dynamics of assemblage's formation, diversity and agency of its elements, and the transformative effect brought by the assemblage to its constitutive parts.

Assemblage here refers to a temporary constellation of different actors and their socio-material contexts, which coheres around particular effects, interests, ideas or purposes. It is 'a mode of ordering heterogeneous entities so that they work together for a certain time' [Müller 2015: 28–29]. More formally, assemblages can be defined by four characteristics (based on Dittmer [2017] and Müller [2015]). First, they consist of *relations* between their elements. Relations are at the very centre of assemblage-focused analysis, since it is only in relation to other entities of a particular assemblage that an element can be seen as having a particular identity, function or effect. Second, assemblages are '*productive of novelty*' [Dittmer 2017: 10]. Through the formation of an assemblage, new realities emerge. As Loughlan et al. [2015: 43] note, security assemblages form around newly identified security issues, while they at the same time shape the very understanding of what these security issues mean. Third, assemblages are *heterogeneous*, as they are put together from different elements (humans, things, ideas, narratives etc.), and fourth, unlike social structures, they are '*open systems* with elements constantly entering and leaving' [Dittmer 2017: 10, emphasis added]. This also makes them 'impossible to delimit', meaning that for the analyst 'the only possibility is to attempt to describe trends in their relational space over time' [Dittmer 2017: 10].

While the use of assemblage thinking is broad and varied, we agree with Bueger [2018: 615] that the concept is particularly useful for dissecting contemporary forms of governance and 'debates on public-private interaction'. As such, assemblage thinking speaks to other conceptualisations of public–private relations, such as policy networks [Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Börzel 1998] or epistemic communities [Haas 1992]. In particular, it communicates with the research on 'democratic network governance' [Marcussen and Torfing 2007; Sørensen and Torfing 2007]. In this work, governance network is defined as 'relatively stable, horizontal articulation of interdependent, but operationally autonomous actors who interact through negotiations that take place within a relatively institutionalized community […]' [Torfing 2007: 5].

There are plentiful similarities between a governance network and an assemblage, especially in the notions of horizontal coordination and actors' autonomy. However, there are also important differences. First, the emphasis on the 'relatively institutionalised' nature of network governance means that this strand of research focuses on the more organised and coordinated aspects of the policy

process, leaving aside the more unruly and decentralised activities—for example, those happening within the NGO or media spheres. By emphasising openness, assemblage thinking is sensitive to a broader array of actors and practices and better suited for the often chaotic nature of social interactions. Second, network governance—with the exception of the small 'poststructuralist institutionalism' branch [Sørensen and Torfing 2007: 38–41]—sees actors as interdependent, yet still possessing an intrinsic identity that is more or less unchanged by their participation in a network. In contrast, assemblage thinking conceives the actors as 'having no essence or particular identity prior to entering the assemblage' [Bueger 2018: 619; paraphrasing Marcus and Saka 2006]. By entering the assemblage, the identity of actors is produced and reproduced, including their identity as public/private [Abrahamsen and Williams 2011: 95].

Therefore, while other approaches are well-suited to capturing public–private interactions, assemblage thinking moves beyond them by analysing also the process-based and relational production of the public/private distinction as such. In the assemblage lens, the focus moves away from particular actors and institutions towards the *processes* in which they come together to forge new possibilities. Therefore, we look at the ways in which the different entities—'think tanks, political parties, universities, embassies, lobbying groups, media networks, and so on' [Dittmer 2017: 18]—are linked together into a system of relations in and through which they gain their capacity to act (e.g. to articulate a policy) in the first place. Policy-making is thus seen as a much messier process, in which agency is distributed across the particular assemblage. The assemblage approach thus 'emphasizes openness, dynamism, and self-organization' [Dittmer 2017: 9] against the more hierarchical, closed, static, and binary models of public–private policy-making. This emphasis makes it also particularly 'sensitive to short-term change' [Bueger 2018: 615], making it possible to track the often rapid processes through which certain policy issues are articulated by means of ad hoc coalitions of actors—such as in the case of RHW in the Czech Republic.

At the same time, this does not mean simply dissolving 'public' and 'private' as meaningful categories. It would be naïve to argue that actors do not mobilise the political capital that comes from their belonging to a particular institution (newspaper, party, bureaucracy) or their occupation of a certain subject position (recognised expert, elder statesperson) [see Abrahamsen and Williams 2011: 105–108]. By entering into an assemblage, the identity of the actors is not completely erased, but the context for its performative reconstruction is changed. How actors reconstitute themselves as 'public' or 'private' vis-à-vis others and, especially, what this means in the context of a particular assemblage thus becomes an empirical question—and also one intimately intertwined with politics and power. 'Assemblages establish relations of expertise and authority, technology and politics.' [Bueger 2018: 620] Therefore, it is upon the different actors to utilise these resources to (successfully) *perform* their identities as 'public' or 'private', (re)assert themselves in the policy process and (re)capture a privileged position in the shifting order.

Methodologically speaking, in mapping the RHW assemblage, we follow the actors' own narrative descriptions of the assemblage and their relations with others [see Loughlan et al. 2015: 38–39]. In doing so, we rely on a variety of different sources of data. First, we draw on nineteen semi-structured interviews with actors from the RHW field. Our respondents have a background in media, think-tanks, academia, ministries, and national security agencies and were selected on the basis of their prominence in our preliminary media sample and in references made by other interlocutors. Given the sensitive nature of the information gathered, all our respondents have been anonymised (on the other hand, we use the real names of those who identify themselves with the counter-RHW agenda in the public sphere). The interviews were centred on interviewees' descriptions of the actors involved in countering RHW, the nature of the threat, and their own contribution to the counter-campaign and cooperation with other actors. The interviews allowed us to capture above all the inter-subjective aspects of assemblage, as present in the respondents' narratives and perceptions. Second, to triangulate this, we complemented interviews with an analysis of an extensive textual archive made up of media articles, press releases, think-tank analyses, and official documents (more than 120 texts on RHW). Our key objective here was to map relations between actors. Therefore, the documents were examined for mutual references and intertextual links that showed us the patterns of mutual familiarity, recognition, and interaction through which an assemblage is produced and reproduced. Our third source of data were the lists of contacts participating in one Facebook messaging group and two e-mail groups devoted to RHW that were made available to us, and the attendance sheets or at least the lists of speakers at fifteen conferences, roundtables, and other public events that took place in 2015–2016.

Two caveats are necessary to further clarify our analytical position and its limits. First, we do not claim to provide a complete and exhaustive picture of all actors, relations, and practices that had something to do with RHW in the given time frame. Instead, we focus on the key actors that played a prominent role in the public articulation of RHW as a threat. Some parts of the assemblage that were not exposed to the public were side-lined, in particular those relating to communication occurring in a classified regime to which we did not have access. This constitutes a limit of our analysis, but not necessarily a problem, since our key interest is in unpacking the public articulation of the RHW assemblage and the role of public and private identities in its performance.

Second, while being ourselves members of the small Czech security policy community, we do not consider ourselves part of the Czech RHW assemblage, as we neither engage in counter-RHW activities, nor share most of the ideas and narratives around which it coheres. Rather, we think of ourselves as sceptical, yet engaged participants in the broader field of interactions related to RHW. As this article is the first output of our broader project, we did not have to face too much suspicion or disagreement during our interviewing research. Our respondents

were mostly uninterested in our normative opinions on the matter. During the writing phase, however, we gradually entered the RHW debate by presenting our drafts in public, sharing them with our respondents (even mutually commenting on draft reports with some of them), and commenting on the matter in the press [see Kovanda 2018]. The following pages are a continuation of this intervention, which will most likely be seen as challenging (if not hostile) by at least some actors of the RHW assemblage, likely impacting the nature and quality of our future access. Therefore, we do not claim a naturalistic detachment from our research objects. Instead, in the spirit of double hermeneutics, we are using conceptual tools to make sense of a section of social reality of which we ourselves are part.

The emergence of 'Russian hybrid warfare' in the Czech Republic (2014–2016)

Hybrid warfare was not considered a major threat to the Czech Republic until Russia's annexation of Crimea. Before that, it was merely a peripheral topic for professional debates on the pages of security journals and specialised servers [e.g. Kubeša and Spišák 2011; Zůna 2010]. The Russian attack on Ukraine played an agenda-setting role, which, however, was only gradual and rather slow. Russia's actions were mostly unexpected. In the words of a key figure in the RHW assemblage, '[w]hen Russia invaded Ukrainian territory in early 2014, we were surprised' [Janda 2017]. The response of Czech security intellectuals can be chronologically organised according to the three years that followed: 2014 was characterised by mostly uncoordinated efforts to reflect and respond to Russia's aggressiveness; 2015 was decisive in putting the issue on the top of the agenda of the Czech security community; 2016 then marks the condensation of the assemblage and the formulation of a state response to the newly constructed threat of RHW.

In the first months after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, there was little concerted action. The RHW assemblage was emerging only slowly and from a scattering of originally disconnected actors, practices, and narratives. The first occasion when the RHW threat became publicly articulated came with the extension of the impact and nature of Russia's actions in Ukraine, which were broadly discussed in the media, to constructing them as a direct danger also for the Czech Republic. The key actor was the right-wing conservative media server *Echo24.cz*, in particular the journalist Vladimír Ševela, who wrote a number of articles on hybrid or information warfare. In August, he provided the first comprehensive coverage of *Aeronet.cz*, a leading disinformation website, which then became one of the favourite targets of the RHW assemblage. The article uses strong security rhetoric, articulating the presence of this website as part of an existential threat: 'It appears that the struggle [between Russia and the West] ... will be waged on multiple fronts. The media-information one is only one among them, the first Russian paratroopers have already landed.' [Ševela 2014]

A purely coincidental impulse came with the arrival of the new Czech government in February 2014, which made the promise 'to revive Czech foreign policy' [Zaorálek and Drulák 2014]. This involved revising key strategic documents, of which the first was to be the Security Strategy, the update of which was requested by the National Security Council in June 2014 [MFA 2015a]. This process of redrafting provided a good opportunity to insert RHW into the official vocabulary. Similarly coincidental was the scheduling of the NATO Summit for September 2014, which was indeed announced long before Crimea [BBC 2013]. However, under the changed circumstances, the summit provided an important push to the formation of the Czech RHW assemblage, especially because of its own prime-time focus on hybrid warfare. NATO's hybrid warfare terminology was then embraced also by Czech leaders, albeit at the time still seen rather as restricted to Ukraine, than as extending also to the Czech Republic (e.g. Defence Minister Stropnický's comments for Czech Television [MoD 2014]).

A crucial event for raising public awareness was connected to the November 2014 commemorations of 25 years since the Velvet Revolution, a part of which was a public happening, during which the participants displayed red cards to symbolically show their disagreement with President Miloš Zeman. The disinformation server *Aeronet.cz* accused the US Embassy of staging the event, a disinformation that was subsequently appropriated and spread also by a series of mainstream outlets and politicians [see *Echo24* 2014; Kundra 2016: 161]. A number of our respondents from the media, civil society, and public service recalled that this was the first time they realised the power that disinformation can have, and that this constituted a trigger that pushed them to act and get involved.

If 2014 had laid the groundwork, 2015 brought an explosion of activities and knitted different discursive threads together into an articulation of RHW as a prime security issue, one epitomised in the Czech context above all by covert Russian influence operations and 'pro-Russian' websites. In February 2015, this was defined clearly and urgently as a threat in the updated Security Strategy. Absent from the previous version from 2011, hybrid warfare now made it straight to the top of the list, coupled with a visible emphasis on propaganda and disinformation and an implicit yet clear reference to Russia:

> Some states seek to achieve a revision of the existing international order and are ready to pursue their power-seeking goals through hybrid warfare methods combining conventional and non-conventional military means with non-military tools (propaganda using traditional and new media, disinformation intelligence operations, cyber-attacks, political and economic pressures, and deployment of unmarked military personnel). [MFA 2015b: 13]

As one of our respondents put it, this was the state authorities' first direct elaboration of the newly constructed threat. The momentum was then sustained also by the conference 'The Future of Security, the Security of the Future', held

two weeks later in the Czech Parliament, which drew several distressing comments from high-ranking military officials. Most importantly, speaking explicitly about hybrid warfare, Special Forces general Karel Řehka uttered the much echoed comment: 'In a way, we are already at war, we just do not realise it or are not able to admit it.' [Lang 2015] By the end of February, members of state security agencies—including high-ranking military personnel like Řehka or even the then Chief of the General Staff Petr Pavel—were part of the nascent RHW assemblage.

This was followed by the mobilisation of civil society between February and June 2015. The two most visible 'speakers from the civil sector' on the matter (a phrase borrowed from an interview with an NGO) became Ivana Smoleňová of the Prague Security Studies Institute (PSSI) and Jakub Janda of the European Values think-tank (EV). Already in March, Smoleňová published articles in prominent American (*Forbes*) and Slovak (*Denník N*) media, in which she spoke about Russia's 'information warfare' and discussed the challenges facing those who would want 'to counter a well-organized, billion-dollar propaganda push from Moscow' [Smoleňová 2015a, 2015b]. EV had a slower start, initiating its activities only during the course of the summer. By then, other NGOs, such as Jagello 2000, the Association for International Affairs (AMO), or the People in Need Foundation had become active on the issue. Also involved was the Prague office of the Open Society Fund (OSF), which started sponsoring an investigative project conducted by the server *Neovlivni.cz*—an online magazine dedicated to investigative journalism and tackling corruption.

In parallel with the increasing involvement of both state and civil society actors, the media coverage of the issue intensified. *Echo24.cz* continued its reporting and was joined by a number of other outlets. This included the niche web projects *HlidaciPes.cz* ('WatchDog.cz'—an investigative online magazine) and the already mentioned *Neovlivni.cz*, but also more mainstream actors, most notably the liberal opinion-making weekly *Respekt*, especially Ondřej Kundra's detailed investigation of *Aeronet.cz* [Kundra 2015]. By summer 2015, the assemblage thus included highly interested actors from public service, academia, civil society, and the media.

During the autumn of 2015, the intelligence services also suddenly became much more detailed in their unclassified study of RHW threats. In a report published in September 2015, the Security Information Service (SIS) listed 'Russian and pro-Russian propaganda' as a major cause for concern. 'Russia has been creating influence and propaganda structures in the Czech Republic over a long period of time. ... The Czech public was and is greatly influenced by Czech pro-Russian organisations and individuals using websites to present their interpretations of Russian stances' [SIS 2015]. To highlight the urgency of the matter, SIS considered this a part of a broader Russian master plan to build a structure in Europe that could even 'be considered a return to the Komintern concept' [ibid.]. In this cascade of securitising arguments, fringe websites came to be identified as a grave danger, as they were assessed as a part of a broader imperialist expan-

sion. Only one month later, 'alternative news websites' were for the first time discussed also in the Ministry of the Interior's quarterly reports on extremism [MoI 2015]. By the autumn of 2015, websites like *Aeronet.cz* were thus publicly called out as a danger by key actors from the military, intelligence services, and the MoI.

In 2016, the assemblage grew further. Above all, it was now able to steer and influence policy-making, as well as shape political discussion in the country. A decisive moment came with the National Security Audit (NSA), a bureaucratic exercise that, according to the official press release [Nováková 2016a], involved more than 120 professionals from all across the state security apparatus, including a handful of consultants from academia and NGOs. The aim was to evaluate the Czech Republic's ability to respond to a broad range of threats and risks, from natural disasters to terrorism and cyberattacks. The political impetus for this unprecedented process came from Prime Minister Sobotka, who requested the audit already in November 2015 [Czech News Agency 2015]. Multiple ministries, security services, and other agencies participated, with coordination placed in the hands of the MoI. The audit itself then ran throughout most of 2016, including working group meetings, discussions, conferences, and drafting. In May 2016, a conference was held to present the first drafts. The recommendations already included the creation of the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats [Nováková 2016b]. While the origins of the NSA process were framed in terms of countering terrorism and managing the looming 'migration crisis', by now it was hybrid warfare that was starting to emerge as the master narrative.

The key development in making the issue one of the top ones in the public debate was the rapid increase in the activities of the EV and the establishment of their 'Kremlin Watch' programme at the end of 2015. In the words of Jakub Janda, the programme's head: 'From the beginning of 2016, things started rolling.' [Janda 2017] Under the Kremlin Watch banner, whose declared aim is 'to uncover and resist disinformation and influence operations of the Russian Federation and its fellow travellers' [European Values 2017a], EV started producing countless monitoring reports, weekly newsletters, papers, and policy recommendations, as well as organising events and appearing in the media on subjects related to RHW. Many other civil sector players were active in 2016, but EV stood out.

Finally, the conclusions of the National Security Audit were presented on 1 December 2016. The document—a 140-page, rather dryly written and often disconnected text—was wrapped in the master narrative of hybrid warfare. While the RHW agenda was discussed throughout different chapters (especially 'Foreign Power Influence' and 'Cybersecurity Threats'), the part on 'Hybrid Threats and Their Influence on the Security of the Citizens of the Czech Republic' claimed to be the document's 'overlapping' and 'coordinating' chapter [MoI 2016: 127]. Like the earlier statements of state agencies, the document also argued that 'propaganda and the spread of disinformation as a means of information warfare' are part of a broader strategy of hostile foreign powers acting against the Czech Republic. This is 'part of hybrid threats … and therefore one of the most serious

threats' [MoI 2016: 50]. These threats are, again, personified also by 'media and quasi-media platforms and social networks' [ibid.]. The official establishment of the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats (CTHH) was the most visible outcome of the NSA process.

The presentation of the NSA was the high point in the constitution of the assemblage and construction of RHW as a major security concern. 'Hybrid threats' were now a key part of the language through which Czech national security was understood, a special institution was set up to address them, and this perspective had strong backing from key political actors, including the Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior, and the Minister of Defence. However, this moment was also the starting point of a heated public contestation, as the results of the NSA—and the CTHH in particular—came under heavy public attack, especially from President Zeman [Zeman 2016]. The public exchange that followed was accompanied also by growing inner fragmentation and disintegration of the assemblage, marking a new phase in its existence, one that lies outside the scope of this article.

Holding the assemblage together: core actors and connections

This section turns to the actors who were crucial in keeping the RHW assemblage in motion and explores the ongoing (re)construction of connections between its core elements. As already argued, assemblages are dynamic and ever-changing. Holding the assemblage together requires continuous work, which involves connecting heterogeneous elements, ascribing them a single purpose, and constantly reiterating the performance [Bueger 2018]. Therefore, we start our mapping by describing those actors who were perceived as the most important assemblers and performers of the agenda. We aim to highlight the parallel activity of the assemblage on the levels of civil society, media, and governmental bureaucracy, thereby documenting the patterns of involvement of both public and private actors. We also point out the connections between these actors and their mutual support in promoting the campaign. This kind of mapping allows us to identify those who are at the centre of the RHW assemblage and whose 'work' holds it together. The following account thus does not represent a complete description of the assemblage, which would be impossible anyway due to its constantly changing nature, but is rather an overview of its most active core.

European Values

The European Values think-tank was identified by almost all our interviewees as the most active actor in the Czech campaign against RHW, basically for three main reasons. First, they were highly visible in the media, which a number of our interviewees attributed to the then deputy director of EV Jakub Janda's hardworking and highly ambitious personality. Second, their outputs were character-

ised by a clear-cut anti-Russian ideological message, which made it very easy to understand. Third, they were keen to work very closely with policy-makers and connect with a number of other Czech and international actors. The EV team produced dozens of articles dedicated to the issue of 'Kremlin Information Warfare'. In some cases, these texts were republished on web portals, such as *Neovlivni.cz* and *Echo24.cz*, and others were further promoted by national media. Some of the outputs were written and/or published jointly with other highly visible actors of the RHW assemblage, such as the journalist Ondřej Kundra or the political communication researchers from Masaryk University, Miloš Gregor and Petra Vejvodová [Janda and Kundra 2016; Gregor and Vejvodová 2016].

However, the importance of EV for the formation and performance of the assemblage goes well beyond their presence in the public sphere. EV played an essential role also in bringing diverse actors together. Thanks to their networking skills and their engagement in mapping and debunking the alleged Russian disinformation campaigns, EV became closely connected with several Czech and international agencies and policy figures (interviews, MoI, 5 May 2017 and NCISA, 23 June 2017). In particular, already in the spring of 2015, they started cooperating with Jakub Kalenský, at that time an active networker himself and a future Czech representative in the EEAS StratComm East team, who supported further expansion of their network on the international and especially the European level. The established international connections were later used by EV to advance its position at the national level, as EV was able to connect foreign experts with Czech bureaucrats. The think-tank established close cooperation with the team at the MoI that formed the core of the nascent CTHH. Jakub Janda became a consultant in the NSA process and other EV analysts worked with the MoI on the development of counter-disinformation training scenarios (interviews, MoI, 5 May 2017, EV, 8 September 2017, EV, 12 September 2017).

On a more mundane level, EV was among the primary contributors to the closed Facebook messaging group 'Svědkové Peskovovi' ('Peskov's Witnesses', named in ironic reference to Putin's press speaker Dmitry Peskov), which brought together influential figures from the media, the policy sphere, and civil society. At the time of our data collection (mostly spring and autumn 2017), this group consisted of more than fifty members. EV was also very active in organising seminars and roundtables. At least six smaller events dedicated to the issue of tackling the Russian hybrid and disinformation campaign took place in 2016 alone and their participants included think-tanks active in the area, the media, and officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Defence, and the Interior [European Values 2017b]. Together with the MoI, in October 2016 they organised the Stratcomm Summit, a high-profile event with participation from representatives of NATO, the USA, Germany, and the Baltic states alongside high-ranking Czech military and civilian government officials [European Values 2017c; interview, MoI, 5 May 2017]. In sum, EV were able to establish themselves as one of the main assemblers and performers of the campaign against RHW.

Think-tanks and Masaryk University

The scale of the assembling performed by EV was unparalleled, but other actors were also active within the assemblage, promoting the issue on the public agenda and linking diverse types of actors together. Ivana Smoleňová, a researcher from the Prague Security Studies Institute, became a regular media speaker on RHW following her first media outputs in the spring of 2015 and in particular her study of the 'pro-Russian disinformation campaign', which was later republished by connected think-tanks and organisations [PSSI 2015; Smoleňová 2016]. PSSI simultaneously positioned itself explicitly as an organisation that seeks to 'deter and defeat hybrid warfare strategies and other forms of external aggression' [PSSI 2017a]. Even though it also dedicated a fair share of its activities to the niche area of hybrid economic threats, where it was highly active in networking with civil society and business actors, PSSI also organised a series of events on the issue of pro-Russian disinformation operations and information warfare on the internet. As manifested by many of its public outputs, PSSI activities were, compared to EV, less attached to Czech state-security agencies and the institute relied more on cooperation with Ukrainian and Central European activists, domestic connections with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and donors such as the OSF or the National Endowment for Democracy [see, e.g., PSSI 2017b, 2017c]. While being a publicly visible and frequently noted part of the assemblage, PSSI's connections rested more within civil society than in the policy-making sphere.

Jagello 2000 played a distinct networking role. In contrast to PSSI or EV, Jagello 2000 rarely published its own analyses. Instead, it acted as an intermediary between international organisations (NATO in particular), security experts, and the wider public. It organised a series of expert workshops funded by NATO, which culminated in a report written by security analysts from Masaryk University, one of the first studies on RHW in the Czech Republic (interview, Masaryk University 1, 6 September 2017; Světnička [2015b]; Kříž et al. [2015]). The workshops and subsequent Jagello 2000 projects brought together a slightly different community than the ones that formed around EV or PSSI, and attracted primarily Czech and international defence and security policy experts, academics, and bureaucrats (Interview, Masaryk University 1, 6 September 2017; see also, e.g., *Natoaktual.cz* [2018]).

A group of political communication researchers at Masaryk University around Miloš Gregor and Petra Vejvodová originally gained recognition and media presence thanks to their short-lived cooperation with EV on the publication of their analysis of the manipulation techniques used by 'pro-Kremlin websites' [Fojtů 2016]. However, they later distanced themselves both from EV and from linking their work primarily to the Russian hybrid campaign, and shifted their attention more towards issues connected to media literacy and disinformation in general (interview, Masaryk University, 7 September 2017; Golis [2016]). While the focus of the Masaryk University group was less on policy advocacy, they remained a strong presence in the public sphere as experts and educators with

outreach well beyond academia. Therefore, given their awareness-raising role and strong media presence, they were still perceived by our respondents to be attached to the wider campaign against RHW. They also continued to cooperate with state agencies, such as MoI or NCISA, as well as civil society groups and donors on issues related to the analysis of specific communication techniques (interviews, Masaryk University, 7 September 2017, NCISA, 23 June 2017).

Journalists

The successful construction of RHW as a threat would hardly be imaginable without dedicated journalists. While hybrid threats were regularly covered by a number of media outlets, our respondents pointed primarily to journalist Ondřej Kundra writing for *Respekt* magazine. Since 2014 Kundra had published several articles and a book dedicated to Russian covert operations and had conducted agenda-setting investigations into Czech disinformation websites and *Aeronet.cz* in particular [e.g. Kundra 2015, 2016a, 2016b]. Kundra is known to be a well-connected figure in state agencies, including the MoI and MFA, and the police and intelligence services, as well as among civil society actors (his work with EV was already mentioned). He has also been a frequent public speaker at events on disinformation and Russian activities in the Czech Republic [e.g. European Values 2017d]. Kundra's role and public exposure was essential for the public performance of the RHW threat, as he provided other actors and the issue itself with the legitimacy of a respected journalist from a leading national magazine.

Naturally, Kundra and *Respekt* were not the only ones who picked up this topic. Our interlocutors noted also the extensive and continuous investigative coverage of the Russian disinformation and influence networks pursued by the *Neovlivni.cz* portal throughout 2015 and 2016. While *Neovlivni.cz* could not match the national influence of *Respekt*, its articles dedicated to uncovering 'pro-Russian' disinformation websites resonated within the assemblage and helped to keep the issue on the agenda (*Neovlivni.cz* 2016). A similar role was played by the investigative portal *HlidaciPes.cz*, which maintains a special section dedicated to mapping Russian interests and activities in the Czech Republic and regularly republishes expert studies on the topic.

Security bureaucrats

The last core part of the assemblage consists of the bureaucratic and military actors who supported the campaign against RHW inside the main governmental agencies and in some cases also through cooperation with civil society actors. The first group, one that played a decisive role in the assemblage, was the initial CTHH team around MoI officers Benedikt Vangeli and Eva Romancovová, who were identified by our respondents as the main supporters of the RHW agenda

at the Ministry and who since 2016 have frequently made public appearances to speak about the issues of disinformation and foreign influence. While the core of their workload took place behind the scenes, Vangeli and Romancovová also became the public faces of policies aimed at countering RHW. Both also established close working relationship with EV, attended its events, liaised with the think-tank to organise study trips abroad and conferences, and shared information and experience with EV's foreign and domestic contacts (interviews, MoI, 5 May 2017, NCISA, 23 June 2017, EV, 8 September 2017). However, the connections of this group extended also to other civil society actors, such as PSSI, Masaryk University, and various journalists. The team at the MoI was responsible for the chapter on 'Foreign Power Influence' in the NSA, which was written in collaboration with EV (in turn, EV repeatedly praised the NSA in public).

Second, a group of high-ranking military officers, among others the Special Forces general Karel Řehka, became early promoters of the notion of RHW as a threat operating on Czech territory. Řehka later appeared also in events organised by EV, occasionally commented on RHW in the national media, and even wrote a chapter on hybrid threats and hybrid warfare in a book on the nature of change in contemporary societies [Krejčí 2016; Řehka 2015]. Another important military figure, Petr Pavel, former Chief of the General Staff and Chairman of the NATO Military Committee, also gave a series of interviews and appeared in conferences organised by EV or Jagello 2000. Besides military officers, our interlocutors also often mentioned a team of civilian planners and bureaucrats at the Defence and Strategy Division of the Ministry of Defence, acting under the auspices of Deputy Minister Jakub Landovský. Ministry of Defence (MoD) bureaucrats were also responsible for drafting the 'hybrid threats' chapter in the NSA, which adopted an explicitly military framing.

The third and least visible group was composed of the cyber-security experts of the National Security Authority, which was later transformed into the National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NCISA). This group was responsible for the 'Cybersecurity Threats' chapter in the NSA, which is rather technical and less expressive compared to those drafted by the MoD and the MoI. Accordingly, they were identified by our interlocutors as important supporters of a low-profile, bureaucratic, technical, and educational approach to the threats posed by RHW. Their role in the assemblage was thus confined mostly to backdoor bureaucratic negotiations and they were sceptical of the public, bombastic approach associated with EV and CTTH. NCISA staff also forged close ties with Masaryk University, none the least because of their shared location in Brno. This collaboration took the form of university lectures, providing researchers with access and information, and the recruiting of personnel from the ranks of university students (interviews, NCISA, 23 June 2017, NCISA, 6 September 2017).

Performing public/private actorness

We have argued that by entering the assemblage, actors' identities are somewhat altered. Assemblages produce new constellations and understandings of problems, but also new identities for actors who change their ways of acting upon the world by appropriating these understandings. In this section, we turn to the ways in which identities were reconstructed through participation in the Czech RHW assemblage, with attention paid to how actors redefined themselves in relation to the categories of public and private. Based on our data, and in particular the actors' own narratives from the interviews, we offer an ideal typology of different types of identity performances grounded in two sets of intersecting criteria. First, identity performances can be located on a continuum between 'reproductive' and 'transformative', defined by the extent of repetition versus change in identity through the performance. Second, this reproduction and transformation can relate both to the identity of actors themselves and to the actors' situatedness with respect to the public/private divide.

The purpose of this typology is to provide pragmatic tools for navigating a complex and messy social reality. However, it should not fool us into believing that actors can be easily pigeonholed into these categories or that actors always behave in a consistent manner. On the contrary, our study shows that identity performances through and within the RHW assemblage were characterised by paradoxical interplays of both repetitive and transformative aspects. The same actors often engaged in multiple practices, through which their identities were simultaneously both reproduced and altered. These different, yet often intersecting and intertwined patterns of behaviour are captured below. Due to our focus on identity performances through practices, we concentrate only on the most typical examples in each category and leave out the actors whose practices fell somewhere in between.

The first type is the reproductive performance of identity in the changed environment. For many actors, the RHW debate came as a new context that had to be responded to, yet without significantly altering one's own practices and identities. RHW served as a vehicle by which actors could present themselves as capable of dealing with the new situation. This aspect can be documented in the response of the state, or, more exactly, its leading policy-makers and agencies. The process of revising the Security Strategy and conducting the National Security Audit indeed served the very purposes of 'assisting the Government of the Czech Republic in its key task' [MFA 2015b: 30] and to 'verify the ... basic capabilities of the state' [MoI 2016: 8]. Put bluntly, by engaging in these practices, state agencies wanted to reinforce their identity as institutions that are able to fulfil their role also under the changed circumstances and in the context of the newly defined threats. This is relevant also for individual policy-makers. In particular, a number of our respondents argued that the driving force of the NSA process was the ambition of the Prime Minister and the Minister of the Interior to be seen as competent in matters of national security at a time when the public

was increasingly worried by uncertainties caused by Russia's aggression, terrorism, and mass migration to Europe (interviews, MoI, 17 March 2017, MoI, 5 May 2017, NCISA, 23 June 2017). Therefore, the RHW assemblage served as a context through which these public actors were able to reinforce and legitimise their identities as the citizens' defenders against security threats.

The polar opposite option was the emergence of a new identity through involvement in the RHW assemblage. By taking part in RHW debates and activities, some actors were able to change the repertoire of practices in which they were involved. The clearest example of this is EV and its key RHW figure Jakub Janda. Before 2014, EV was just one of the Czech think-tanks interested in foreign and security policy, arguably a smaller one, focusing predominantly on EU affairs. This changed completely with their RHW activities. As one of the interviewees put it, it was not clear how exactly it happened, but suddenly, 'EV could be seen everywhere' (interview, Masaryk University, Prague, 13 September 2017). The organisation used the opportunity to make RHW a key activity, but also to alter its broader character. From an organisation known chiefly within the policy community, they changed to an actor with high public visibility. This transformation can even be tracked quantitatively. Between 2014 and 2016, the number of EV's website visitors and media citations tripled, while the amount of Facebook followers doubled and their budget grew by almost 40% [European Values 2017e, 2017f]. Put simply, EV is now a different organisation than it was in 2014 and the RHW assemblage played an important role in this change. A similar process can be traced also for a number of individuals whose career paths and professional identities were significantly altered through their involvement with the RHW activities, such as Ivana Smoleňová of PSSI or Miloš Gregor and Petra Vejvodová from Masaryk University, all of whom became at a certain point public figures attached to this issue [see, e.g., Golis 2016; Světnička 2015a].

Participation in the RHW assemblage had an effect also on actors' identities with respect to the public/private divide. Certain actors were keen to reinforce the divide and stick to locating their identity firmly on one side of the boundary. Typically, this was the case of security professionals—for instance, from the MoI or the NCISA. They were keen to highlight their reservations about non-governmental experts and their participation in the policy-formulation process, especially through the NSA. One interviewee argued that it was 'nice to have' experts, but their advice was not really asked for (interview, MoI, 17 March 2017). Another suggested that external experts were unnecessary, since the most important data were already available to officials and 'it would be strange, if expert evaluations were different' (interview, MoI, 18 September 2017). This did not always mean that public actors would be completely dismissive, but rather that they saw their role as superior, since they were the ones who possessed the relevant expertise. Similar distancing was performed also by many of the academics we talked to. Contrasting themselves with the NGOs that were willing to work closely with the government, especially EV, many of them told us that they saw their role as con-

ducting independent and methodical research according to the standards usually required of it, regardless of the preferences of the government (interviews, Masaryk University 1, 6 September 2017, Masaryk University, 7 September 2017, Charles University, 31 October 2017). In other words, they were very keen to reinforce the rules attached to their identities as academics and not to compromise them by becoming too close to the government.

The final type of identity performance is the symbiosis of public and private actors, which had ambiguous and rather paradoxical effects on the public/private divide. On the one hand, by cooperating closely across the divide, actors on both sides were able to get access to novel ways of formulating and legitimising policies and to utilise this access as a source of symbolic capital within their respective fields. On the other hand, however, this cooperation was at the same time a source of mistrust and distancing within these very fields. The boundaries between the public and the private were thus reinforced and erased simultaneously through the complex interplay of close cooperation on the one hand and insistence on their original identities as a way of remaining relevant within their fields on the other hand. A prime example is the cooperation between the MoI and EV. EV were extremely vocal in making this liaison public, happily listing their supposed achievements in influencing policies (interview, EV, 8 September 2017; Janda [2017]). EV's Jakub Janda even highlights that he 'advises the Czech Ministry of the Interior' in the short bio under his articles [e.g. Janda 2016]. Similarly, an MoI official labelled the cooperation with EV as mutually beneficial, especially with respect to EV's role in organising conferences and collaborating within international networks created through EV's private efforts (interview, MoI, 5 May 2017). Both MoI and EV clearly benefitted from the cooperation, as EV gained privileged access to public decision-making in exchange for providing a quasi-independent voice to legitimise the very policies they helped formulate in public.

Conclusion

This article mapped the 'Russian hybrid warfare' assemblage—a constellation of public and private actors that redefined the understanding of national security in the Czech Republic. Emerging in the aftermath of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, it gradually took shape in 2014–2016, eventually managing to make 'hybrid warfare' a prominent trope in the official language and broader public debate. This was also accompanied by tangible policy outputs, such as the creation of the Centre against Terrorism and Hybrid Threats. Drawing upon an analysis of research interviews, documents, message groups, and conference programmes, we have shown that this transformation was a rather messy and contingent process, often arising from a haphazard co-occurrence of events. Constructing and holding the assemblage together required substantial work on the part of some of its key actors, such as the European Values think-tank, Ministry of the Interior

officials, and journalists like Ondřej Kundra. Consequently, the emergence and nature of RHW as a prime security issue was much less direct than it seems. It had to be gradually shaped and formed in complex public–private interactions, which could have taken a different route at any given moment.

We argued that participation within the assemblage had transformative effects on the identities of the actors involved, but also on how they contributed to the performance of the public–private distinction. Through their practices and interactions, actors participated in the paradoxical process of simultaneous erasure and reinforcement of the public–private boundary. Therefore, the assemblage perspective and our case study portray the public/private divide in a complicated and ambiguous manner. On the one hand, the boundary is a porous one, as cooperation between different actors was necessary for the RHW to emerge in the way it did. In constructing public policies, actors habitually transgressed these boundaries and engaged in hybrid relations—of symbiosis, for example—in order to acquire certain resources for themselves, such as ideas, information, or access to the public sphere. On the other hand, by defining oneself as 'public' or 'private' and performing the practices related to their fields along one side of the divide, actors gained acknowledgement and authority. Therefore, we argue that, rather than essentialised categories, 'the public' and 'the private' are characteristics that are constantly re-enacted in practice. Establishing oneself as a 'public' or a 'private' actor requires ongoing work, as do the maintaining and erasing of the boundary that occur simultaneously.

Offering an initial exploration of the RHW assemblage, our research leaves a number of important questions open to further investigation. In particular, we see three interesting avenues for further research. First, focusing on the Czech security community and local performances of public/private identities, we have left out the international connections of the RHW assemblage. Much more could be said about the ways in which Czech actors interact with their foreign partners, as debating and responding to 'hybrid warfare' is by no means just a local phenomenon. Second, our analysis of 2014–2016 could be productively embedded within a larger historical study of the discursive resources that were utilised and modified by the RHW assemblage. Clearly, techno-anxieties or fears of Russia are not a novel phenomenon and it would be relevant to look at how these longer-term discursive threats mutated into RHW and how they enable certain performances of the assemblage. Last but not least, by emphasising the cohesion of the assemblage and the success of its agenda-setting, we have backgrounded the elements of difference and dissent. Not everyone interested in RHW had the same understanding thereof and not everyone agreed with the dominant narratives and policies. Further research could also turn to the ways competition was marginalised and neutralised.

Jan Daniel *is a senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations Prague. He is also a part-time researcher at the Institute of Political Studies, Charles University. His main research interests include anthropological and sociological approaches to the study of international politics and security as well as politics in the Middle East (particularly in Lebanon and Syria). He has published on Islamist political movements and the political sociology of peacekeeping and security governance.*

Jakub Eberle *is a senior researcher at the Institute of International Relations Prague. His research interests focus on international relations theory, international political sociology, and Czech and German foreign policy. His work has appeared in such journals as* International Political Sociology, Foreign Policy Analysis, *and* Journal of International Relations and Development. *His monograph* Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War *is forthcoming with Routledge.*

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