

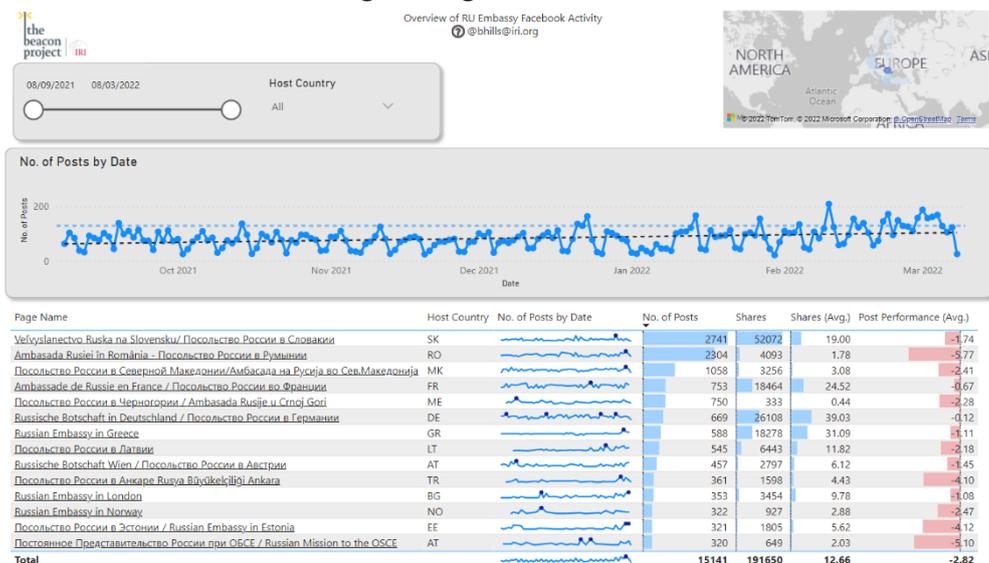
HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF: WAR IN UKRAINE

BRIEF NO. 1

MARCH 08, 2022

Top Line Summary:

- Support for Ukraine is generally strong across the EU with marches in solidarity with Ukraine held in major cities across Europe. One held in on March 06 Brussels was attended by approximately 5,000 people while one in Berlin a week earlier as attended by over 100,000 people.
- There are currently 2,011,312 of refugees outside Ukraine (status for the 8th of March 2022). Most of them are in Poland - 1,204,403 (59,88%), according to official UNHCR data (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>)
- Russian government media assets, RT and Sputnik, remain accessible in the EU despite the EU's announced ban on March 02.
- Telegram is emerging as a leading platform for both on the ground news and a swell in disinformation. While the platform has always had footholds in certain markets (east central Europe) initial insights are that the platform is growing in popularity in other European countries. This could be of particular concern as the company (based in Saudi Arabia) has often been less than cooperative in countering disinformation and hate speech on its platform.
- Key narratives promoted by the Kremlin fall flat for the general population but are being opportunistically used by traditional disruptive actors including extremist political movements, anti-immigration, and anti-vax groups.
- Some key narratives to monitor in the short to medium term are those related to anti-refugee narratives (particularly in countries bordering Ukraine), narratives targeting NATO troops being repositioned along NATO's eastern flank, and narratives targeting NATO and a perceived western imperialism amongst elements of far-left politics and in the Western Balkans.
- The Russian embassies have used their social media platforms to push the Kremlin's narratives. Particularly active are the Embassy Facebook pages for the Russian missions to two front line countries taking in refugees, Slovakia and Romania.





Key narratives:

Anti-refugee and broader anti-migrant narratives are likely to from the primary vector for pro-Kremlin actors and other extremist political opportunists to exploit in the short to medium term. Of particular concern are the Polish, Slovak, and Romanian media environments due to the large influx of Ukrainian refugees. The presence of foreign born residents of Ukraine amongst the refugees has been a particular angle reported on by disinformation outlets and anti-migrant groups with some suggesting that this is a continuation of the Belarussian governments attempts to foment a migration crisis on the Belarussian-Polish border at the end of 2021.

Potential Impact: The associated risk is that an increase in narratives hostile to the influx of refugees has the potential to erode support for the overwhelmingly positive response the bordering countries have shown to the refugees fleeing the war.

Geographic Scope:

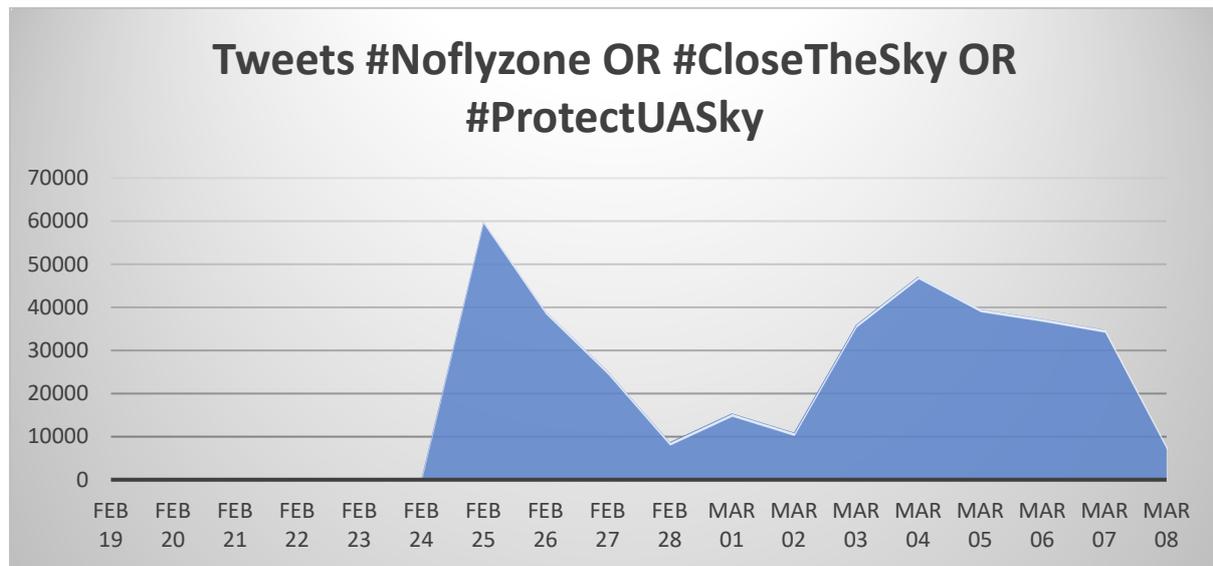
Primary risk: Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Moldova, Romania

Secondary risk: Wider Europe

The Beacon Project has been coordinating with partners in these countries to improve the information environment assessments available to stakeholders.

Anti-NATO narratives are likely to increase as calls for a NATO enforced No-Fly Zone over Ukraine grow and the Alliance seeks to bolster its presence in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to protect NATO's borders. During increases in NATO activity there is often an increase in anti-NATO narratives, this has been seen throughout Europe as a result of NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) or training exercises. As troop numbers in countries increase it is anticipated there will be attempts to undermine their presence by exaggerating or completely fabricating supposed misdeeds by foreign soldiers. Countless reports of disorderly behaviour have been debunked in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania,

and Poland since EFP began in 2017. It is anticipated that the longer there is an increased NATO troop presence in countries similar disinformation activities will be uncovered.



Potential Impact: The associated risk is that it can be used to reduce support for NATO forces deployed in countries along the Eastern Flank and can be used to entrench anti-NATO sentiments in countries where anti-NATO sentiment runs higher.

Geographic Scope:

Primary risk: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia

Secondary risk: Other NATO countries

EU

- (provided by IRI's Beacon Project partner [DisinfoLab](#)) While the EU has banned state-owned Russian media outlets RT and Sputnik and their subsidiaries, tech companies have been under pressure to limit the spread and algorithmic amplification of Russian trolling and disinformation campaigns. Amongst others, Twitter said it will label content from all state-affiliated Russian media; Facebook announced it is blocking access to Russian state media in the EU; and Google, YouTube, and Facebook claimed they are blocking Russian state media from running ads. Reddit and Apple have entered the fray (more in our [Hub](#)). However, a recent study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate on Facebook showed that “91% of 1,304 posts containing articles from Kremlin-funded media did not carry any warning labels”. Over the weekend, Russia responded to those measures by blocking Facebook and restricting access to Twitter. Russia has also cut access to several independent foreign media, including the BBC and DW.

In response to the EU's actions to ban access to RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik in the 27 Countries of the European Union on March 02 ([press release](#)). The Beacon Project team has done an initial review of RT and Sputnik outlets throughout Europe and have found that access to RT and Sputnik, including their country specific subsidiaries websites remain accessible a week after the ban was announced. While the web pages remain accessible most of their social media assets (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram) were blocked. However, Sputnik's German language Twitter account and RT's French language Telegram channel remain accessible.

Name	Platform	URL	Country/Lang	Status
RT	Web	https://actualidad.rt.com/	ES	Online
RT	Web	https://russian.rt.com/	RU	Online
RT	Web	https://de.rt.com/	DE	Online
RT	Web	https://francais.rt.com/	FR	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://sputniknews.com/	RU	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://mundo.sputniknews.com/	ES	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://snanews.de/	DE	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://fr.sputniknews.com/	FR	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://sputniknews.gr/	GR	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://it.sputniknews.com/	IT	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://it.sputniknews.com/	CZ	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://pl.sputniknews.com/	PL	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://rs.sputniknews.com/	RS	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://sputniknewslv.com/	LV	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://lt.sputniknews.com/	LT	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://md.sputniknews.com/	MD	Online
Sputnik	Web	https://bel.sputnik.by/	BY	Online
RT	Rutube	https://rutube.ru/channel/23174740	RU	Online
RT	VK	https://vk.com/rt_russian	RU	Online

RT	Live Journal	https://rt-russian.livejournal.com/	RU	Online
Ruptly	Ruptly	https://www.ruptly.tv/	EN	Online
RT	Telegram	https://t.me/rtfrance_officiel	FR	Online
Sputnik	Twitter	https://twitter.com/snaneews_de	DE	Online

- On March 8, European's parliament plenary discussed the report on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation. During a heated discussion, many MEPs (Members of the European Parliament) expressed their support for bans on Russian broadcasters. However, several MEPs also called for more stronger actions such as ban on Russian gas.
- On March 8, Sandra Kalniete (Member of European Parliament, former Minister of Latvia) held a press conference to present EP INGE committee [report on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation](#). The European parliament will vote on this report on Wednesday
- The CyberPeace Institute is conducting a research into Russian cyberattacks in Ukraine, it launched a "[Timeline of Cyberattacks on critical infrastructure and civilian objects](#)"

Situation in different European regions

V4

- On March 25 the Czech domain operator [blocked](#) eight websites spreading disinformation and Kremlin propaganda. Despite this ban some of the sites have already circumvented this by launching new domains. Well known disinformation outlet aeronet.cz was one of these banned sites launched a new site on the same day of the ban (aeronet.news) which is now hosted by US based company Go Daddy.

Whois Record for AeroNet.news

— Domain Profile

Registrant	REDACTED FOR PRIVACY
Registrant Org	Domains By Proxy, LLC
Registrant Country	us
Registrar	GoDaddy.com, LLC IANA ID: 146 URL: http://www.godaddy.com/domains/search.aspx?ci=8990 Whois Server: whois.godaddy.com/ .abuse@godaddy.com (p) 14806242505
Registrar Status	clientDeleteProhibited, clientRenewProhibited, clientTransferProhibited, clientUpdateProhibited
Dates	11 days old  Created on 2022-02-25 Expires on 2024-02-25 Updated on 2022-03-02
Name Servers	NS29.DOMAINCONTROL.COM (has 59,951,246 domains)  NS30.DOMAINCONTROL.COM (has 59,951,246 domains)
Tech Contact	REDACTED FOR PRIVACY REDACTED FOR PRIVACY REDACTED FOR PRIVACY, REDACTED FOR PRIVACY, REDACTED FOR PRIVACY, REDACTED FOR PRIVACY (p) x (f) x
IP Address	34.102.136.180 - 29,201,072 other sites hosted on this server 
IP Location	 - Missouri - Kansas City - Google
ASN	 AS15169 GOOGLE, US (registered Mar 30, 2000)
IP History	1 change on 1 unique IP addresses over 0 years 
Hosting History	1 change on 2 unique name servers over 0 year 

Additionally, as this action was carried out by the Czech Government and not part of the EU wide ban, the social media platforms do not appear to be applying this ban on their platforms with many of the site's social media accounts remaining active. This is not the first time Facebook seems to focus its efforts on the major markets while turning a blind eye to activities in other countries. These include those that are bordering Ukraine and will be taking in the lion share of the refugees. February 2022 [report](#) of the Centre for Countering Digital Hate also found that Facebook was failing to label 91% of posts containing Russian propaganda about Ukraine.

- In Slovakia, the government last week passed a law allowing the blocking of certain websites. One of the largest websites circulating Russian propagand (website's name in Polish is "report a troll") a, Hlavné Správy, has been blocked by the National Security Agency

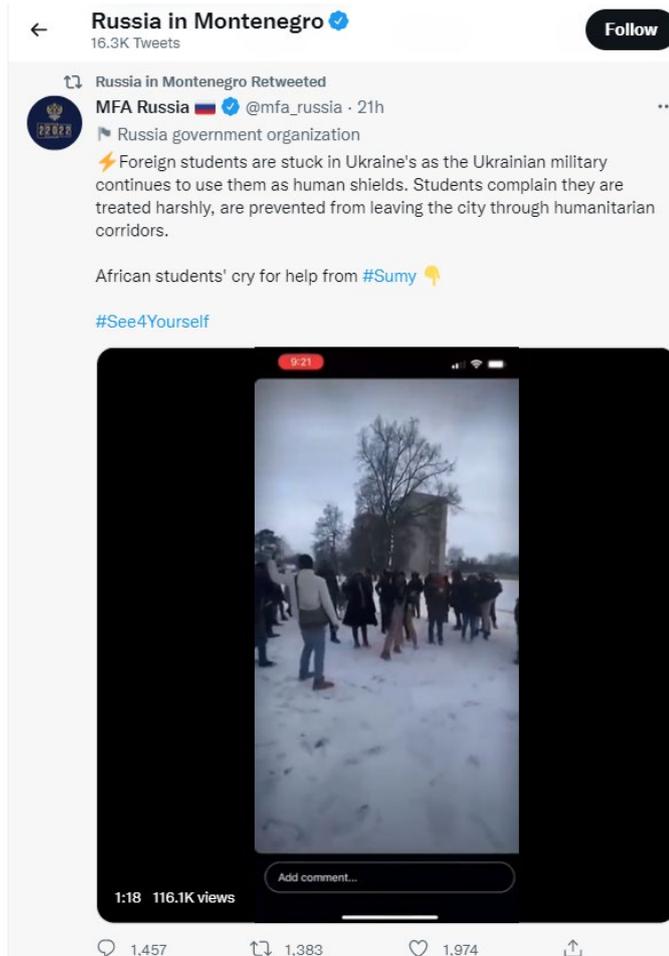
With similar domestic bans expected across other European countries it is necessary for the social media platforms to follow suit by banning these sites assets on their platforms as well.

- On February, the Polish NASK National Research Institute launched a new project focused on the verification of information "#WłączWeryfikację" (in English "Turn on verification") - <https://twitter.com/WeryfikacjaNASK> & <https://www.nask.pl/pl/wlaczweryfikacje/4413,WlaczWeryfikacje.html>
- On February, new Twitter account was launched in Poland - Demaskujemy dezinformację (in English "We expose disinformation") - https://twitter.com/przeciw_wojnie

- On February 24 Polish National Broadcasting Council [adopted a resolution](#) on deleting Russian programs from the register of television programs: RT (Russia Today), RT Documentary, RTR Planeta, Soyuz TV, Rossiya 24
- On March 7 in Poland a new website was launched via which every user can report suspicious addresses or social media posts: <https://zglostrolla.pl/> (website's name in Polish is "report a troll")
- **Follow newsletters of Beacon Project partners** - [Ukraine Essential](#) by GLOBSEC (Slovakia); Transitions (Czech Republic) newsletter [Beat](#)

Western Balkans

- CRTA published publication called [Analysis – Prelude to War: Serbian media on Ukraine](#). The analysis showed that, in the absence of the official statements due to the state's long hesitation to determine, mainstream pro-regime media report dominantly in favour of Russia.
- Serbian NGO KRIK and their debunking initiative RASKRIKAVANJE continue to provide analysis of the content in the media. The group of the investigative journalists found several tweets manipulating with photos and sources, impersonating CNN as the source [Fake news about fake news: fabrication of the un-existing CNN accounts](#). KRIK and groups of 5 organizations from the region gathered around [SEE Check](#) on February 17th started a Viber group Netacno I tocka! (Incorrect and Period!) on <https://t.co/8RpJ5Pj9MT> with an aim to debunk all fake news related to the war in Ukraine.
- While some of the Russian Embassies in the Western Balkans opt not to tweet after Russia's attacks on Ukraine (like Rus Embassy to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) twitter account of the Russian Embassy to Montenegro which is a NATO member is active and pushing for narratives on neo-Nazi acts in Ukraine



Baltics

Private sector – response of VLOPs (very large online platforms) and other media houses

Polish information space: new trends and challenges

War in Ukraine caused serious challenges in the Polish information space. Partially, they are connected with the still existing crisis on the Polish-Belarus border and illegal immigrants being used as weapon against Poland, EU and the West in general by the regime of Lukashenka. After the Russian invasion there was a serious spike in the topics of immigration. There is lack of significant research in this area, and the data being published by organizations or institutions close to the Polish state are limited, partial and incomplete.

Example from new private initiative Institute for Internet and Social Media Research (PL: Instytut Badań Internetu i Mediów Społecznościowych):

“In the last 24 hours, over 120,000 attempts of disinformation were recorded in the space of Polish social media on the topic #Ukraina #war #Russia

→ Increase of incidents by 20,000%

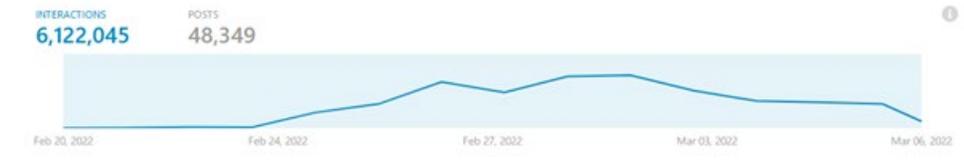
→ Drastic radicalization of anti-refugee groups operating mainly in anti #COVID channels"

<https://twitter.com/ibimspl/status/1498923913648263171>

*Tweet from the 2nd March 2022

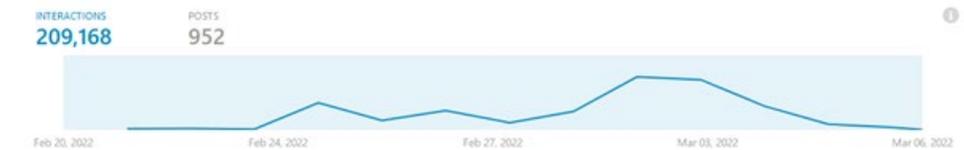
There were also rumors about the fact, that the negative sentiment in refugees-related content has risen by around 11000% during the first week after the Russian aggression. However, this type of statements are not publicly based on any methodology, with an unclear approach and dataset.

At the same time, we can confirm, that there is spike in the data mentioning refugees on Facebook, using CrowTangle tool:

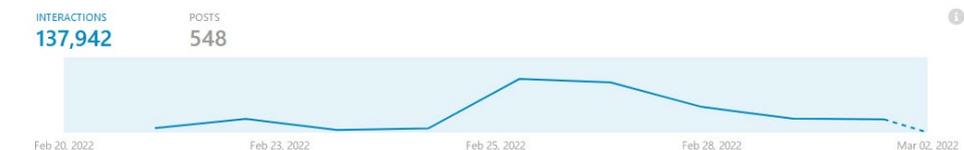


There were also data spikes around February 25th regarding the topics of:

a. immigrants:



b. “banderivec” term (pejorative name for Ukrainian nationalists in Poland):



As illustrated, the issue of refugees is getting a lot of traction. At the time being, there are 1,735,068 of them outside Ukraine (status for the 6th of March 2022). Most of them are in Poland - 1,027,603 (59,2%), according to official UNHCR data (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>). Poland is expecting even over 4 million refugees from Ukraine. Adding to this psychological effects of danger from Putin’s unpredictable regime, deteriorating economic situation as a result of the war (rising inflation, problems with accessing money from ATMs, rising gas and fuel prices), as well as really important historical factors, there is a significant possibility, that different internal and external actors would like to use this situation for different purposes.

What is noticeable even at this stage, right wing actors are using this situation to gain political capital. They are using narratives, that alongside the real Ukrainian refugees, there are also coming “illegal immigrants”, who earlier were used by Lukashenka on the Polish border. They are sharing anonymous videos and messages for instance about mothers and children from Ukraine are being attacked and thrown down the trains, so that they can come to EU. They are using also misinformation regarding students from Asia and Africa, who were working or studying in Ukraine, as a proof.

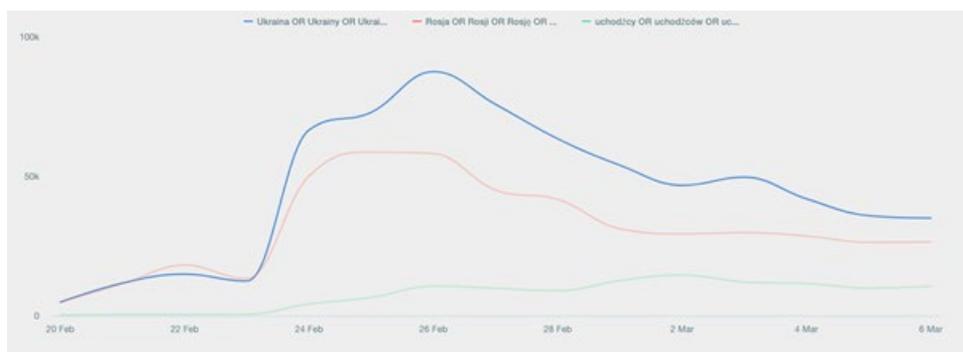
The topics of Ukraine, Russia and Putin are also gaining importance for the Polish Twitter. The decrease below could be partially attributed to the fact that a lot of discussions are on the daily basis and people started to phrase their thoughts and emotions in a more diversified way (e.g. writing directly about the situation on the border, on the front line or in specific cities or villages without mentioning Ukraine in general, and using synonyms or hashtags for the war related issues). As a proof to that, there may be the fact, that RF president name is on the rise in terms of mentions on Twitter – it is a reflection of changing emotional component against him.



In terms of the media publications, there were over 17 thousands publications mentioning Putin in two weeks, since the 20th of February:



As a comparison, there is also a slow but steady increase in the trend of writing about refugees:



It is safe to assume, that it will be growing. Although they may be cooling down on Twitter, the number of publications in the Polish news outlets is on the rise for Ukraine and refugees:



Just to summarize, there were almost 3 thousands articles about situation in Ukraine, almost 2,5 thousands articles about Russia and almost 600 articles about the refugees daily in Poland. What is worth mentioning, that is not the full picture, since database in Pulsar does not have all the media outlets writing in Polish.

There are main narratives used as information activities identified partially as a foreign hostile information operation. Among them there are, e.g.:

- Ukrainian refugees will have a negative impact on the demographic situation of Poland, making life difficult for the Poles and burdening the already barely efficient health care and pension system,
- Ukrainian refugees are (or soon will be) the cause of even more painful rise of inflation,
- Ukrainian refugees may be a cause for famine in Poland (helping them in the long run is unsustainable for the Polish state),
- Ukrainian refugees have priority over Polish citizens in hospitals and many Poles that will need medical assistance may suffer or die because of this policy,
- Ukrainian refugees will be the beneficiaries of Polish social assistance at the expense of Polish families and children,
- Ukrainian refugees are too much of a burden for the state budget,
- refugees from Ukraine may start persecution of Poles (historical and ideological contexts),
- Ukrainian refugees will bring crime and disease to Poland,
- Many of the Ukrainians coming to Poland are not vaccinated, which is used to attack the government for its previous strict COVID policies (like “Putin switched off the pandemic” - this is also one of the examples how accounts and other actors, who were previously focused on anti-vax activities are now shifting towards anti-Ukrainian and/or pro-Russian content).

All of them are being used simultaneously with the general anti-immigration narratives targeting people from the Middle East and Africa or anti-government narratives, e.g.:

- the current Polish government is not doing enough for the Poles and state,

- the current Polish government is not in control of the situation on the border,
- even the Border Guard cannot deal with border control,
- there are or soon will be new routes of illegal migrants through Ukraine.

They are all consistent with similar tendencies across the region, in other countries neighboring with Ukraine. What is paramount in regard to those narratives, at the beginning of March, there was a new development. Far right politicians and supporters, as well as football fans and hooligans circles in the social media profiles and public groups started to engage in “saving the local Poles” in the regions neighboring with Ukraine from the “illegal immigrants”. They activated their anti-immigrant messaging, which led to organizing “local patrols” in Przemyśl (city close to Ukraine, famous in the past for right wing radicals happenings, events and provocations), composed mostly from the hooligans of the local soccer clubs. It received more traction thanks to the support and generating hysteria from the Konfederacja party members. Those activities can be assessed as an important determinant for the future activities.

What is more, there are other mainstream media publications and messaging from right wing actors, who are basically defending the policies and actions of Russia. They could start or be combined with information, psychological and even kinetic activities in Poland, that would be targeting Polish, as well as Ukrainian or other population, including the neighboring countries’ information spaces.

Our initial research identified the following pages and groups on Facebook, really active with the anti-immigrant narratives (with the number of followers):

- 1 [Świat kibiców](#) (89,948)
- 2 [Konrad Berkowicz](#) (210,204)
- 3 [Grzegorz Braun](#) (229,245)
- 4 [Podkarpaccy Kibice](#) (44,990)
- 5 [Ruch Narodowy](#) (146,520)
- 6 [Czujny](#) (236,370)
- 7 [Nie dla Islamizacji Europy](#) (280,133)
- 8 [Tygodnik Solidarność](#) (24,246)
- 9 [KRESY.PL](#) (92,044)

- 10 [Wychowani na Stadionie](#) (62,644)
- 11 [Partia KORWiN](#) (253,677)
- 12 [wRealu24](#) (90,738)
- 13 [Jajami o Asfalt .pl](#) (341,182)
- 14 [Wredni są fajniejsi](#) (402,957)
- 15 [Info z Boisk](#) (95,008)
- 16 [Prawicowy Internet](#) (137,182)
- 17 [Michał Urbaniak](#) (16,737)
- 18 [Krystian Kamiński](#) (34,358)
- 19 [Własny punkt widzenia](#) (13,080)
- 20 [Młodzież Wszechpolska](#) (49,493)
- 21 [Polska Scena Kibicowska](#) (37,033)
- 22 [Nie chcę islamizacji Polski](#) (85,738)
- 23 [Edgar Wolność](#) (1,500)
- 24 [nowiny.pl](#) (32,376)
- 25 [Michał Nieznański](#) (5,814)
- 26 [MEDIA INFO TV. PL](#) (8,860)
- 27 [Polacy.PL](#) (28,429)

Moreover, we were able to identify a Twitter user who tweeted about the Facebook post with photos of immigrants outside of Europe, saying: “Dirtbags are passing through our Ukrainian border” (<https://twitter.com/Mariola40555264/status/1498737003957002252>):

The Tweet from @Mariola40555264 was then retweeted by others at least 11 times and also we have seen some examples where the tweet is being used to try and flag directly to politicians.

There are also other Twitter examples of hostile messaging against the Ukrainian refugees. Particularly viral was this tweet

(<https://twitter.com/PiotrStrzembosz/status/1500454256586993669>):

The user was claiming that the Polish hospital in Warsaw was not providing any medical assistance to Poles, only the Ukrainians. It was of course debunked in the reply. This account was also sharing a petition to the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs with questions about the “illegal immigrants” coming through the Polish-Ukrainian border and the safety of the border itself (the link can be found here: <https://twitter.com/PiotrStrzembosz/status/1499803624863580165>).

The scope of study would need to be much broader. From what we can see, is that the profiles that were active in the past with the issues of Ukraine (anti-Ukraine narratives) and vaccines (anti-vax communities) are interconnected. To a large extent they were posting and disseminating also anti-Western (anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-US, anti-Israeli, anti-German) and/or pro-Russian narratives at the same time. Furthermore, they are sharing similar content and sources. Creating a network map, as well as broadening the research to media outlets and other social media (Twitter, Telegram) would significantly increase the resilience building and informative functions of it. It could also help other CSOs in the region, who are facing right now their own waves of anti-immigrant narratives.

Possible new trends and narratives in Poland:

- in next week Polish audience may deal with periods of different intensity of information activities from the Russian and pro-Russian actors (since the same networks need to cover broad specter of topics, there may be relatively calm periods), but at the same time the quality and audience targeting may get more precise towards different groups of recipients (mostly towards the most vulnerable groups),
- there will probably be rise of cyberattacks and messaging outside of social media (like via SMS) about nuclear threat, growing level of radiation, obligatory military conscription, disease outbreaks, electricity or gas shortages (or other situations generating chaos and fear in the society – both on the local and national level),
- social and societal issues may get much more important and emotional for the Polish audience, especially in the regions neighboring with Ukraine and closer to Russian war,
- highly ideological and political content will also become more popular in Poland, especially if the war continues and the situation worsens,
- more negative stories, fake news mis- and disinformation about the Ukrainian refugees will be spread in the social and traditional media, but also the direct conversations among people will play more influencing role (harder to track and identify the source),
- if more foreign soldiers come to Poland, the more likely it will become to use the false or in fact accurate stories about the US soldiers to discredit NATO and build new, anti-Western messages and sentiments among the local and national audience (e.g., a fight between a drunk US soldier and a Polish citizen, rape or attack on Polish woman, etc..).

Later Opinion polls : <https://wapor.org/resources/ukrainian-public-opinion-2022/> .