

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF: WAR IN UKRAINE

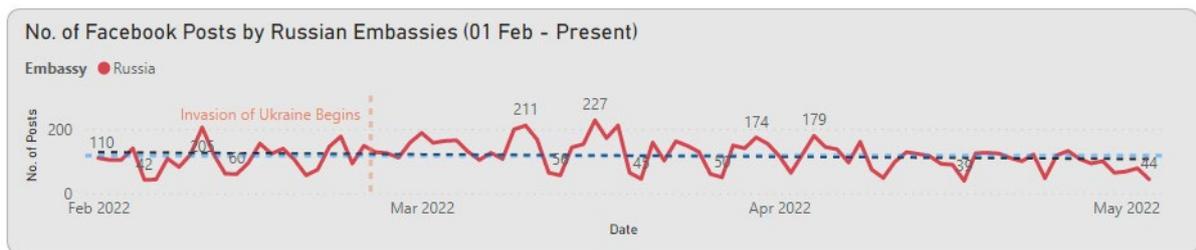
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MAY 04, 2022



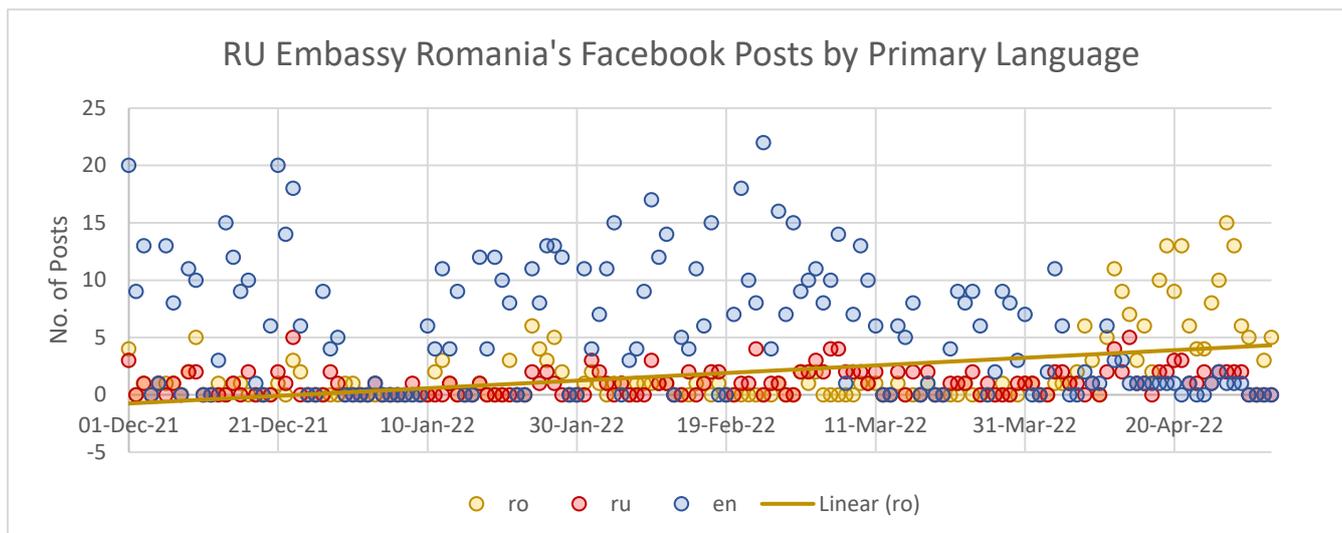
Period: April 18 – May 03, 2022

Top Line Summary:

- **Political parties on the far-right continue to have an outsized voice on Facebook.** Activities in **Bulgaria** should be monitored more closely as the far-right **Revival party** remains highly active and engaged with at a time of increasing political instability in the country.
- **The bleak economic forecast across Europe is among the leading drivers of anti-refugee and anti-sanction messaging.** The messaging appears to resonate with Romanian, Bulgarian, and Czech audiences on Facebook.
- Several Member States are seeking exemptions to further sanctions due to the **economic impact of sanctions targeting Russian energy exports – this is likely to impact further unified EU actions.**
- **‘Pro-peace’ and anti-imperialist (anti-US) narratives continue to be the basis of anti-NATO messaging.** Opposition parties often portray their governments as promoting US and EU interests over domestic interests.
- The official Facebook pages of **44 Russian Embassies in Europe** continue to reduce their **posting activity**. The last two weeks (April 18 - 3 May) saw a **lower number of posts** (avg. 97.31/day) compared to the prior two-week period (avg. 109.87/day). This also impacted the **average number of interactions which declined from 323.83/post down to 305.61/post** during the same period.



- **The Facebook page of the Russian Mission to Romania switched their primary posting language from English to Romania in mid-April.** The switch to Romanian appears to be working as Romanian posts average more interactions (262.05) and shares (15.34) than their English posts (50.37 interactions/1.95 shares). **Since April 12, when the pages started posting more in Romanian language, the Page has seen an average increase of +72.17 interactions and +4.24 shares.**



Data from Facebook's CrowdTangle

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 to find out how you can contribute.

Narratives

1) From the Headlines:

The potential of Sweden and Finland joining NATO during the Madrid Summit remains a topic of discussion. During the last two weeks the majority of conversations that received the most interactions on Facebook in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria were largely [fact-based](#) reporting with only a limited number of posts containing [anti-NATO messaging](#). Of the top 50 most interacted with posts only 7 contained anti-NATO sentiment, while 43 presented the facts or support for the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO.

2) Medium/Long-Term:

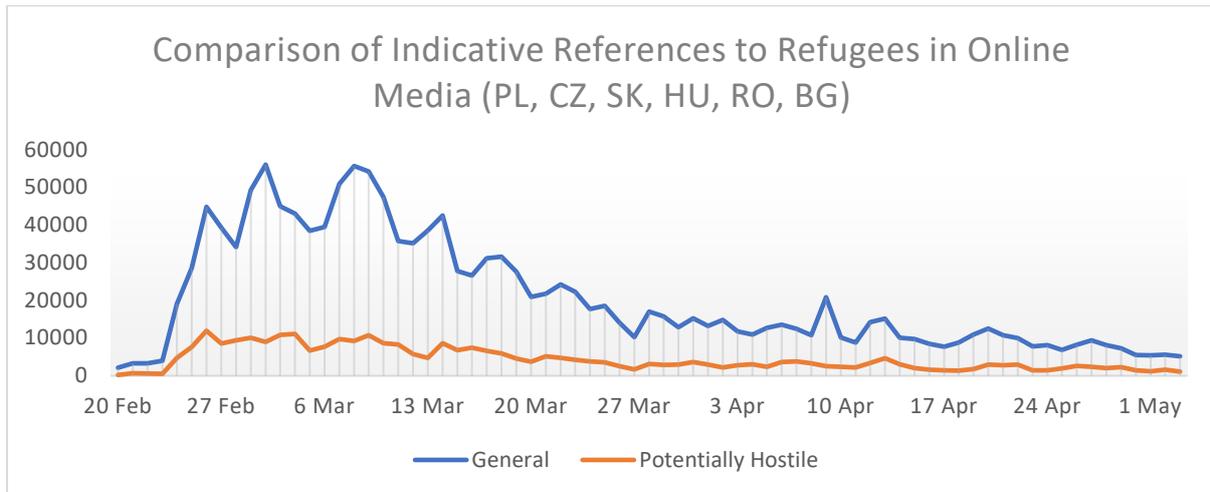
ANTI-REFUGEE AND BROADER ANTI-MIGRANT

General references to refugees continue to trend down across multiple online platforms without appear to reach a new baseline value. The 7-day average for general references to refugees in the V4+RO+BG is **around 7,000**. General coverage **remains sympathetic to the refugees**, however, examining the most interacted with posts on Facebook shows that citizens criticizing the political and social realities within their own countries is increasing.

This has been most apparent the last two weeks in Bulgaria where [criticism of Prime Minister Kiril Petkov](#)'s request for Bulgarian's to donate one month salary to support Ukraine has been used to **attack the Petkov Government's handling of the situation** and highlights the **growing political instability in the country that could result in new elections**. Additionally, the most interacted with posts in the Czech Republic are highly critical of the government with **17 out of the top 20 interacted with posts mentioning refugees being critical of the government and 14 of them being from the [far-right SPD party](#)**.

Amongst the most interacted with post on Facebook in Romania was content about [refugees gaining employment in Romania](#). **While the posts themselves were presented in a factual manner a sample of the comments to the posts shows that they contain a significant number of anti-**

refugee remarks focusing primarily on how Ukrainians are given preferential treatment in the job market.



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:

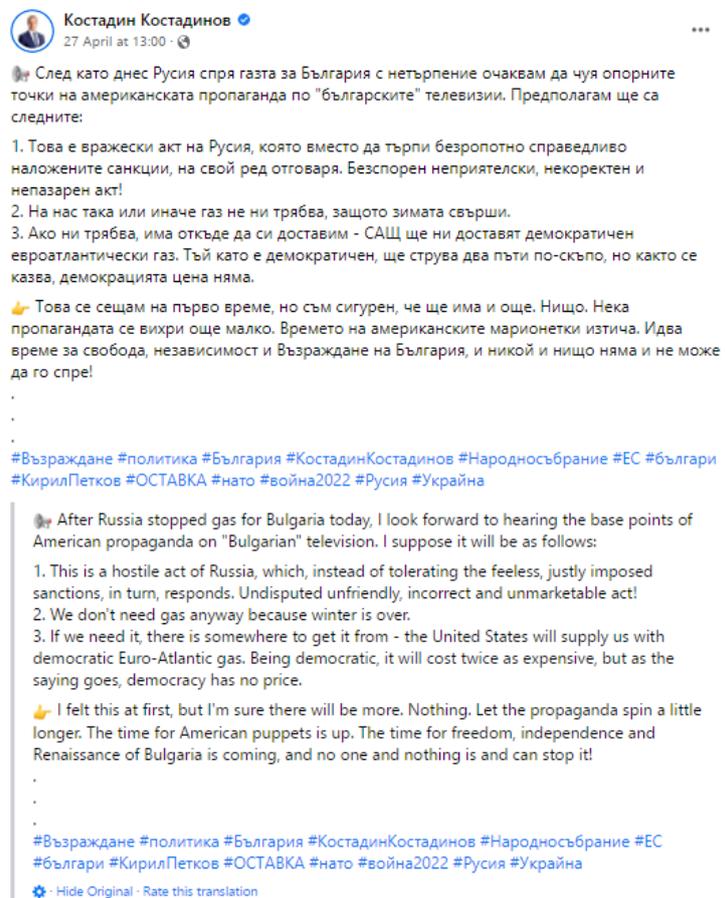
The **primary risk** is that as refugees become increasingly integrated in their host countries - finding jobs and accessing social services and education - there will be an increase in content criticizing them and the national governments. Combined with worsening economic outlooks it can provide an outlet for frustrations that will benefit extremist political parties. With the proportion of potentially hostile content increasing compared to those with more general references to refugees to approx. 27% of the total coverage it is likely to increase the visibility of these messages and potentially increase support for anti-Ukrainian narratives.

Based on samples of Facebook posts, Romania and Bulgaria appear to provide fertile ground for anti-refugee narratives while the large online visibility of the **Czech far-right SPD party should also be watched closely**. The **political instability in Bulgaria remains of primary concern as snap elections may provide an opportunity for extremist political parties to turn the current crisis in to electoral gain and further legitimize their positions**. Despite these risks, the major political parties across Europe continue to show support for the refugees so the risk for undermining Europe's resolve on the issue is assessed to remain at a **medium risk**.

ANTI-SANCTION/CONSUMER PRICES

The discussion about new sanctions targeting Russian energy exports dominated the conversations on Facebook related to the sanctions. The majority of the content was critical of sanctions and the economic harm it could have on European economies. Of the examined content **Polish language posts were the only ones that were demonstrably in support of sanctions and came from both government and opposition politicians**. Looking at content in Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian the messages were much less cleared. The top 50 most engaged with posts related to the sanctions that were examined contained **34 (68%) posts that could undermine support for the sanctions** and only 16 (32%) that clearly support the sanctions.

A [post](#) by the leader of the far-right Bulgarian party, Revival, Kostadin Kostadinov received the most interactions (15,990 including 2,000+ shares) of all content critical of the sanctions and contained strongly anti-Western sentiment. The far-right Republika party in Slovakia's [post](#) received the second most interactions of sanction related content. Both of these parties have maintained an outsized voice in the online discussions related to Ukraine and highlights a trend of far-right political parties utilizing the war in Ukraine for their messaging.

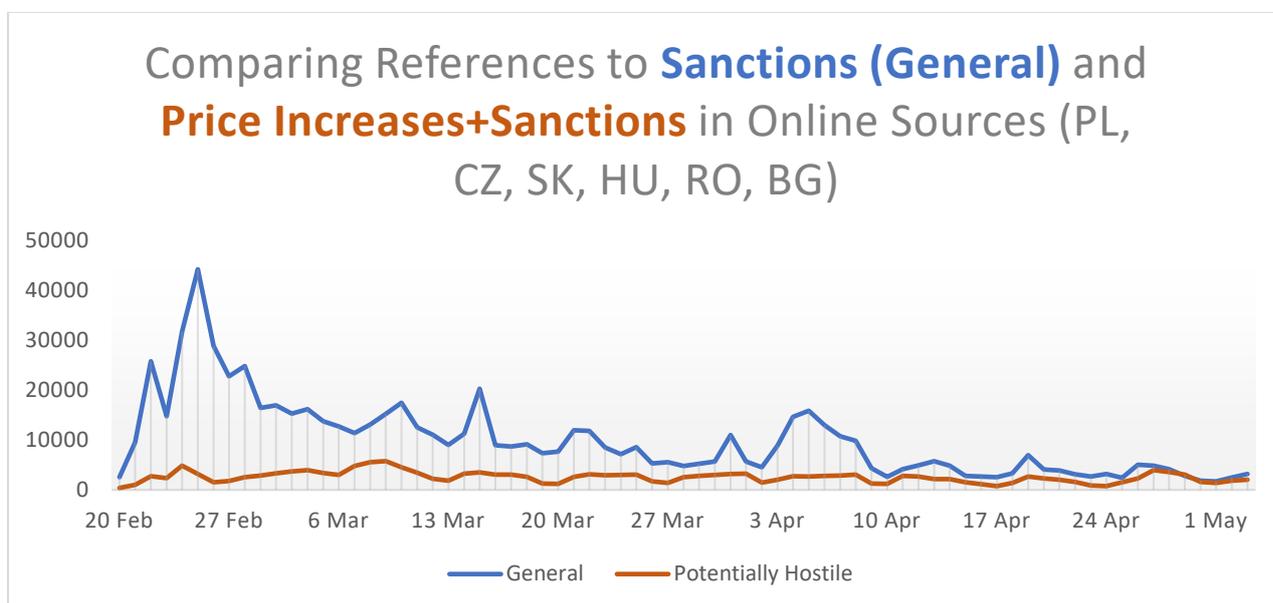


Assumed Target Audience:

General Public

Potential Impact:

With the announcement of new sanctions this week likely to cause an uptick in general sanction related content, the trend of potentially hostile messaging increasing its proportion of the conversation continues. April 29 marked the **first time that the posts containing content that potentially undermines the sanctions outnumbered generic sanction conversations** (3,078 posts compared to 2,808, respectively). Content that has a higher probability of containing **anti-sanction messaging has increased to a 7-day average of over 80% of all content mentioning the sanctions**. With a number of countries (including Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) expected to request exemptions to any sanctions targeting Russian energy exports, it appears that it is **an end to a unified European sanction regime**. With anti-sanction content accounting for a higher proportion of the conversation on sanctions and economic difficulties expected to continue for the foreseeable future it is assessed that there is a **high risk that support for sanctions will continue to decrease** without a significant elevation in Russian aggression or robust financial support mechanisms from the European Union.



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

ANTI-NATO

General references to NATO in online media have continued their downward trend toward pre-invasion levels, however, conversations about the future membership of Sweden and Finland have caused the volume of mentions to increase.

The most engaged with Facebook post referencing NATO in general terms was from the Facebook page of **Kostadin Kostadinov, from the Bulgarian far-right Revival party. Of the top 10 most engaged with posts mentioning NATO 5 of them were from him**. This continues a trend with content from Revival being some of the most engaged with content in relation to refugees, sanctions, and NATO over the last two-week period. Also in the top 10 most engaged with posts on NATO are two posts presenting **anti-NATO messaging from Slovak opposition leader, Luboš Blaha**, whom has regularly featured as one of the highest performing anti-NATO voices since the February 24 invasion.



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

Assumed Target Audience:

General public of NATO allies (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria), **Far-Right political actors**, **Far-Left political actors**

Potential Impact:

Support for NATO remains high and critical voices remain largely confined to the political extremes, however, recent [statements by Pope Francis](#) and the prospect of Finland and Sweden joining NATO are likely to significantly increase the narrative that NATO is a destabilizing force. The risk that political parties across the ideological spectrum and including some from mainstream parties may promote anti-NATO narratives is likely to increase and reduce the likelihood of more robust military engagement from NATO Allies to counter Russian aggression, **the risk to overall support for NATO is assessed to be low.**

Country and Regional Overview:

Poland:

- On April 25, [Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki publicly confirmed](#) that Poland handed over Polish tanks to Ukraine, without giving much details. According to the available information, there were 236 T-72M1 and T-72M1R tanks. In return, Great Britain has pledged to donate its Challenger 2 tanks to Poland. So far, Poland has supported Ukraine with military equipment worth 7 billion PLN (around 1,49 billion EUR). The so far donated military equipment includes the 2S1 Goździk self-propelled howitzers and the Grad rocket launchers.
- [Disinfo Digest published](#) selected disinformation theses of Russian information activities aimed at the perception of Poland's security and the presence of NATO troops on the eastern flank of the alliance in the period 25-29 April:
 - Poland has lost control over US forces in Poland due to their exclusion from the Polish law,
 - Allied troops in Poland are frightened by a potential conflict with Russia,

- US troops stationed in Poland do not have the appropriate morale to participate in combat, they are good only for confrontation with unarmed civilians,
- NATO soldiers increasingly avoid doing military service in Poland, using sick leaves or not extending their contracts.
- [Konkret24 reported](#) a new disinformation example, that according to the new law on defense of the homeland, that entered into force on April 23 “all Polish women aged 18-60 are going to war”, and “Polish women (...) will not have the right to leave the country, as Ukrainian women could do”. As stated in the article, according to experts “the new legal regulations do not increase the already existing risk of covering women with the obligation to defend the homeland, nor introduce new prohibitions to leave the country in the event of war. The provisions of the new act confirm the general civic duty provided for in the event of war, and it should be made more precise only in subsequent legal acts.”



My tu kręcimy bekę z Lotniska im. Chopina a tymczasem 11.03.22' na Wiejskiej przeszła ustawa poz.664/Dział II Art 3,4 5 w którym mowa, że wszystkie Polskie kobiety w wieku 18-60 lat idą na wojnę . Ukrainki przynajmniej miały wybór

12:26 PM · 27 kwi 2022 · Twitter for Android

304 Tweety podane dalej 68 Cytatów z Tweeta 1 057 Polubień

- The Foreign Intelligence Service in Russia (SVR, Служба внешней разведки) claims that Poland intends to take control of the western regions of Ukraine. Spokesperson of the [Minister-Special Services Coordinator in Poland explains](#) that the purpose of Russian propaganda is to arouse distrust between Ukraine and Poland, break up PL-UA cooperation, portray the West as an entity aggressive towards Russia, and Poland as a “warmonger” that escalates tensions and even threatens peace in Europe.



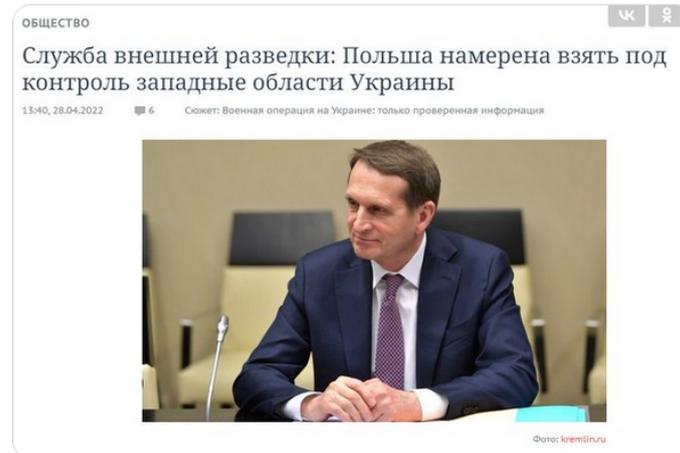
Stanisław Żaryn
@StZaryn

Sergey Naryshkin continues Russian information operation against Poland and the USA.

Russia's intelligence chief is spreading insinuations against PL and the U.S., convincing falsely that both countries are preparing 'a Polish annexation of western Ukraine'.

1/3

[Przetłumacz Tweeta](#)



5:07 PM · 28 kwi 2022 · Twitter Web App

47 Tweetów podanych dalej 10 Cytatów z Tweeta 105 Polubień

- The Minister-Special Services Coordinator in Poland was yet another Pole that publicly accused Reuters of another [example of conveying content that coincides with Russian propaganda](#) without giving any contextual information. After this intervention the news was updated, but the “misleading” titles and posts were left on social media:



Stanisław Żaryn
@StZaryn

. @Reuters, you're sharing Russian disinformation crap without any comment.

The lies about Poland's alleged plans to attack western Ukraine have been repeated for several years.

Please, do your homework and update your piece. Here's short background



Przetłumacz Tweeta



Guy Faulconbridge i 9 innych użytkowników

- [Wirtualna Polska reported on a Russian provocation from Transnistria](#) with a Polish “plot”: “Bombers on Polish numbers? Russian provocation in Transnistria. According to pro-Russian television from the unrecognized Transnistria, the bombers who fired grenade launchers at the building of the Ministry of State Security in Tiraspol on 25 April were driving a car on Polish plates. The Polish services have verified that a car of a different brand has such a registration in Poland.” According to the former head of the Military Counterintelligence Service in Poland, “the use of Polish registrations in this provocation is to link us, in the eyes of the Russians, with purely military and terrorist activities of our country towards the territory controlled by Russia. The Russians will use it to create their narratives and use it in some subsequent activities.”
- In connection with this year's training program of the Polish Armed Forces, in the end of April 2022, the General Command of the Kinds of the Armed Forces [appealed not to publish information and photos](#) showing the movements of troops and their location, dates and times of travel of military columns, data on departures and landings of military aircraft. It was followed by an information campaign on social media:



For examples of Fake News circulating in Poland concerning Ukraine see: [Demagog](#) and Twitter profiles: [@WeryfikacjaNASK](#), and [@PAPFakeHunter](#).

For more information see our local partners activities: [CAPD](#)

Czech Republic:

- The Czech government decided to introduce a one-time lumpsum social benefit support for families with children as a response to increasing costs of living related to rapidly growing inflation rate. Many see this as bending to pressure by the opposition, and contrary to established policy and platform. Opposition parties such as SPD and ANO continue spreading narratives about support for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees coming at the expense of ordinary Czech citizens. The rapid response of the Czech government is still supported by the majority of citizens, however local media shows about growing frustration focused on the speed and efficiency Czech authorities deal with administration and distribution of the support rather than envy or lack of compassion for refugees. Structural changes related to user-friendly online application for benefits or emergency social housing, which used to be a hot discussion topic for years, seem to be dealt with in a matter of weeks. Therefore, introduction of a one-time benefit for vulnerable families is despite the good will behind it criticized by some as a mistake in reading of the situation and first Stratcom stumble of the government as well as diversion from the governmental program.

For more information see our local partners activities: [Association for International Affairs \(AMO\)](#), [Prague Security Studies Institute \(PSSI\)](#), [Manipulatori.cz](#)

Slovakia:

- Disinformation sources are focused on undermining of sanctions ("Sanctions will bring Slovakia to the WWII"; "Sanctions are harming EU more than Russia"). "Demilitarization" of Slovakia is another discussed topic. For instance [this FB community](#) claims Slovakia is making itself vulnerable due to military equipment donations to Ukraine.
- Slovak media informed about warning issued by the Ukraine Center against disinformation (part of the National Security council led by the president Zelenski). The Centre issued a report warning against pro-Russian opinions of Robert Fico, former Slovak PM and leader of the SMER party.



Source: [Dennik N](#)

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

Hungary:

For more information see our local partners activities: [Political Capital](#)

Romania:

- The narratives according to which Ukraine is the aggressor within the conflict continue to spread. In a Russian Embassy [post](#), it is claimed that the Russian Army has stopped a ballistic missile bombing in the city of Kherson where schools, kindergartens and other such social facilities are located. They keep portraying President Zelensky as a criminal and claim that the Ukrainian Army is committing crimes against humanity.
- The war in Ukraine has been used by political actors, such as far-right AUR party, to promote Moldovan-Romanian unionist messages. PIN politician, Cozmin Gușă, posted a [video](#) in support for unification while implying that the president of Moldova, Maia Sandu, is incapable of leading the country.

For more information see our local partners activities: [Global Focus](#), [Expert Forum](#), [45North](#)

Bulgaria:

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

Serbia:

- In his [interview for German newspaper](#) Serbian president condemned the violation of international law in Ukraine war, however stated that Serbia is not going to support EU sanctions.
- *For more information see our local partners activities: [CRTA](#), [BIRN](#)*