Period: May 31 – June 14, 2022

Top Line Summary:

- The threat of snap elections in Bulgaria (following three elections in 2021) creates a substantial risk to European unity in support of Ukraine as the far-right Revival party has the potential to make significant gains.
- Political instability in Bulgaria provides a risk to NATO unity as there is a potential extremist and opportunist will use the war in Ukraine and weakening support for the Alliance to their advantage.
- Anti-refugee messaging continues to portray Ukrainians as unappreciative and as ‘tourists’ rather than people in need. The return flow of refugees to Ukrainian controlled territory and day-to-day concerns of local citizens is likely to result in a decrease in support for refugees in CEE countries.
- The increased cost-of-living has become the dominant narrative related to the sanctions and plays into Russian talking points. Additional EU-wide sanctions seem unlikely without further military escalation.
- The official Facebook pages of 44 Russian Embassies in Europe have returned to posting activity before the 9 May spike with the trend line going slightly up from the pre-Victory Day lull. The average number of posts per day between June 01-14 increased to 102.07 compared to 93.8 for May 17-31. The average number of interactions also increased from 205.73/post to 218.64 during the same period.
- The Facebook Pages of the Russian Embassy in Slovakia (418 posts) and Romania (124 posts) continue to in the top three most active accounts. Unusually the page of the Russian Embassy in Iceland is the fourth most active account in this two-week period with 110 posts. The mission in Reykjavik has seen a substantial increase in activity with nearly the same number of posts since 1 May (44 days) as it had since 1 Feb – 30 Apr (88 days).

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:

A new study by the European Council on Foreign Relations largely corroborates what has been observed in online media monitoring since the 24 February invasion; Europeans overwhelmingly support Ukraine, but their support for the war effort is waning. A plurality (35%) of citizens polled in 10 countries belong to the “peace camp” that wants the war to end as soon as possible, while 25% continue to support Ukraine’s war effort and feel Russia should be punished.
Italy is the only country where a majority support the peace camp (52%) while Poland has the highest support for the justice camp that wants to see Russia punished for its aggression. Additionally, Italy is the most supportive of Russia’s narrative that Ukraine and the West is responsible for the war, not Russia. Meanwhile, 90% of Finns and 83% of Poles put the blame squarely on Russia.

Poland, which has largely shown unwavering support for Ukraine since the beginning of the war, is most frequently on the opposite side of Italy in the polling results. These trends are also largely reflected in the media monitoring carried out by IRI’s Beacon Project since the beginning of the war.

Although only limited monitoring of the Italian media space has been carried out, the country has the second highest average of post overperformance and average shares from its local Russian Embassy’s Facebook page since 1 February according to IRI’S Embassy Monitor. Meanwhile, Poland has shown rare unity amongst in main opposing political forces in its unwavering support.
for Ukraine - also overwhelmingly reflected in the media monitoring - with only minimal dissent from political extremists supporting Russian narratives.

There is however an increasing risk that this unity will fragment as the general public in many countries begin to feel media fatigue and see the situation in Ukraine as taking precedence over issues of most concern to local citizens.

Notably Romania (58%), Poland (52%) are at the top of the list when it comes to feeling that their government is paying too much attention to Ukraine. This has been shown to be the primary concern in online media and has an especially high risk to erode support for Ukrainian refugees in both countries.

2) Medium/Long-Term:

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

References to refugees continued to trend downward across multiple online platforms with the average daily posts with general references to refugees in the V4+RO+BG around 4,000 during the last two-week period. Content from **Bulgaria continues to dominate the most interacted with content, accounting for 59 of the top 100 most interacted posts on Facebook** mentioning refugees.
Most of the Bulgarian content continues to cover the exodus of Ukrainians from Bulgaria back to Ukraine or Romania and generally presents the Ukrainians as ungrateful.

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

An example of this sentiment can be seen in the most interacted with Facebook post, with over 9k interactions and 2k comments which was from a Bulgarian page. It continued to discuss the refugees who were leaving Bulgaria and an examination of the most interacted with comments reflect the wider sentiment **portraying the refugees as unappreciative or tourists.**

The most interacted with content aside from Bulgarian was again from Hungary, with a video and statement from President **Katalin Novák** following her visit to Berlin. However, unlike the post from Hungarian Foreign Minister, Péter **Szijjártó**, which was critical of Ukraine for being unappreciative; President Novák said that people continuously “[…] expressed their gratitude to Hungary and the Hungarian people for the help they had given to the refugees […]”.

**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** is that good will toward the refugees will continue to wear thin. The most interacted with Facebook content reviewed since the 24 February invasion has shown an increase in the amount of content hostile toward the refugees as the war as continued. Recent **polling** has also shown the potential risk with Poland and Romania showing less support for their government taking in Ukrainian refugees than the polling average. However, it is important to note that support remains generally high at 71% and 64%, respectively.
Despite continued widespread support for Ukrainian refugees in Central and Eastern European countries, there is potential for this to erode further as anti-immigrant groups and other political extremists continue to promote anti-refugee messaging. The current risk of anti-refugee narratives prompting significant policy change is assessed to be a medium risk but should continue to be monitored closely.

**ANTI-SANCTION/CONSUMER PRICES**

References connecting sanctions to consumer price increases have continued to trend up and have now reach parity with general references to sanctions. Between 1 and 14 June the proportion of messaging that mentions sanctions and consumer price increases accounts for 93% of the overall references to sanctions in the reviewed sample. This is one indicator that content that has the potential to erode support for sanctions has the potential to dominate messaging in online media on the topic.
Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine / Period: May 31 – June 14, 2022

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

Poland and Bulgaria accounted for the highest number of references to content mentioning sanctions and price increases with Poland making up 35% of the references and Bulgaria 29%. Content posted in Bulgarian account for 43 out of the top 100 most interacted with posts on Facebook referencing sanctions and price increases while Poland only has 9 in the top 100.

Data from Facebook (source: Pulsar & CrowdTangle)
Of the 43 Bulgarian posts 8 are from the Russian Embassy’s page, while the most interacted with comments on other articles from Bulgarian media sites appear to repeat the Russian talking points.

Assumed Target Audience:

General Public

Potential Impact:

According to polling by Datapraxis and YouGov cited by the European Council on Foreign Relations, “increasing cost of living and energy prices” are the biggest concerns regarding the war in Ukraine with 61% of those polled citing it of equal concern along with the threat of nuclear war. Given the increased presence of messaging that has the potential to erode support for sanctions and the high concern amongst the general public the risk associated with anti-sanction narratives remains high and is not anticipated to improve as the war continues.

ANTI-NATO

General references to NATO in online media continue to trend down with a two-week average of 6,691 mentions compared to 9,781 in the previous two-week period. The majority of references continue to be more general with the percentage of potentially hostile content making up 8% of the total coverage.

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

Comments mentioning NATO from 31 May to 14 June were dominated by the political situation in Bulgaria and the There Is Such a People party (Има такъв народ) announced it was leaving the governing coalition. The move prompted by disagreements on the EU accession process for North Macedonia, however could have a significant impact on NATO as the far-right Revival party (Възраждане) seized the opportunity to rekindle their idea to hold a referendum on NATO membership. The messaging from Revival’s leader, Kostadin Kostadinov, was the overall most interacted with post on Facebook mentioning NATO across V4+RO+BG during the two-week period.
Together with his other posts he accounted for four of the top 15 most interacted with posts across the monitored countries.

The most interacted with post by Kostadin Kostadinov on 8 June

Despite only making up 6% of the total potentially hostile messaging on NATO, Bulgaria continued to account for the largest proportion of the most interacted with content with 41 of the top 100 most interacted with Facebook post coming from Bulgarian language pages.

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:

The continued high engagement rate on Facebook for potentially anti-NATO messaging in Bulgaria combined with its continued political instability provides fertile ground for pushing anti-NATO narratives more as political extremists and opportunists seek to capitalize on the situation. The disproportionally large number of top interacted with posts compared to their absolute volume provides some indication that there is heightened interest in the topic. The rise of the far-right Revival party in public opinion from 3.1% in July 2021 to 4.9% during the last election in November 2021 and up to 10% in polling from May 2022 increases its chances of being a significant political force during the next election. Its largely anti-Western stance and objective to have a national referendum on NATO membership increases the risk to NATO coherence. Bulgaria is the only country in the region where support for staying in NATO has decreased from 54% in 2021 to 50% in 2022 while interest in leaving increased from 25% in 2021 to 38% in 2022 according to Globsec Trends. With these factors in mind the risk to support to NATO is assessed to have increased from low to medium.

Country and Regional Overview:

Poland:

- The Government Security Center in Poland informed of new information operations against Poland: “We identify the increase in the activity of the Russian propaganda apparatus and activities aimed at presenting Poland in a negative light - as a country planning to annex the territory of Ukraine.” According to their research, the false lines of Russian narratives for the period 6-13 June are:
  - Poland, under the guise of helping Ukraine, plans to annex its territory
  - Poland hinders peace talks between Ukraine and Russia
  - The West gave Poland a silent consent to establish a protectorate in Ukraine
• The Polish-controlled president of Ukraine admits to plans for the incorporation of Western Ukraine
• Poland is secretly polonizing Ukraine

The Center also announced that Russian special military services were active in creating disinformation about Poland: “The Russian personnel associated with the GRU is conducting a disinformation operation based on false theses about the participation of Polish soldiers in the battles for Severodonetsk. Information that Polish soldiers took part in the fighting in eastern Ukraine is false”

• All those information activities of the Russian Federation are consistent and have continued over a long period of time. According to the Government Security Center, the topic of the presences of Polish military personnel in Ukraine is being used constantly:

• Similar type of stories about the Polish military personnel were identified by Konkret24.tvn24.pl: “The car’s documents, allegedly belonging to a Polish colonel, were found in Severodonetsk in eastern Ukraine. This is supposed to be ‘proof of the participation of the Polish Army in the war on the Ukrainian side’. However, the officer in a completely different place at the time, the car never belonged to him and legally went to Ukraine, and the documents are selectively shown.” As Konkret24 added, before the story reached Polish social media, “the photos were originally posted on the Russian network. They were described, among others Russian-language portal eadaily.com, known from disinformation messages”

• The Minister Coordinator of Special Services in Poland, Stanisław Żaryn, stated that: “Belarusian propaganda is regularly involved in Russian information attacks on Poland. The false theses of Russian propaganda regarding the possible annexation of Ukraine by Poland are repeated by Belarusian propagandists, and also by the despot A. Lukashenko. According to the Belarusian dictator, the strategy of NATO and Poland includes actions in Western Ukraine, and Ukraine will have to turn to Belarus for help in order to prevent the fragmentation of its territory. Lukashenko also criticized the visit of President A. Duda to Kiev, describing the behavior of the Polish president as «incomprehensible» and questioning the credibility of his actions and decision-making possibilities. In turn, the Belarusian propagandist A. Dzermant stated that Poles would be the colonizers of Ukraine and the Polish administration and army would be merged with «the remnants of the Ukrainian state». According to Dzermant, W. Zełeński could promise Poland part of the territory of Ukraine in exchange for protection of his person. Belarus, with Russia, is carrying out disinformation activities aimed at slandering Poland and international structures (NATO) in the context of developments in Ukraine”

• Disinfo Digest presented information on “selected disinformation theses used by the Kremlin’s manipulative apparatus aimed at reducing the will to provide support to refugees from Ukraine”:
  o Supporting refugees will lead to lower living standards in Poland
  o A further influx of refugees from Ukraine will result in a lack of jobs for Poles
  o Aid provided to Ukraine will ruin the Polish economy
  o Ukrainians are greedy, ungrateful for the help they receive in Poland
  o Ukrainian women will strive to make a career in Poland at all costs, even at the cost of breaking up marriages

• Anti-Ukrainian content on social media was also reported by @WeryfikacjaNASK Twitter profile. It was related to the disinformation, that there is no money for Polish citizens for social benefits because of the Ukrainian refugees. As authors from @WeryfikacjaNASK wrote: “Information about granting benefits only to refugees from Ukraine at the expense of help for Poles is false.” Even the Ministry of Family and Social Policy officially denied these false claims
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:

- Czech Republic announced its priorities for the presidency of the Council of the EU. War in Ukraine and resilience against disinformation and hybrid threats are among the five main priorities. “The Czech Presidency will address cyber threats and the geopolitical context of new technologies (and space). It will also focus on the rapid development of the so-called Hybrid toolbox, the fight against disinformation and the security of cyberspace.”
- Last week, MP Tomio Okamura, leader of the populist anti-migration SPD party claimed the war was over on the majority of Ukraine territory. According to him, refugees should start returning to Ukraine.
- Epidemiologist and former minister of health, Roman Prymula, commented on CNN Prima TV that the increase of HIV cases in the country and mentioned it was partially due to migration from Ukraine. This information was shared by several disinformation and far-left sources with comments suggesting direct causality between the refugee wave and increase of HIV cases in the country.

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

Slovakia:

- Facebook has cancelled the page belonging to Slovak lawmaker Ľuboš Blaha (SMER), an influential disinformation spreader, following past warnings about violating the platform’s rules forwarded to the lawmaker, informed the Slovak Spectator this week.

For more information see our local partners activities: Globsec, Infosecurity.sk

Hungary:

For more information see our local partners activities: Political Capital

Romania:

- Explore the latest Expert Forum report China’s narrative of Russia’s war against Ukraine

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:

- Trend of anti-EU sentiment in mainstream and fringe media continue. Televisions continued to broadcast news from the Ukrainian battlefield and their reports showed a biased approach in favor of the Russian side. troops are portrayed as aggressive and provocative. Several media outlets reported on alleged rifts in the unity of EU over the pressure put on Serbia in relation to its international relations with Russia.
Večernje novosti: “A rift within the EU partially because of pressures on Serbia”

- The cover of the 17 June print version of the tabloid Informer ran a headline claiming the EU is running out of gas due to impact of Canadian sanctions.

Informer: “The EU is running out of gas”

- For daily news and disinformation summary follow newsletter produced by CRTA

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