

## HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF: WAR IN UKRAINE

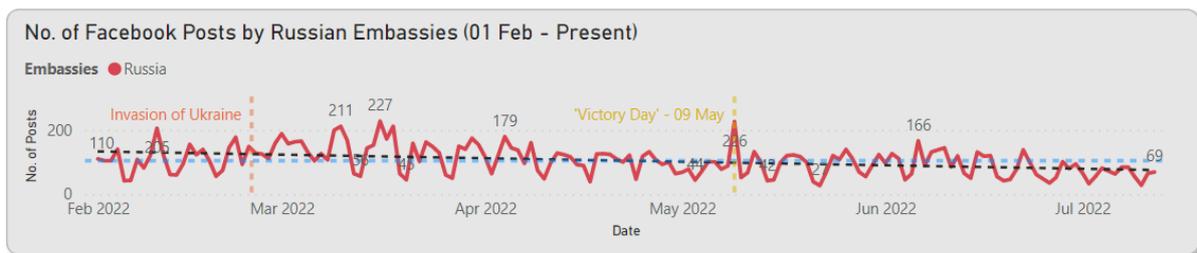
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BIWEEKLY BRIEF NO.12  
JULY 12, 2022

Period: June 28 – July 12, 2022

**Top Line Summary:**

- Reporting on purported weapon smuggling out of Ukraine is likely to feed into well-established anti-Ukrainian narratives and has the potential to undermine support for continued arming of the Ukrainian military.
- Broader anti-migration narratives being promoted by the Hungarian Government and political extremists have the potential to further reduce support for Ukrainian refugees and is likely to continue as migration flows from Europe’s south increase during the summer.
- The growing economic crisis continues to feed anti-sanction narratives especially as energy prices increase. This feeds narratives that the sanctions have backfired and hurt Europe and the rest of the world more than Russia.
- The NATO Summit in Madrid, and the expansion of the Alliance to include Sweden and Finland resulted in largely positive coverage. However, content critical of NATO continues to receive disproportionate engagement levels on Facebook.
- The posting activity of the official Facebook pages of **44 Russian Embassies in Europe have continued to trend down, especially since 1 June**. The average number of posts between 28 June – 12 July **declined to 68.67 per day compared to 80.29 posts per day** during the preceding two-week period. This also resulted in a decline in the **average number of interactions to 202.53/post compared to 234.87/post** during the same periods.
- Facebook posts from the **Russian Embassy in Iceland accounted for the largest number of posts (129) between in the same period averaging 8.6 post/day**. This highlights a [previously reported](#) trend - since approximately 9 May the embassy in Reykjavik has seen **unusually high activity**. While most of their content appears to be spreading standard [Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine](#) there was a post regarding [Russia’s militarization of the Arctic](#).



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.

**Narratives**

**1) From the Headlines:**

An article published in the Financial Times on 12 July, "NATO and EU sound alarm over risk of Ukraine weapons smuggling," has been controversial with statements from the EU’s delegation to Ukraine condemning it.

Nato and EU sound alarm over risk of Ukraine weapons smuggling

Countries call for greater tracking of arms to stop sales to Europe's black market



Ukrainian soldiers prepare to fire a rocket launcher south of Kharkiv. The issue of arms trafficking from Ukraine was discussed at a meeting of EU interior ministers this week. © Anatoli Stepanov/AFP/Getty Images

EU in Ukraine @EUDelegationUA

EU has no reason not to trust the Government, as weapons supplies provided by EU Member States are used in Ukraine for intended purposes: defend its people against a brutal Russian aggressor. Smuggling claims are often simply lies.

4:31 PM · Jul 14, 2022 · Twitter Web App

The original headline (“[EU states sound alarm over Ukraine weapons smuggling](#)”) notably omitted the word ‘risk,’ this was subsequently corrected. This feeds into well established anti-Ukrainian narratives that the Ukrainian government and army are intractably corrupt and has the potential to undermine support for future military aid. These narratives can be seen spreading online by [Fox News’ Tucker Carlson](#) and on social media primarily by actors from questionable outlets and those on the political fringes.



Example of social media posts (Source: Facebook content analyzed by Tremendum Analytics)

Further evolution of the narratives as well as analysis on its reach and potential impact is currently being conducted in cooperation with [Tremendum Analytics](#). Follow them on Twitter ([@tremendum](#)) for updates and other useful insights.

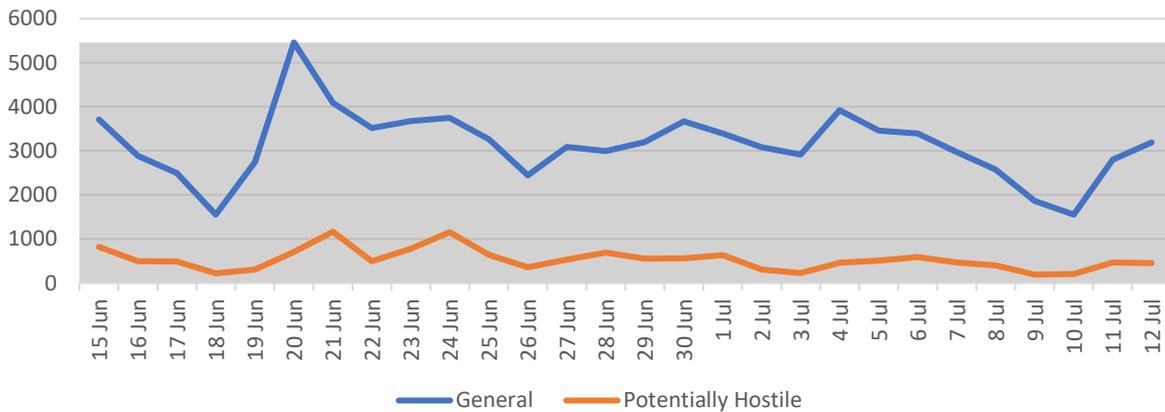
2) Medium/Long-Term:

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

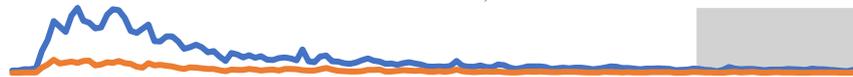
Mentions to refugees continued its downward trend across multiple online platforms despite the relative spike in the last reporting period on World Refugee Day (June 20). The average daily posts containing general references to refugees in the V4+RO+BG were **down from 3,310/day during the June 14 – 28 to 3,002/day from June 18 – July 12**. This downward trend was also reflected in the daily average for content that has a greater potential to be hostile toward refugees, as it declined from 666/day down to 450/day during the same period.

Comparing (General & Potentially Hostile) References to Refugees in Online Sources (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)

Jun 15 - Jul 12, 2022



Feb 01 - Jul 12, 2022



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

The proportion of content that is potentially hostile toward refugees has remained consistent at between 15%-20% of the levels of more general references since mid-May. This largely reflects **past reporting as well as statements from political leaders and public opinion research which have shown that the majority are supportive of the Ukrainian refugees**. However, so far in the first 12 days of July there has been a marked increase in **the proportion of Hungarian content in the top 100, when compared to the first half of previous months**. Between July 01-12, Hungarian posts account for 44 out of the top 100 most interacted with Facebook post referencing refugees. This is more than double the average number of posts in the top 100 for the preceding four months.

This is largely driven by more traditional [anti-EU and broader anti-migration](#) content and not directly targeting Ukrainian refugees. However, given previous attempts to portray Ukrainians as something other than ‘refugees’, such as economic migrants or even tourists, the potential for these broader anti-migrant narratives to public erode support for Ukrainians fleeing war is a very real risk. Furthermore, aggressive anti-migrant policies such as the [establishment of “border hunter” \(hatarvadaszok toborzasa\)](#) units announced by Hungary on 08 July is likely to increase this risk.

Original (Hungarian)

Machine Translation (Google Lens)



*Example of one of the most interacted with posts referencing refugees/migrants between Jun 28 – Jul 12 (Source: Facebook's CrowdTangle)*

**Assumed Target Audience:**

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

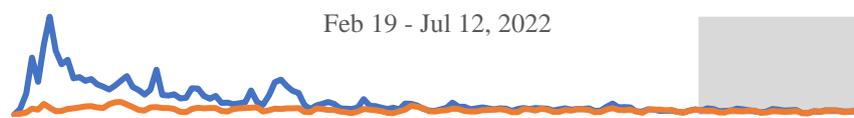
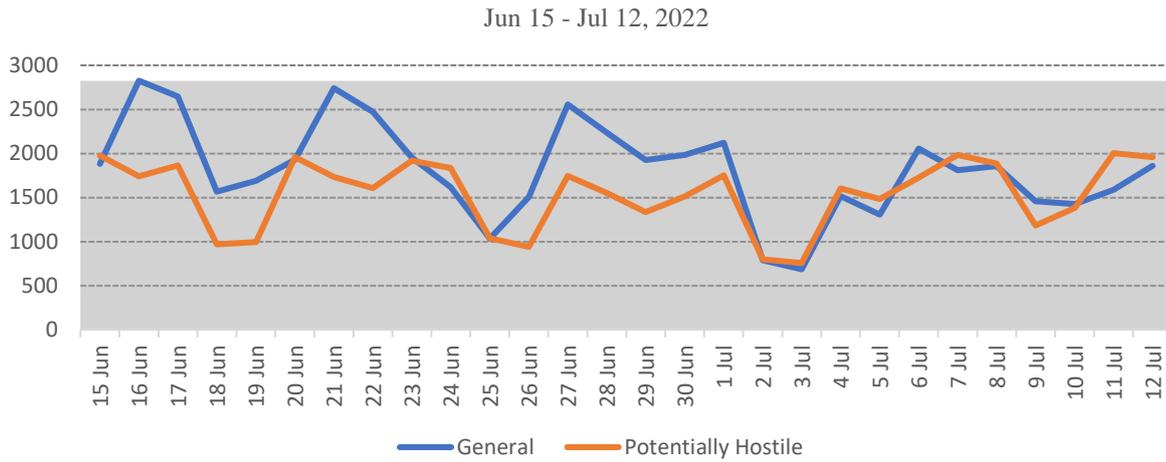
**Potential Impact:**

As previously reporting the **primary risk to the good will that has so far been shown to Ukrainian refugees is likely to be from political opportunists taking advantage of the current economic crisis and the anticipated increase in more traditional migration patterns from Europe's south.** The continued strong public support and that by most political leaders toward Ukrainian refugees keeps the risk of anti-refugee narratives resulting in significant erosion of support at a **medium risk.** However, if broader anti-migrant messaging continues to grow it is likely the associated risk will increase.

**ANTI-SANCTION/CONSUMER PRICES**

References **connecting sanctions to consumer price increases and more general references to sanctions have continued to remain at near parity levels since the end of April.** The proportion of messaging that mentions sanctions and consumer price accounted for 96% of the overall references to sanctions from June 28 – July 12, an increase of 17% from the preceding two-week period. The continued high proportion is one indication that **messaging with the potential to undermine support for the sanctions has filled the void left behind as reporting fatigue and economic concerns set in.**

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)

Poland (33%) and Bulgaria (28%) continue to account for the highest proportion of the 21,366 mentions referencing sanctions and price increases during the last two-week period. Similar to past reporting periods, content from Slovakia (44%), Hungary (22%), and Bulgaria (20%) continue to represent the most interacted with posts on Facebook based on a sample of the top 50. The majority of the posts in these languages present content that undermines the sanctions.

| Top 50 Interacted w/Facebook Posts Referncing Sanctions |           |            |                     |            |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------------|---------------------|------------|-----------|
| Language                                                | General   | % of Total | Potentially Hostile | % of Total | Total     |
| SK                                                      | 5         | 10%        | 17                  | 34%        | 22        |
| HU                                                      | 2         | 4%         | 9                   | 18%        | 11        |
| BG                                                      | 2         | 4%         | 8                   | 16%        | 10        |
| CS                                                      | 0         | 0%         | 3                   | 6%         | 3         |
| RO                                                      | 0         | 0%         | 2                   | 4%         | 2         |
| PL                                                      | 1         | 2%         | 1                   | 2%         | 2         |
| <b>Total</b>                                            | <b>10</b> | <b>20%</b> | <b>40</b>           | <b>80%</b> | <b>50</b> |

Hand-Coded Data from Facebook's CrowdTangle

The primary narratives being presented are that the sanctions are having more adverse impacts on Europe than they on Russia. An example of this can be seen in a [Bulgarian language post](#) which promotes uncritical statements by Putin which received more than 5,200 interactions including more than 1,000 shares. An additional narrative that has been widely seen, particularly in Slovakia and Bulgaria, is the the benefit of a more non-aligned approach that many see Hungary, Turkey, and Serbia have taken with regards to sanctions. The most interacted with [post](#) was a video of Viktor Orbán posted by the Hungarian Governments official page attracting more than 13k interactions and 226k+ views. In the top 50 most interacted with posts 12 support the Hungarian position accounting for 30% of the content critical of the sanctions. Out of the 12 supporting the Hungarian position, 5 were posted by Slovak pages including the second most interacted with [post](#).



*Second most interacted with post referencing sanctions (Original Slovak & machine translation by Facebook)*

**Assumed Target Audience:**

**General Public**

**Potential Impact:**

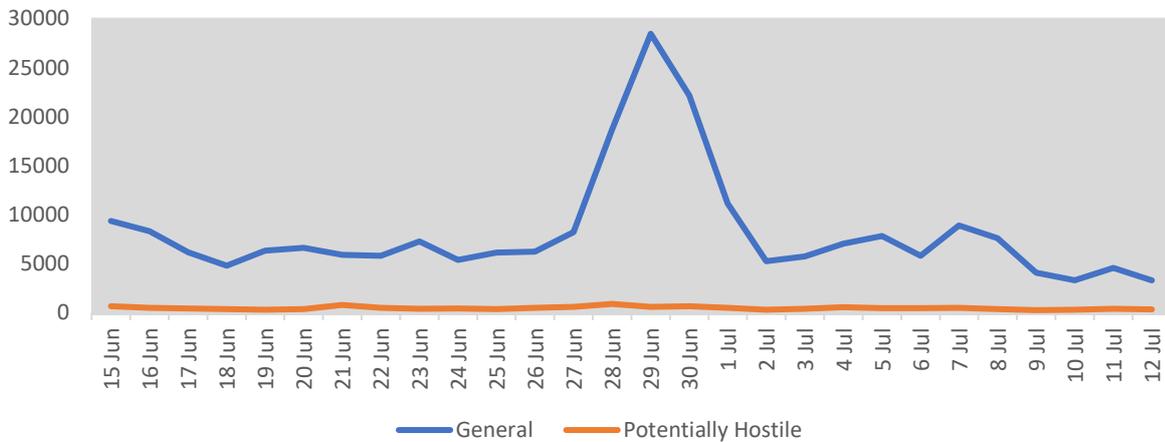
The threat of additional countries looking to replicate the more non-aligned approaches taken by Hungary, Turkey, and Serbia remains one of the primary narratives that resonates with the general public. In addition to remaining popular in Hungary, it appears to be particularly successful in Bulgaria and Slovakia, however, it has also received traction in Romania and the Czech Republic as well. As Europeans begin their summer holidays prices at the pump and unprecedented heatwaves force home energy costs up the **risk associated with anti-sanction narratives remains high**. This is likely to continue in the winter as concerns over energy supplies and heating costs is expected to increase.

**ANTI-NATO**

Despite relative spike of references caused by the NATO Summit held in Madrid from June 28-30 causing the trend line to increase between June 28 – July 12, the general level of references has continued to decline since its peak at the beginning of March. The **average daily references to NATO increased to 9,589.4 between June 28 – July 12, compared to 7,527 in the preceding two-week period**. This spike in general references also drove the proportion of potentially hostile content down to its lowest ever point as it made up only 2% of the content on June 29. However, by July 12 this proportion was up to 10% resulting in a 6% average for the two-week period, which is in line with past low-end averages. This is one indication that the coverage of the NATO Summit and, also the inclusion of Sweden and Finland into the Alliance, was largely positive or neutral.

Comparing (General & Potentially Hostile) References to NATO in Online Sources (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)

Jun 28 - Jul 12, 2022



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

In contrast to the large proportion of general references to NATO in the media covered, an examination at the most interacted with posts on Facebook references indicate that Hungary continues to be a potential issue. Of the top 100 most interacted with Facebook posts mentioning NATO in V4+RO+BG, 30% were in Hungarian, including two posts by Viktor Orbán which were the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> most interacted with posts.

3<sup>rd</sup> Most Interacted with Post (machine translated)



4<sup>th</sup> Most Interacted with Post (machine translated)



Source: Facebook's CrowdTangle

While the [3<sup>rd</sup> most interacted with post](#) was more neutral the [4<sup>th</sup> most interacted with post](#) is more to the point of Hungarian messaging on the war in Ukraine; namely that sending weapons for Ukrainian self-defense is not an option and that Ukraine should sue for peace with Russia as soon as possible.

### 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:

Consistent with previous reporting, the trend for content that is critical or potentially hostile to NATO continues to receive disproportional engagement rates on Facebook. While previous reporting highlighted Bulgaria and Slovakia as drivers of this trend, Hungary has been more prominent during the past two-week period. Hungarian posts that present messaging [blaming NATO for the conflict](#) or presenting [NATO as imperialistic](#) were also amongst the top 5 most interacted with posts. Despite these negative sentiments receiving significant traction more neutral or positive posts were still found at the top. The most interacted with post being a Romanian language [readout of military commitments to Ukraine](#). Although there are significant voices that present messaging hostile to NATO the risk to support for NATO is assessed to remain at a **medium** level.

### Country and Regional Overview:

#### Poland:

- Spokesperson of the Minister-Special Services Coordinator in Poland, Stanisław Żaryn [analyzed on Twitter the correlation between the Russian and Belarusian information operations](#): "The Kremlin doesn't give up conducting an information warfare offensive against Poland embedded in the context of the Russian war in Ukraine. Recently, Russian propaganda's received much support from its Belarusian counterpart in pushing anti-Polish claims
  - Poland seeks a cultural annexation of Ukraine (a narrative launched in response to the wearing off of its earlier versions: Poland had plans to invade part of Ukraine)
  - Poles are growing more wary of, biased to & tired of Ukrainian refugees
  - Poland is a US pawn
  - Poland bows down to the US
  - in case of a war against Russia, NATO will use the Polish and Lithuanian soldiers as cannon fodder
  - after Russia captures the Donbass and Kyiv, Warsaw will be its next prime target."
- "Narratives recently pushed by the propaganda machine of the regime of Lukashenko are as follows:
  - the buildup of Poland's military might near Belarus is the preparation for a war
  - in response to a Polish attack on Belarus, the latter will strike fragile targets in Poland."
- "As a complement to the aforementioned disinformation campaign, the Belarusian regime has also launched an operation of profaning the burial sites of the Home Army soldiers (Polish underground army in German-occupied Poland) in Belarus aimed to have a psychological impact on Poland. Russia continues also its disinformation campaign that depreciates the Ukrainian Armed Forces, while pushing narratives that praise the Russian army. These efforts are also strongly supported by the regime of Lukashenko. Here're some of the narratives used by both regimes:
  - Ukraine uses civilians as human shields
  - Ukrainians torture the POW's
  - Western weapons supplied to Ukraine won't change much – Ukraine is losing
  - morale of Ukrainian soldiers is low

- o offensive of Russian forces is clever and efficient."



- Stanisław Żaryn [described also the latest Russian information activities against Poland](#): "Russian propaganda machine continues its disinformation campaign against Poland. Reiterating its earlier lies, the Kremlin is trying to portray Poland as a warmonger. This time a self-proclaimed 'political scientist' Alexander Nosovich argues that Poland wants to convene 'a serious military coalition against Russia.' However, according to the propagandist, only the Baltic states want to join. Nosovich enumerates those countries that 'have refused to be involved' in the Polish-led activities against Russia. His bogus claims are being widely commented on in the Russian propaganda outlets. This reported activity of Nosovich in an implementation of the Russian information warfare efforts against Poland in two key areas:
  - o portraying Poland as an aggressive country that seeks to drag the West into war against Russia
  - o implying that Poland is isolated by Allies
- Nosovich is a notorious Russian propagandist actively involved in the Kremlin's propaganda efforts targeted against Poland and other Western countries."



- The Kosciuszko Institute published its latest report "Cybersecurity cooperation between Poland and the United Kingdom", examining the new National Cyber Strategy of the United Kingdom, and the civilian, military and technological dimensions, as well as the role of modern technologies, also including the global and regional security context and the Russian war against Ukraine



- Spokesperson of the Minister-Special Services Coordinator in Poland, Stanisław Żaryn [published an overview of the leading propagandists in the Russian state television stations](#): "Russian state television remains the most important channel of propaganda influence on society. Its leading propagandists, who derive considerable income from their activities, daily consolidate the main narrative lines of Russian propaganda in the minds of Russians – they lie

about the war in Ukraine, praise the imperialist ambitions of Vladimir Putin, spread false myths about history, attack and ridicule the European Union and NATO and at the same time build up a sense of threat in the Russian consciousness, and threaten Western countries, including Poland. Particularly active in this area are the hosts of political shows, broadcast with great frequency, who act on behalf of the Kremlin."

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:**

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

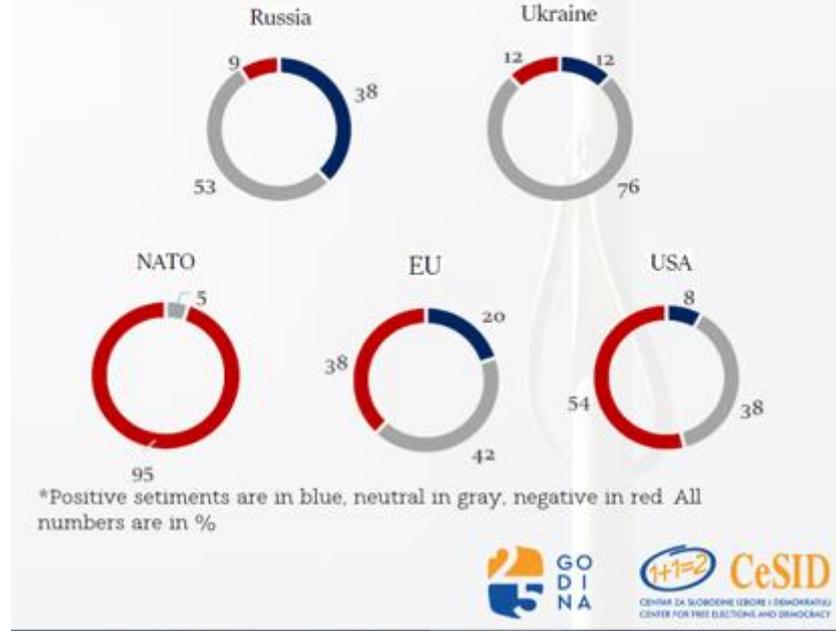
### **Bulgaria:**

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

### **Serbia:**

- IRI partner CeSID published monitoring of Serbian media coverage of Ukraine war in the pre-election campaign period. As many as 38% monitored online posts and articles contained positive sentiment towards Russia. Positive sentiments were especially present among the members of political parties SRS and Zavetnici. Negative sentiments were present in texts which contained views of Ajmo Ijudi, Moramo and US party members. Frequent narratives included:
  - "Any kind of opposition to Russia is unacceptable since it is a guarantor of Serbian interests" (especially in Kosovo and in the wider region)
  - "Serbia should not be involved in the conflict of two close nations"
  - "The West is inconsistent when it defends territorial integrity of Ukraine and neglects Serbia's integrity".

The most positive sentiments are related to **Russia** (primarily among right-wing lists NADA, Dveri-POKS, Zavetnici, Sovereignists, but also ruling Socialist party of Serbia). **Ukraine** was mentioned mostly in a neutral context. Sentiments towards the **EU** were mixed, towards the **USA** mostly negative and towards **NATO** - almost exclusively negative.



Results of media monitoring of online portals (Source: CeSID)

*For more information see our local partners activities: [CRTA](#), [BIRN](#)*

**Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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