

## HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF: WAR IN UKRAINE

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**BREIF NO. 4**  
**MARCH 29, 2022**

Period: March 21-28, 2022

**Top Line Summary:**

- **Online media content about the war in Ukraine has been declining.** Outlets have scaled back the non-stop coverage and have gone back to reporting on other news. This may **reduce the amount and quality of coverage and create space for more extremist voices.**
- *Anti-immigrant and far right movements continue to spread anti-refugee messages related to social welfare and suggestions that there are non-Ukrainian economic migrants mixed in with the flood of refugees. These conversations for now remain largely in the political fringes. Content that receives the most audience interactions on Facebook are actually announcements by companies contributing goods and services in support of the refugees.*
- *Anti-NATO content also remains on the political fringes, particularly on the far-right. While many of these groups are nationalist and do not openly support Russia, they use anti-imperialist messaging to support narratives that there should be focus on their country and current leaders are puppets of the West (NATO/ EU/ US).*
- Messaging about **increased consumer prices** (esp. petrol and natural gas), have continued to be one of the focal points of **anti-sanction and broader anti-war narratives.** While straightforward anti-sanction messaging remains largely limited to the far-right, there are a number of more mainstream opposition parties voicing concern about the rise in consumer prices including **former Czech prime minister Andrej Babiš.**
- *The official Facebook pages of 44 Russian Embassies in Europe continue to be highly active, however, this last week had a lower number of posts compared to the previous ones. They posted 958 times between 21-28 March (-113 than previous week) averaging 119.75 posts per day (133.88 in previous week). Despite an absolute value decline in interactions rates and shares, average interaction increased (234.36) and share (23.97) rates per post. Resulting in a net gain of approx. 2 additional shares per post over the previous week. The increase in shares is largely driven by posts from the Russian Embassy in Rome and Sofia. 11 posts in Italy averaged 303.55 shares and had an overall post performance that was approx. 12.5 times better than its average. Sofia accounted for 15 posts with 267.52 average shares and a performance score 4.5 times its average.*



To monitor the situation live, the Beacon Project has launched a [Facebook tracker to monitor the Russian \(and Chinese\) Embassy activity](#). You can contribute by providing links to the **Official Social Media pages of the Russian Embassies in your country**. Contact [beaconproject@iri.org](mailto:beaconproject@iri.org) to find out how you can contribute.

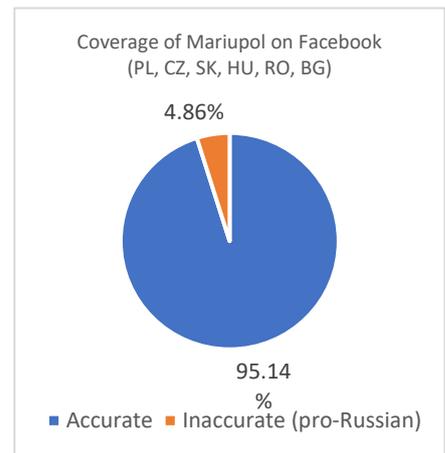
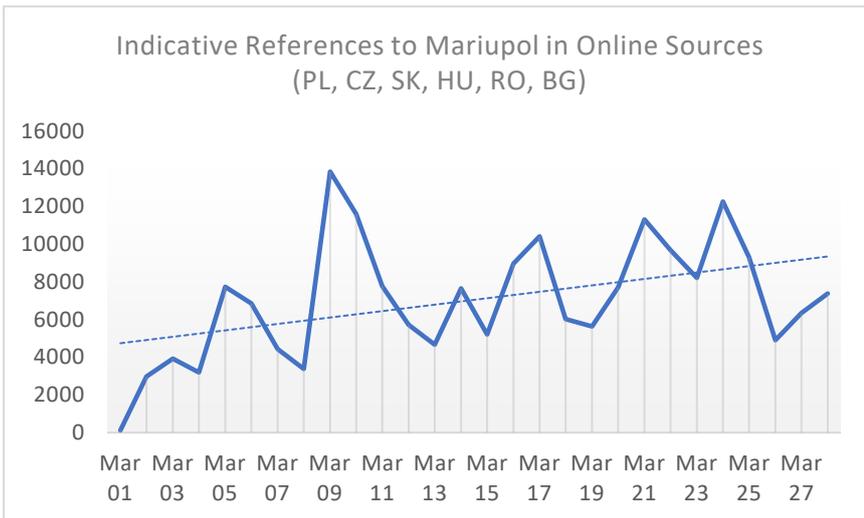
- *The most overperforming post from all the Russian Embassies was from the **Italian Mission** which addressed the cancellation of cultural events that are seen to be related to Russia by many Western countries and businesses. The [post](#) written in Italian said [automated translation]: “A message to #Moscow: “In some countries they have decided not to play #Šostakovič (sic), but we have decided that #Vivaldi's music is always beautiful. Culture cannot be erased.”*

*The post seemed to resonate with its audience on Facebook by **overperforming** the Mission’s average post by over 35 times and receiving 4,000 interactions and over 1,000 shares. The cancellation of Russian linked cultural events has the **potential to feed into the Kremlin’s talking points on Russophobia and potentially increase support for the Kremlin’s narratives from group critical of ‘cancel culture’.***

**Narratives**

**1) From the Headlines:**

The Russian siege of Mariupol and the bombing of civilian targets has been widely reported across major media outlets and social media. Although there have been some [videos shared](#) purporting to show Ukrainian civilians fleeing under fire of their own troops, the majority of coverage has been reporting on the Russian atrocities in the city including the bombing of the local theater and hospital. Assessing the top 100 most interacted with posts on Facebook across Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria between March 21-28 only 5 are spreading Russian narratives. Comparing the interactions, the posts received it becomes apparent that the pro-Russian content is much less engaged with by the Facebook audience. In total the 5 pro-Russian content received 20,955 (4.8%) total interactions compared to the 409,968 (95%) interactions of the 88 fact-based accounts.



Data from Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Youtube, Online News, Forums, and Blogs (source: Pulsar & CrowdTangle)

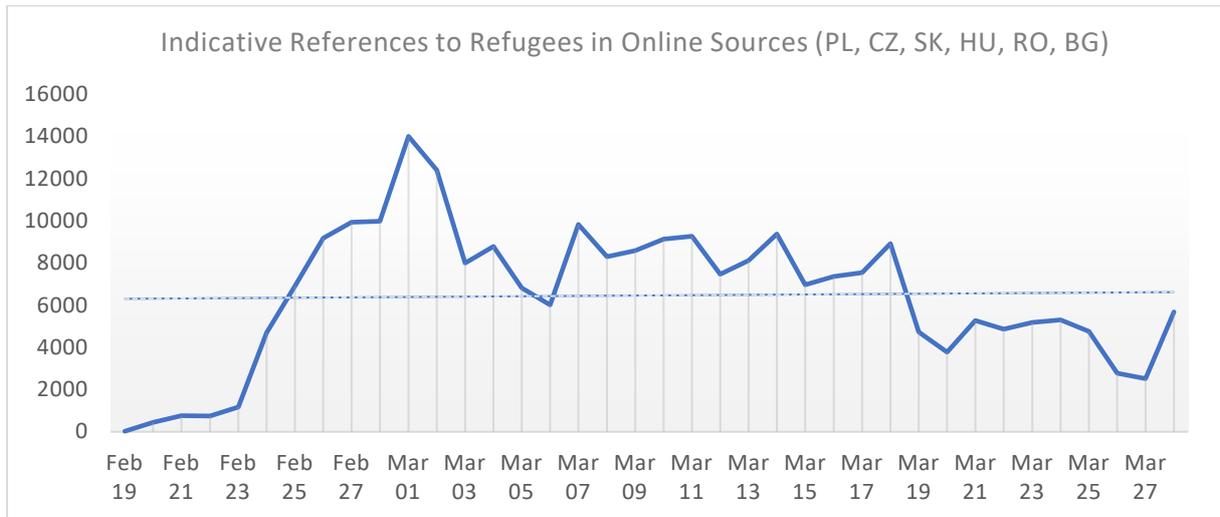
The most interacted with pro-Russian post, came from a [Romanian Facebook Page](#) which **claims to be a ‘satire’ site, but is actually promoting Russian narratives in an apparent attempt to circumvent take down actions that may be initiated on social media platforms.** The page has a following of 23,000 people on Facebook and the video posted about Ukrainian civilians coming under attack by Ukrainian troops received more than **150k views.** While his [YouTube channel](#) receives much less attention with only 2.75k subscribers.

**2) Medium/Long-Term:**

**ANTI-REFUGEE AND BROADER ANTI-MIGRANT**

While references to refugees across multiple online platforms has remained high since the Russian invasion there has been a downward trend since March 20. In general, coverage is overwhelmingly sympathetic to Ukrainian refugees and the local communities supporting them. However, far-right groups continue to use the crisis to spread negative narratives by [exploiting cases](#) reported in popular media outlets of Ukrainian refugees crossing the border with [luxury cars and goods.](#) Other nationalist

movements continue to focus on messaging that highlights the perceived special treatment that refugees receive at the expense of local citizens.



Data from Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Youtube, Online News, Forums, and Blogs (source: Pulsar & CrowdTangle)

**Assumed Target Audience:**

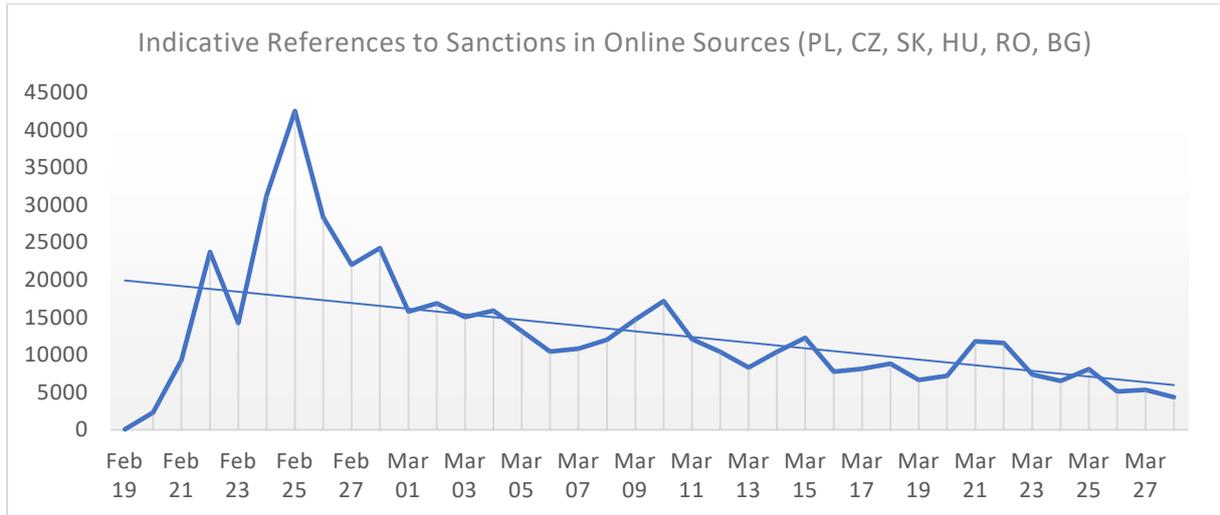
**General public** of bordering countries (**Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova**), **Far-Right political actors, Anti-immigrant movements**

**Potential Impact:**

The **primary risk** as major media outlets begin to shift away from non-stop coverage is that more attention will go to outrageous misinformative stories, often extrapolating narratives from isolated and/or unverified incidents. These are likely to be exploited by extremist groups that seek to take advantage of post-pandemic inflation and regional instability. Although still on the political fringes and generally receiving less than 10% popular support, there is a possibility these movements will feed off the discontent to consolidate niche political positions. While the majority of coverage continues to come from quality media outlets, its reduction provides a **medium risk** that more extremist narratives will fill the space.

**ANTI-SANCTION/CONSUMER PRICES**

References to sanctions has consistently trended down since the initial announcement of Western sanctions, however, some initial Facebook data indicates that conversations more broadly about consumer prices remain consistent. Although explicit support for sanctions in major media outlets is likely to remain, increased attacks on government handling of the economy has the potential to decrease long term support for sanctions, which are perceived as a direct cause for higher energy costs.



Data from Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Youtube, Online News, Forums, and Blogs (source: Pulsar & CrowdTangle)

Keyword matching from public Facebook pages from Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania revealed 6,319 posts referencing sanctions or consumer price increases related to the crisis in Ukraine between Feb 20 – Mar 28. Reviewing the top producing sources showed that the majority (72%) of content is coming from pages likely to post factual information. Of the top 15 most active pages between Mar 21-28, four were pages likely to share anti-sanction content. However, when sorting by pages with the most interactions during this period, 8 are from are more likely to share anti-sanction content - including the leader of the Czech far-right SPD party [Tomio Okamura](#) and the former pro-Russian president of Moldova, [Igor Dodon](#). Dodon’s [post](#) was a clip of Putin accompanied by text in Romanian and Russian that **called on Moldova to not join any sanctions and maintain political and economic neutrality**. It was viewed over 350k times and shared 2k times.



References to Sanctions or Price Increases related to Ukraine on Facebook (source: CrowdTangle)

**Assumed Target Audience:**

**General Public**

**Potential Impact:**

The **primary risk** remains that inflation and consumer prices will be exploited for political gain by both major opposition parties and extremist political actors. Combined with reports that Russia will reduce the scope of its operations in Ukraine and peace talks there is a **high risk** that public support for the current sanction regime will weaken. A more thorough monitoring of political parties messaging and public opinion research would be required to produce a detailed risk assessment.

**ANTI-NATO**

General references to NATO in online media remain significantly above pre-invasion averages but have been trending down. More detailed searches of public Facebook pages focusing on keywords that have the potential to reflect Anti-NATO narratives resulted in 1,134 post between Feb 20 – Mar 28. This included a significant spike on Mar 24, which marked the anniversary of the NATO bombing campaign on Serbia in 1999. The majority (72%) of the top producing pages are assessed to be likely posting factual information supportive of NATO.



References more likely to reflect anti-NATO messages on Facebook (source: CrowdTangle)

Of the top 15 most active pages between Mar 21-28, only 2 are more likely to contain anti-NATO content but did not received a significant amount of interactions on average. However, the post that received by far the most interactions was an anti-NATO message from Slovak socialist MP Ľuboš Blaha in which he called NATO mass killers. The post overperformed his average resulting in 14.7k interactions and over 3k shares on Facebook.



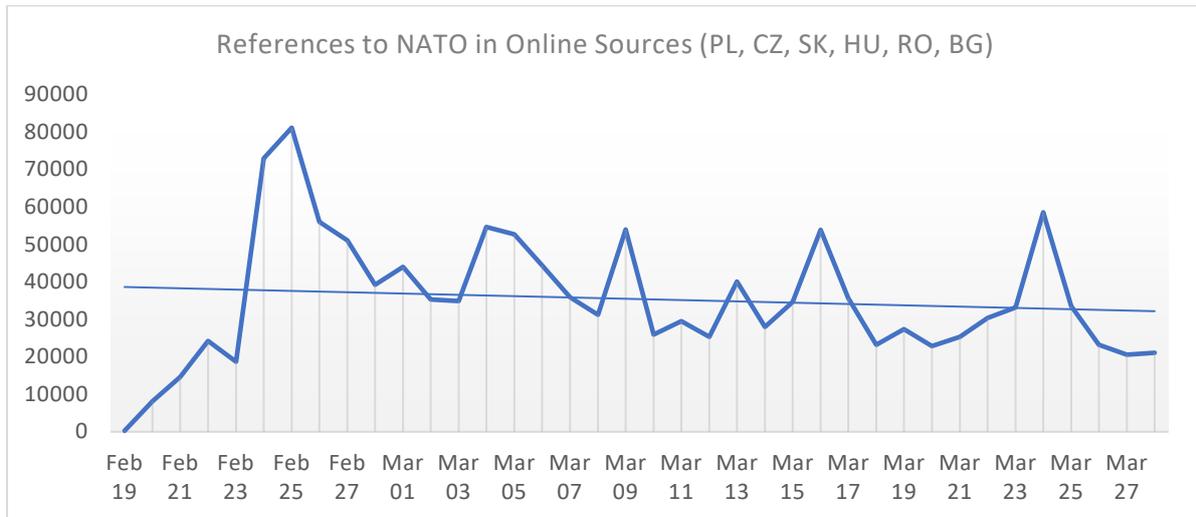
**Assumed Target Audience:**

**Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, other NATO member states.**

**Potential Impact:**

The **primary risk** remains that anti-NATO narratives will become increasingly interwoven with anti-refugee and anti-sanction narratives to build a broader base of support receptive to this messaging. However, currently coverage remains high among fact-based sources more likely to support NATO

providing less space for anti-NATO narratives in the mainstream. For this the current risk of significant anti-NATO sentiment appealing to the general public is **assessed to be low**.



**Country and Regional Overview:**

**Poland:**

- Anti-Ukrainian content is still trending on Twitter in Polish (over 14K tweets since February 1, over 3K in the last week), and over 1K news articles (almost 100 in the past week):



(source: Pulsar)

- Contrary to the anti-refugee narratives from a few years ago, anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee narratives focus on the economic aspects of Polish state aid to Ukraine. Reluctance towards incoming Ukrainians is by pointing out that while Polish society opposes the war, there is no support for the economic migration of Ukrainians. One example is a new FB profile called: “NO for financing Ukraine from Polish taxpayer money”



- The Russians distributed another video purporting the mistreatment of Russian prisoners Ukrainian soldiers. The video showed alleged Ukrainian soldiers shooting Russians in the legs, clearly intending to demonstrate equal hostility and undermine sympathy for Ukraine as the victim of aggression. This story was broadly commented in the Polish information space, [speculating about the authenticity](#) of the video.
- One of the most vocal pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian actors in Poland remains the president of the KORWiN party and one of the leaders of Konfederacja coalition – MP Janusz Korwin-Mikke. A [new video](#) started circulating on Polish social media, in which he said: “It would be a tragedy for Poland if Ukraine won the war crushingly. When Ukraine wins the war, it will appear on our borders and demand Przemyśl, Chełm” (which for years was one of the Russian anti-Ukrainian narratives) – this quote was more popular than the video itself.
- The second situation connected with Korwin-Mikke was his statements during an interview with editor Piotr Barełkowski from the Polish Radio Poznań. He said that:
  - He respects the Russian system of government because "there is less democracy there than in Poland and therefore Russia is richer than Ukraine"
  - We "know nothing about the war in Ukraine, because there is monstrous censorship."
  - Mariupol, mired in a humanitarian catastrophe, was "an obvious Ukrainian act, Poles do not see it."
  - He also said, "I defend European values and of the great leaders only His Excellency Vladimir Putin defends European values. In Europe you could be spanked, in the European Union you cannot"
- Barełkowski was fired following the interview. According to the official statement: “he did not maintain his journalistic professionalism and did not comment on the scandalous words and opinions of Janusz Korwin-Mikke, which required it, and concerned the Russian aggression against Ukraine.”
- Highly violent content continues to be distributed by far right-wing supporters and anti-vax accounts on Polish Twitter (mostly anonymous), presenting Ukrainians as brutal, backward, “representatives of a different race” and/or “mentality”, and thus – “not suited” for Europe and its culture, legal systems and societies. They are also accused of committing atrocities against ethnic Russians in Donbas (those stories are often directly taken from Russian state propaganda in Russian language – like in [this example](#) with the comment: “For 8 years, Europe has not seen Ukrainian Nazis kill people in the Donbas”). Other stories on Twitter concern [humanitarian aid from Russia](#) to Eastern Ukraine (continuing trend of sharing the content from the Telegram channel “Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny” (Independent Political Journal) - [https://t.me/s/ndp\\_pl?before=1600](https://t.me/s/ndp_pl?before=1600)).
- One of the most viral fake news in Poland was of a firefighter in protective clothing bearing the inscription "Edmonton." This contributed to the conspiracy theory that the bombing site

was not really in Lviv, as [fakenews.pl reports](#): “The tweet suggesting that the bombing did not take place in Lviv was retweeted almost 6,000 times, gaining a total of over 13,000 likes. Its version on TikTok has also gained great popularity. The most widely shared video with this conspiracy theory was displayed on this portal over half a million times. The thesis also found its way to Facebook, and even appeared on the Polish account of the propagator of conspiracy theories, MP Grzegorz Braun, a Confederation politician.”

- The evolution of the anti-vax accounts continues. One example of how anti-vax content is being combined with anti-Western and anti-Ukrainian narratives: “NATO is fighting for peace just like Pfizer and Biontech are fighting for your health”:



- In response to Russian activities Poland expelled 45 Russian diplomats.

**Stanisław Żaryn** @StZaryn · 23 mar  
 Poland's Internal Security Agency ([#ABW](#)) has identified 45 individuals - Russian secret services officers and persons related to them enjoying diplomatic status in Poland.

Their expulsion from the territory of Poland is requested by the Head of the ABW.



gov.pl  
 45 Russian 'diplomats' to be expelled - Special Services - Gov.pl webs...  
 Poland's Internal Security Agency (ABW) has identified 45 individuals - Russian secret services officers and persons related to them enjoying ...

- “A group of 45 Russian citizens, identified by the Internal Security Agency as officers of the Russian special services and persons associated with them under diplomatic cover and whose expulsion was requested by the Head of the Internal Security Agency, are no longer on the territory of our country.”

**Stanisław Żaryn** @StZaryn · 28 mar  
 Grupa 45 obywateli rosyjskich, których ABW zidentyfikowała jako oficerów rosyjskich służb specjalnych i osoby z nimi powiązane pod przykryciem dyplomatycznym i o których wydalenie zawnioskował SzeF ABW, nie przebywa już na terytorium naszego państwa.



gov.pl  
 45 rosyjskich "dyplomatów" do wydalenia - Służby specjalne - Portal ...  
 Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego zidentyfikowała 45 osób – oficerów rosyjskich służb specjalnych i osób z nimi powiązanych, ...

- Ukraine's communication activities included visualizations of the bombing of several cities, including Warsaw as part of their appeal for support: [Warsaw, Paris, Berlin ... Shocking visualization - this is what European capitals would look like under fire | Polish Press Agency](#)
- The [Government Security Center](#) identified current Russian propaganda narratives, directed towards the Polish society, including possible nuclear attack:



Rządowe Centrum Bezpieczeństwa @RCB\_RP · 29 mar

The Russian propaganda narrative lines that are supposed to evoke a sense of threat and fear in Polish society about the consequences of supporting the security of Ukraine.



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### Czech Republic:

- As the government introduces benefits and reimbursement schemes for households hosting Ukrainians, there are new narratives about prioritizing refugees over the needs of citizens. This is often combined with hoaxes regarding ungrateful behavior of Ukrainians, such as pictures of boxes of food donations left by the Ukrainians on the train which took them to the Czech Republic. To counter this, public radio stations iROZHLAS.cz and Radiožurnál started a new disinformation debunking series - [Ověřovna!](#) (Verification point). The Czech Republic has issued over 245,000 visas to Ukrainian refugees since the war began. The national state of emergency due to the refugee crisis was extended until the end of May.



(source: iROZHLAS)

- On March 23, Petr Fiala's government [appointed](#) a new government commissioner for media and misinformation, Michal Klíma. The government decided to create this position at the beginning of the month. Among others, Klíma will coordinate disinformation responses and strategic communication of Czech ministries.
- *For more information see our local partners activities:* [Association for International Affairs \(AMO\)](#), [Prague Security Studies Institute \(PSSI\)](#), [Manipulatori.cz](#)

#### Slovakia:

- Slovakia has decided to decrease the number of Russian Diplomats in the country by 35. The Ministry of Interior [informed](#) that the activities of embassy staff were not in line with the Vienna convention.
- More than 30% of Slovaks [believe](#) that the war in Ukraine was deliberately provoked by the West, and Russia only responded to this provocation. According to poll results, people who believe that life in Slovakia was better during communism tend to believe these pro-Russian narratives.

*For more information see our local partners activities:* [Globsec](#), [Infosecurity.sk](#)

#### Romania:

*For more information see our local partners activities:* [Global Focus](#), [Expert Forum](#)

#### Bulgaria:

*For more information see our local partners activities:* [Center for the Study of Democracy](#), [Institute for Global Analytics](#)