Period: May 17 – 31, 2022

Top Line Summary:

- Bulgaria has the most active media space compared to Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Romania. Combined with domestic political instability it is increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by pro-Russian actors.
- Refugees beginning to return to Ukrainian-controlled territory has the potential to increase anti-refugee messaging in the short term as it may spur the perception of the crisis being over and that the reaction (sanctions, aid to refugees, etc.) was overblown and no longer necessary.
- Weak economic outlook continued to impact sanction and refugee discussions with the proportion of content combining sanctions with cost-of-living nearly at parity with general references to sanctions.
- Perceived disunity within NATO driven by Turkey stating it would block Swedish and Finnish accession combined with further fueling of the Russian narrative of being surrounded has the potential to increase anti-NATO messaging.
- The official Facebook pages of 44 Russian Embassies in Europe returned to more normal activity from the 9 May spike with trend lines continuing downward. The average number of posts between May 17-31 was 93.8 compared to the 100.07 in the preceding two-week period. The average number of interactions also decreased from 332.11/post to 205.73/post during the same period.
- The Facebook Page of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia has seen a noticeable increase in activity since 9 May; increasing the average number of posts from 9.09/day to 17.48/day in the weeks preceding and following 09 May. However, this has not at this point translated to an increase in interaction rate or page followers.

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 7th edition of the Globsec Trends public opinion report was released on 31 May and confirms many of the findings of media monitoring carried out since the beginning of the war. While the overall outlook of the opinion survey is largely positive, it also highlights that the countries consistently seen to have and increased receptiveness to hostile messaging in online media, namely Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, and Hungary, are not simply an online phenomenon.

The survey consistently shows that Bulgaria remains skeptical of broader EU and NATO positions vis-à-vis Ukraine and provides additional support for the heightened risk that hostile narratives will meet a receptive audience. Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia can consistently be found in the bottom half of key indicators related to the war in Ukraine.

The pro-Russian narrative that Russia’s invasion was a response to Western provocation is believed by 28% of Slovaks and 26% of Bulgarians and Romanians, and 19% of Hungarians which were the four highest percentages in the study. The same four countries were also found to have the highest percentages that believed “Ukraine is a puppet of the West” with 35% (Bulgaria), 25% (Romania), 24% (Hungary), and 23% (Slovakia).
### Medium/Long-Term:

**ANTI-REFUGEE AND BROADER ANTI-MIGRANT**
References to refugees continued to trend downward across multiple online platforms, however, at a lower rate suggesting that the coverage is beginning to normalize. The seven-day average for general references to refugees in the V4+RO+BG is **around 4,500**, which is still double the pre-invasion average. The most interacted with content continues to present refugees as being better taken care of than local citizens while criticizing the respective government response. The most interacted with Facebook posts continues to be dominated by Bulgarian language content, which accounts for 64 out of the top 100 most interacted with posts.

![Graph showing comparison of indicative references to refugees in online media (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG). The x-axis represents dates from 19 Feb to 28 May, and the y-axis represents the number of references ranging from 0 to 70,000. The graph shows a comparison between general and potentially hostile references.](image)

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

The most interacted with Facebook post, with over 16k interactions and at least 270 shares, was from Скандал (Scandal) linking to their own article titled “*Ukrainians are leaving because of chaos and hatred*” (auto translation from Bulgarian). This article is representative of the most discussed topic regarding refugees over the last two weeks which is the return of thousands of Ukrainians back to Ukraine before the Bulgarian government would remove them from the Black Sea resorts many are currently being housed in.

The second most interacted with Facebook post, comes from the Hungarian Foreign Minister, Péter Sziójártó, who criticized President Zelensky’s speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos for not thanking Hungary for looking after Ukrainian refugees. Many of the comments under the post appear to present the narrative that Ukraine is only interested in weapons and prolonging the war at the behest of the US and other foreign powers.
Assumed Target Audience:

General public of Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Moldova, Far-Right political actors, Anti-immigrant movements

Potential Impact:

The primary risk continues to be that criticism of governments for perceived favorable of refugees will undermine national governments and potentially benefit far-right and other traditional anti-immigration groups. With poor economic outlooks across Europe and an increasing number of refugees returning to some Ukrainian controlled territory there is an increased likelihood that anti-refugee messaging will exploit the situation to call an end for government support of the refugee population.

With the general public and mainstream political parties still largely supporting the refugees the current risk of anti-refugee narratives prompting significant policy change is assessed to be a medium risk. However, with perceptions of relatively safety in some parts of Ukraine and increased economic hardship in much of Europe there is the potential for the risk to become more serious in the near future.

ANTI-SANCTION/CONSUMER PRICES

References to the sanctions continue to trend down while references to sanctions and an increase in consumer prices remain stable. The proportion of the coverage has remained consistent for the last
three weeks with **messaging that mentions sanctions and consumer prices together accounting for approximately 76% of the overall references to sanctions.**

Bulgaria continued to account for the highest number of references to content mentioning sanctions and price increases, which accounted for 34% of the total mentions with Poland resulting in the second most at 30%. Despite Czech and Slovak content only accounting for 9% of total, they accounted for 30% of the top 100 most interacted with Facebook posts from the V4+RO+BG. This content was primarily coming from Slovak politicians with the most interacted with post belonging to a video posted by MEP Milan Uhrík of the far-right Republika party which received over 15k interactions and more than 270k views. In addition to the far-right Republika party, posts by social democratic SMER-SD party members, Robert Fico and L’uboš Blaha, questioned the current governments policies regarding the sanctions and suggested that they are puppets of the US and other foreign influence.

**Assumed Target Audience:**

**General Public**

**Potential Impact:**

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*Comparing References to **Sanctions (General)** and **Price Increases+Sanctions** in Online Sources (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)*

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

*General References to Sanctions*

*References to Consumer Prices + Sanctions*

*Data from Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Youtube, Online News, Forums, and Blogs (source: Pulsar & CrowdTangle)*
The **risk associated with anti-sanction narratives remains high**. While the EU reached an agreement to approve the sixth round of sanctions it was not without serious concessions that highlight the fragility of EU unity. The media trends continue to suggest that the economic impact of the sanctions will remain the primary obstacle to passing further sanctions and it is likely that additional countries will look to secure derogations.

**ANTI-NATO**

General references to NATO in online media continue to trend down despite the increase in references as a result of Finland and Sweden voting to join the Alliance. While the overwhelming majority of content are general references, the decision by the two Nordic countries to join resulted in an increase in the proportion of content that has the potential to be hostile toward NATO. The percentage of the coverage that as the potential to be hostile to NATO increased from 6% in the first half of May to 9% in the last half.

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**Comparing References to NATO (General) and Potentially hostile content in Online Sources (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)**

![Graph showing comparisons between general and potentially hostile content in online sources.](image)

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

One of the primary topics of discussion was the appearance of disunity within the Alliance as Turkey announced its intentions to block the expansion of NATO at the forthcoming Summit in Madrid. Questions speculating whether Turkey would leave NATO accounted for 4 of the top 10 most interacted with Facebook posts when examining content with general references to NATO. All four of the posts were also from Bulgarian language pages (Pogled Info, Bulgaria ON AIR, BNT News, and Gospodari).

Bulgaria continued to account for the largest proportion of interacted with content with 48 of the top 100 most interacted with Facebook post coming from Bulgarian language pages. A post by Bulgaria ON AIR announcing that 48% of their listens in a non-scientific survey believed Russia was defending itself against NATO received the most interactions (42k+) on Facebook for content mentioning NATO in V4+RO+BG and was also the post which overperformed its expected interaction rate the most.
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:

Although general support for NATO remains high, Bulgaria continues to be at the forefront of anti-NATO messaging. Combined with Bulgarian content being present at the top of the tables for anti-refugee and anti-sanction messaging and the political instability in the country it could potentially be a target for pro-Russian and other anti-democratic forces. While the wider risk to NATO support is assessed to be low further analysis of the Bulgarian media space and public opinion research should be done.

Country and Regional Overview:

Poland:

- The Government Security Center in Poland informed about a new set of disinformation narratives about Poland: “Objects permanently involved in Russian disinformation activities try to negatively influence the perception of the Polish Army. Learn selected lines of false narratives and don't get manipulated. Remember, information can be a weapon and you can be a target.” According to the Center, among the identified narratives are:
- Poles do not want to serve in the Polish Army
- High crime in the army discourages Poles from joining the ranks of the army
- Crime in the Polish Army mainly concerns civilians, including children. Fights, beatings, kidnappings
- The soldiers of the Polish Army have problems with alcohol abuse and aggression and cause fights
- The soldiers of the Polish Army do not take the safety of Poles into account

- The Center has also described “content about the alleged dislocation of Polish Army units about taking action in Ukraine”

- On the Internet, you may encounter a number of disinforming content about the alleged dislocation of Polish Army units about taking action in Ukraine.

- They are FAKE!

- The indictment for the readiness to act for the benefit of the Belarusian services: “A bill of indictment against Grzegorz M., accused of reporting readiness to act on behalf of the Belarusian KDB [KGB] intelligence service against the Republic of Poland, was sent to the District Court in Warsaw, and for attempting to provide these services with information, the disclosure of which may cause harm RP.”

- Konkret24.tvn24.pl reported about new false theses of the Kremlin after President Duda's visit to Kyiv: “President Andrzej Duda's visit to Kyiv on May 22, who was the first head of a foreign state since the beginning of the war to speak in the Ukrainian parliament - the Verkhovna Rada - launched a disinformation campaign in pro-Russian channels. (...) Volodymyr Zelensky, who spoke in the presence of the Polish president, also spoke about unity. "I would like to thank the Polish Sejm for the recently passed law on assistance to Ukrainian citizens. This is an unprecedented decision, according to which our citizens who have been forced to move to Poland due to Russian aggression, will receive almost the same rights and opportunities as Polish citizens: legal residence, employment, training, medical
care and social security, "Zelenskiy said, adding: "And this step will not remain one-sided. In the near future I will present to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine a similar project, a mirror project." Among other things, the promise made by the President of Ukraine to the draft act on Poles became a breeding ground for the pro-Kremlin media. By adding false information to it, a narrative was created according to which Duda's visit to Kyiv was "the beginning of the legal, Polish occupation of Ukraine."

- [@WeryfikacjaNASK](https://twitter.com/WeryfikacjaNASK) Twitter profile reported on new wave of anti-Ukrainian content being published on Polish social media: “Post authors often use graphics to get their audience's attention. Some of them may be aimed at evoking negative emotions towards refugees from Ukraine. We plead for a rational approach to this type of content. #STOPdisinformation”

- The handbook of the Government Center for Security "Be ready - a guide for times of crisis and war" that was published in April, now has been translated into English. [PDF is now available for download](https://example.com). For examples of Fake News circulating in Poland concerning Ukraine see: [Demagog](https://example.com) and Twitter profiles: [@WeryfikacjaNASK](https://twitter.com/WeryfikacjaNASK), and [@PAPFakeHunter](https://twitter.com/PAPFakeHunter).

**For more information see our local partners’ activities: [CAPD](https://example.com)**

**Czech Republic:**

- After several Ukrainian students successfully passed exams to Czech high schools, disinformation about prioritizing Ukrainian students started to spread according to [Czech Radio](https://example.com). The Ministry of Education denied such a practice.
The disinformation site Aeronet published false information about Czech Railways, alleging that it was preparing for a state of war. Aeronet claimed a new internal regulation was adopted by Czech Railways for this reason. In fact, the regulation is merely a crisis management regulation which has been in place for the past 20 years that was recently updated due to changes of names in the text. The article as well as the regulation were widely reshared on social media and further misinterpreted.

“Third world war ahead of us?” (source: Facebook)

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

Slovakia:

- Infovojna and Aeronet, news websites known for spreading disinformation, published disinformation about the alleged plans of the Polish government to annex Ukraine. False information was based on Polish President Duda’s statements taken out of context.
- For more information see our local partners activities: Globsec, Infosecurity.sk

Hungary:

For more information see our local partners activities: Political Capital

Romania:

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:

- Last week, President Vucic had agreed with Putin on a favorable deal on natural gas imports from Russia and that the price would continue to be based on a 100% crude oil formula. According to media monitoring conducted this week by CRTA, the media praised President Vucic for a job well done and expressed gratitude to Russia. Although President Vucic did not mention the exact price of gas, it was stated that it will be the most favorable in Europe – three times lower than the price paid by countries in Europe. Before the talks, the media gave the impression that the future conditions of the gas arrangement with Russia completely depends on President Putin’s will. The pro-Russian narratives dominates reporting on relationship between Russia and the West. TV stations extensively report on the success of the Russian army in the Donetsk region.

- For more information see our local partners activities: CRTA, BIRN