

6 Months of War: Assessment of CEE Media Environment

Summary Period: February 24 – August 24, 2022

This represents the first of a two-part report covering the topics and narratives related to the war in Ukraine which started on February 24, 2022 and continues to rage on. Part one of this study is a six month overview of IRI Beacon Project's [Hostile Narrative Brief series](#) which examines three key topics and their assessed risk to support for Ukraine and covers media in Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian. IRI's reports will continue in October after being refined to further improve the insights.

The second part of this series will be published next week by the [Open Information Partnership](#) and identifies additional narratives and basic metrics for the Baltics, Visegrad Four, Belarus, Ukraine, Romania, Georgia, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia.

Top Line Summary:

- **Across Europe political instability is the biggest risk factor for continued support for Ukraine as governments in Italy and Bulgaria have collapsed with snap elections scheduled for October. Increased instability has also been seen in Czech Republic and Slovakia, with increasing possibility of the latter government collapsing as well.**
- **Hungarian policy may infect political discourse in other countries, with its 'non-aligned' policy toward Ukraine and Russia gaining traction in Bulgaria's media environment, among others notably Czech Republic and Slovakia.**
- **The conflation of anti-sanction narratives with increasing cost of living will continue to drive messaging aimed at eroding support for sanctions. This is expected to be even more pronounced as winter brings rising energy costs for European citizens.**
- **NATO continues to be largely popular and the media environment is dominated by neutral fact-based reporting and even positive messaging, with anti-NATO rhetoric confined largely to the political fringes. However, foreign troop deployments in Central and Eastern Europe provide opportunities for anti-NATO messaging to increase.**

Background note

Using [Pulsar](#) and [CrowdTangle](#), the International Republican Institute began monitoring news sites, blogs, forums, Twitter, YouTube, Reddit, and public Facebook pages in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria (V4+RO+BG) for narratives that were viewed as having the potential to undermine support for Ukraine. Three selected topics were identified by IRI staff as having a higher likelihood of gaining traction in the selected countries and have since been tracked in regular reports published since the beginning of March 2022.¹

Topics:

- **Anti-Refugee** – With the influx of Ukrainians fleeing the war to bordering countries in CEE there was an increased risk that narratives targeting refugees could gain traction amongst the

¹ All the published reports can be found on IRI's Beacon Project Website: www.iribeaconproject.org

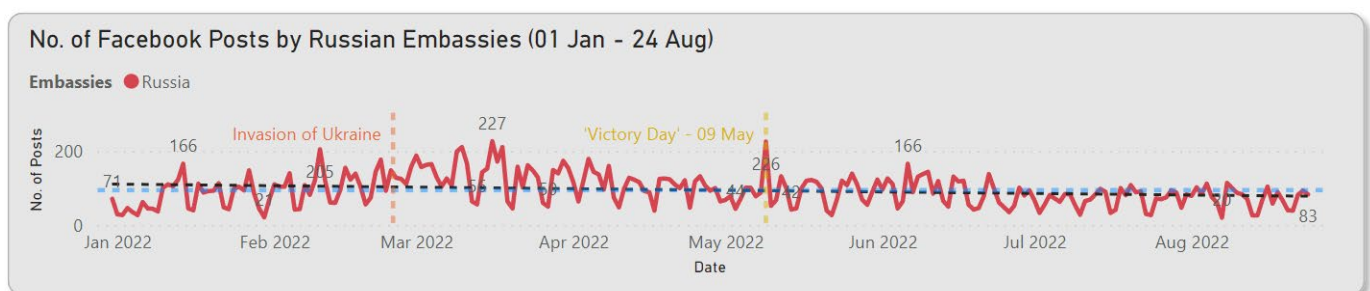
general population and force otherwise friendly governments to enact policies unsupportive of refugees. Given historical anti-migrant sentiment in the region, the risk that narratives focusing on broader migrant issues would also undermine support for Ukrainians meant tracking references not specifically mentioning Ukraine was necessary to assess the overall risk of hostile narratives taking hold.

- **Anti-Sanction** – The relatively quick and robust sanction measures enacted by the European Union and other Allied governments meant that there would likely be attempts made to undermine these policies by means of hostile messaging campaigns. Combined with the lingering effects of pandemic disruptions to the global economy this topic also focused on messaging that referenced price increases and the conflict rather than only those explicitly mentioning the sanctions.
- **Anti-NATO** – Despite Ukraine not being a NATO member the quick response by members of the Alliance and Russian attempts to falsely portray the invasion as a response to NATO aggression resulted in NATO being a primary topic to monitor during the war. Since NATO is not a direct party to the conflict more general references to military support and neutrality have also been included to monitor messaging that may not specifically mention NATO but still has an increased potential to undermine support for the Alliance.

Each topic is assessed by regional experts to determine the approximate risk (**low, medium, high**) that associated narratives have to undermine support for Ukraine. The risk assessment combines insights from the media monitoring, with social and political knowledge of the countries, and other reports and public opinion data when available to provide an indication of how problematic messages could be.

Russian Embassy Activity

To monitor official Russian government activity in relevant countries, the Beacon Project created an interactive dashboard to track Russian embassy activity in select countries.



After months of heightened activity beginning in February the activity of the Russian Embassies' official Facebook pages in 44 European countries has declined but are still higher than pre-invasion levels. Examining further details from CrowdTangle, Russian Embassy pages have increased their average number of posts per day between Feb 01 – Aug 24 from 1.22 in 2021 to 1.63 based on the year-on-year average while also gaining 130,199 combined followers over the previous year to 562,136 combined followers.

Notably:



The **embassy in Romania** shifted from posting predominately in English to posting in Romanian language at the beginning of April. This shift is a possible indication that the embassy is more consciously influencing the domestic audience in Romania more than in the past.



The **embassy in Bulgaria** remains one of the most active embassy Facebook pages since the beginning of the conflict, and the trajectory indicated this this trend may continue. Given the current political instability and snap elections looming in October there is a potential Russia will seek to influence the elections through this channel and possibly more obfuscated sources.



The **embassy in Iceland** has shown the second largest difference in average posts per day when compared to 2021, increasing from less than 1 (0.46) post per day to 3.15. This trend has only grown since February 2022 and could be an indication of increased Russian interests in the country or the Arctic region.

Risk Assessment

Overall Risk Assessment: General Media Space



Each media environment has been given a risk assessment through the combination of monitoring the Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Romanian, and Bulgarian media environments with additional third-party reports, polling and opinion research and expert knowledge of the region. This reflects the potential for narratives hostile to support for Ukraine to gain traction amongst the general public and therefore increase the risk for policy decisions that are not supportive of Ukraine or potentially pro-Russian.

High: Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria

These countries have been assessed to have a higher risk level largely due to domestic political factors and the propensity for hostile narratives to attract significant engagement online. While Hungary is considered high risk due to the policies and rhetoric of the long ruling Fidesz party, Slovakia and Bulgaria are elevated to the higher risk category due to internal political instability and the potential for extremist political parties to gain political momentum. Politicians from the so-called democratic center of the political spectrum have taken advantage of the situation to criticize their governments in an effort to seek electoral advantage but often in ways that undermine European unity for Ukraine or feed into Kremlin talking points.

Medium: Czech Republic, Romania*(Moldova is included by way of the Romanian language media)

Despite recent protest in Prague carried out by the far-right and far-left the political climate in Czech Republic and Romania remains relatively stable with the majority of opposition voices being more openly supportive of Ukraine. Despite this there are potential for heightened risk in both countries, especially related to sanctions and cost of living narratives. Romania has also seen traction on anti-refugee narratives, like those portraying Ukrainian's as tourists rather than displaced people.

Low: Poland

With broad open support for Ukraine across all the major parties in Poland and an outpouring of organic local support that received significant traction in online media the risk of significant erosion of support for Ukraine remains relatively low. However, escalation of Russia's aggression closer to Polish borders, historically grounded anti-Ukrainian narratives and the current economic situation has the potential to increase hostile narratives.

Narratives

ANTI-REFUGEE AND BROADER ANTI-MIGRANT

One of the most feared narratives at the beginning of the war were those targeting the vulnerable refugee populations who had fled Ukraine for the safety of neighboring countries. With an immense influx in refugees there was an increased risk that far-right nationalist and other anti-migrant movements might take advantage of the situation and endanger the safety of those fleeing the conflict through false reports of crime and other anti-social behavior. In the last six months, these narratives have been largely limited to football hooligans and other small extremist fringes of the political spectrum, without widespread reports of violence toward the Ukrainian population.

Countries featured in the Refugee Response Plan

Country	Date	Refugees from Ukraine registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes	Refugees from Ukraine recorded in country	Border crossings from Ukraine*	Border crossings to Ukraine**
Poland	30/08/2022	1,353,338	1,353,338	5,796,748	3,834,530
Hungary	30/08/2022	29,027	29,027	1,292,632	Data not available
Romania	28/08/2022	55,911	86,178	1,127,998	783,091
Slovakia	30/08/2022	90,416	90,612	736,387	474,864
Republic of Moldova	30/08/2022	Not applicable	90,525	591,957	232,313
Total		1,528,692	1,649,680	9,545,722	5,324,798

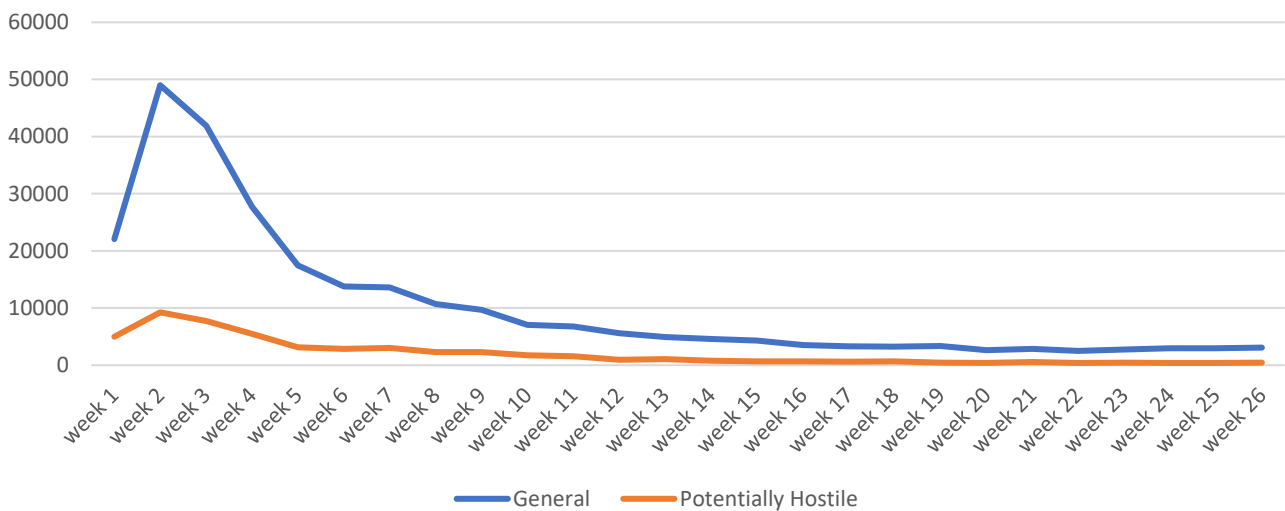
Other countries neighbouring Ukraine

Country	Date	Refugees from Ukraine registered for Temporary Protection or similar national protection schemes	Refugees from Ukraine recorded in country	Border crossings from Ukraine*	Border crossings to Ukraine**
Russian Federation	30/08/2022	Not applicable	2,414,075	2,414,075	Data not available
Belarus	30/08/2022	Not applicable	12,505	16,701	Data not available
Total		Not applicable	2,426,580	2,430,776	Data not available

Source: Operational Data Portal: Ukraine Refugee Situation; UNHCR. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

However, as the war has continued the proportion of the media environment that is potentially hostile toward Ukrainian refugees has increased. This can be clearly seen by comparing the levels of more general references to refugees to matching keywords that have an increased probability of containing hostile messaging. The initial peak of information at week 2 (March) dramatically decreased by week 5 (April) and has steadily trended down until leveling out around week 22 with approximately 15% of the references in monitored media having a higher probability of containing content hostile to the refugees.

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



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

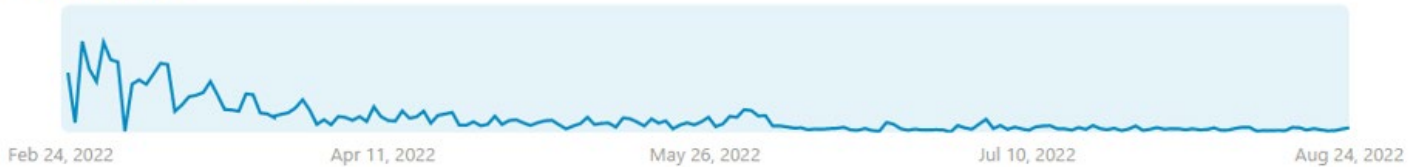


Facebook Content:

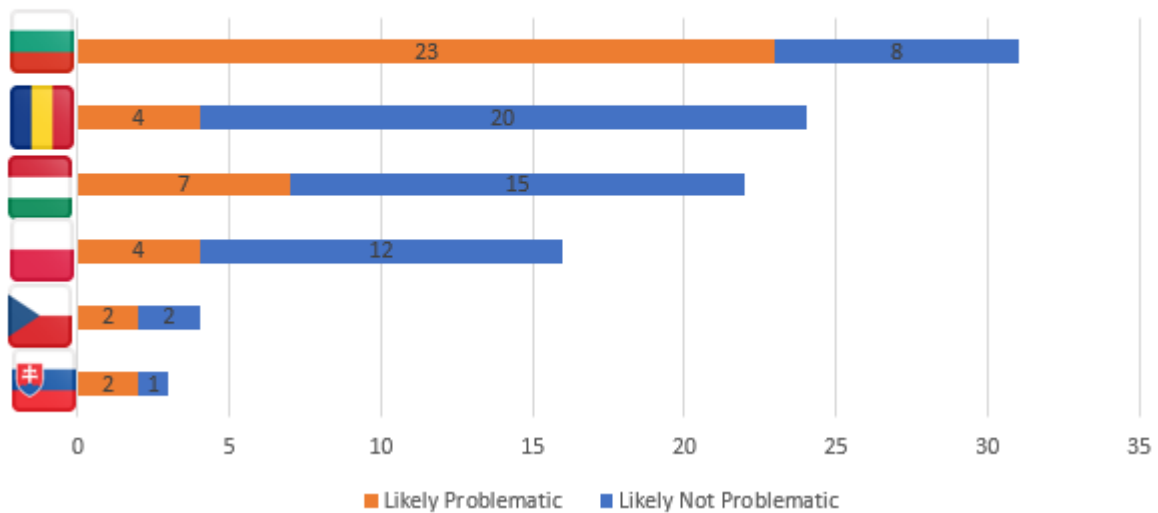
General references to immigrants or refugees on Public Facebook Pages and Groups (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)

INTERACTIONS
13,913,629

POSTS
97,584

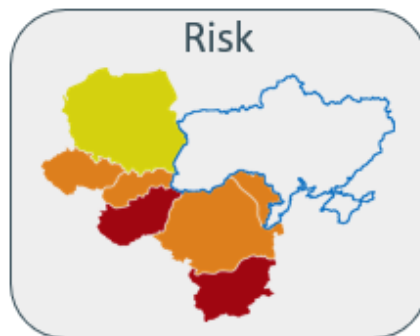


Top 100 Facebook Posts by Engagement Referencing Immigrant/Refugee 24 Feb - 24 Aug



Source: IRI Beacon Project; data from CrowdTangle

Potential Impact:



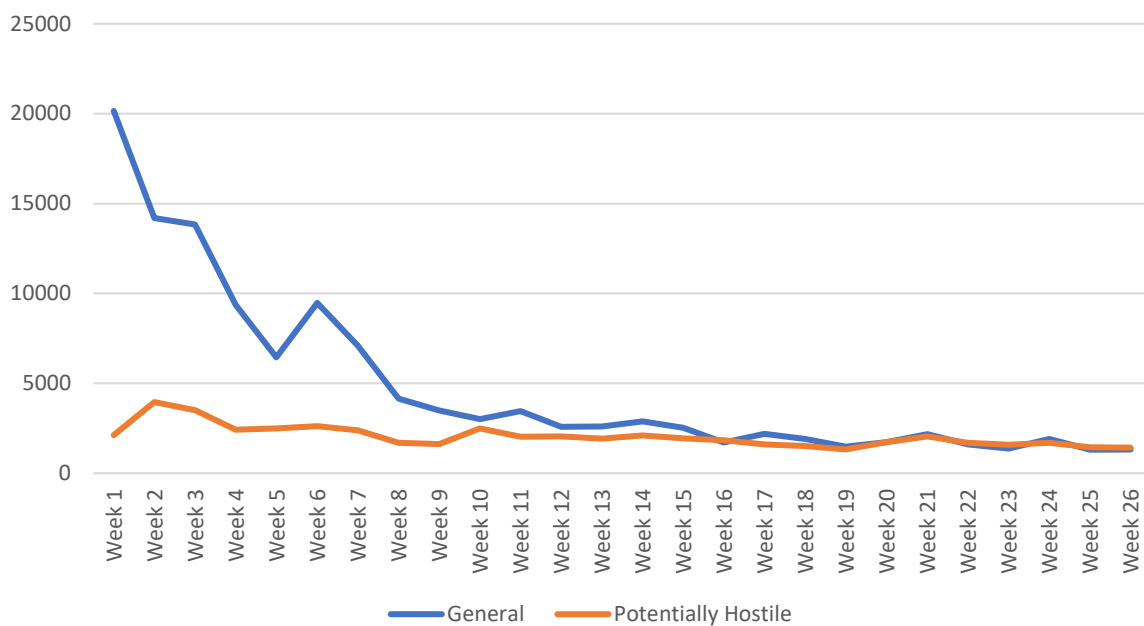
The Beacon Project’s monitoring of online media found that although the most extreme and violent anti-refugee narratives gained little mainstream traction, there was significant levels of other anti-Ukrainian narratives in the media space. **The primary narrative to gain**

traction amongst the general public was that the Ukrainian’s were actually better off than and/or their needs were being prioritized over those of the local population. This was often illustrated with images of expensive cars with Ukrainian registration plates or reports of Ukrainians being unhappy with the accommodation provided by local authorities. As mainstream media began moving on from non-stop coverage of the war and more general reporting on the refugee situation, **the proportion of content that carried potentially hostile narratives toward refugees has averaged approx. 20% of the overall coverage (weekly peak = 23%, low = 13%).** Combined with the fact that anti-refugee messaging received greater engagements (including shares) on Facebook as the war continued further increased the possibility of the local population organically coming into contact with the narratives. **The risk of anti-refugee narratives impacting wider public perception and possible government policies has been assessed to be medium with an outlook of it becoming a higher risk the longer refugees are unable to safely return home and economic challenges impact local citizens.**

ANTI-SANCTION/CONSUMER PRICES

The most impactful hostile narrative that the Beacon Project has tracked over the last 6 months has been those directed against the European sanction regime. Online media monitoring showed that the more general reporting on sanctions only maintained a dominant position in the monitored media environments until week 9 of the war. From week 10 onward the proportion of hostile messaging compared to more general references to the sanctions was at or near parity. An average of 69% of the conversations around the sanctions since February 24 have a higher potential to erode support for them with that average reaching 97% since week 16.

7 Day Avg. Comparing References to **Sanctions (General)** & **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)

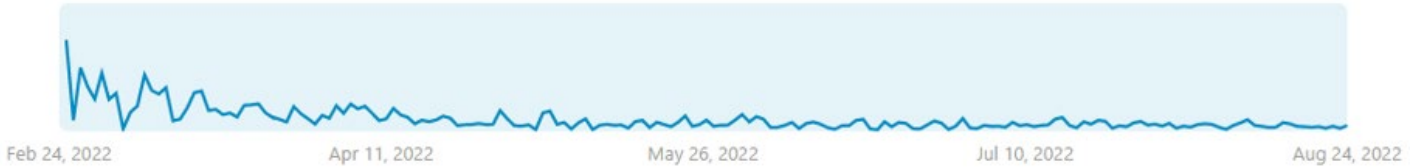


Facebook Content:

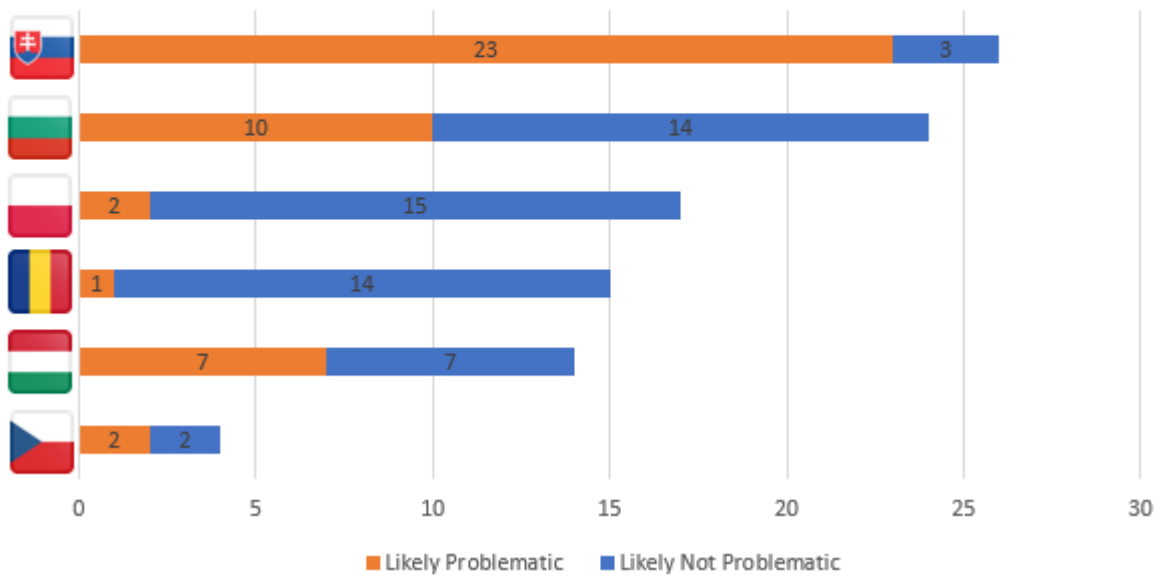
General references to sanctions or cost of living on Public Facebook Pages and Groups (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)

INTERACTIONS
18,222,104

POSTS
87,544



Top 100 Facebook Posts by Engagement Referencing Sanctions or Cost of Living 24 Feb - 24 Aug



Source: IRI Beacon Project; data from CrowdTangke

Potential Impact:



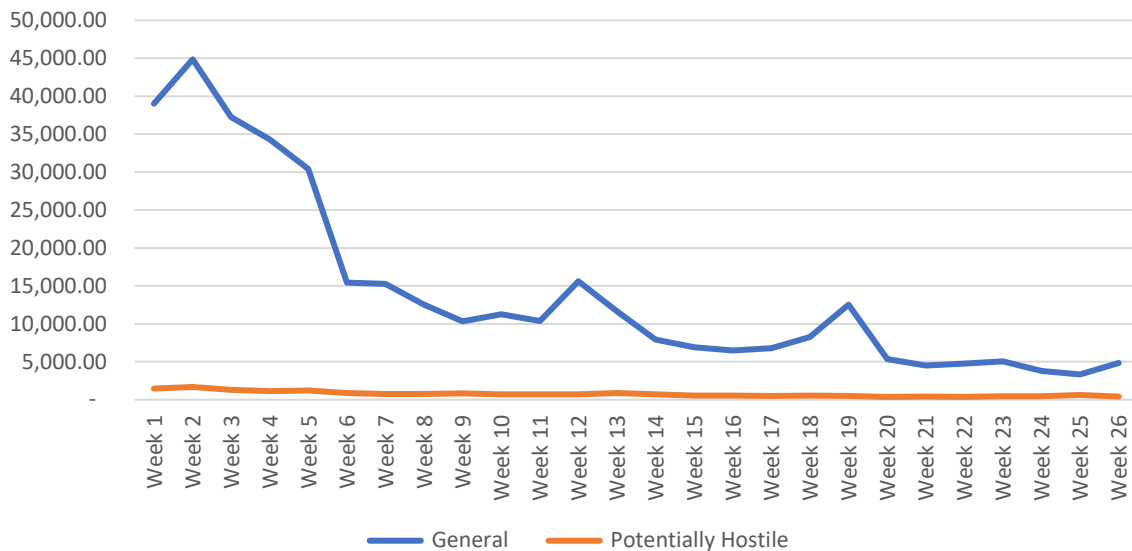
The most successful narrative used to push anti-sanction messaging was to connect the economic downturn and price increase of household staples to the sanctions on Russia. This narrative has

resulted in a significant amount of content claiming that sanctions have backfired and are having a greater adverse effect on European citizens than it has on Russia. The spread of the hostile narrative in mainstream political circles has also been spread by opposition parties (particularly in Slovakia) eager to criticize the government policies in an attempt to score political points with the public. In Hungary, however, the narrative has been widely promoted by the ruling Fidesz government (using the term “háborús inflációtól”, or *war inflation*) as justification for its so-called non-aligned approach to the war in Ukraine that has seen it prevent arms shipments and carve out exemptions from EU sanctions. **The risk associated with anti-sanction narratives spreading organically amongst the general public and having the potential to impact policy decisions has increased from a medium risk to a high risk over the last 6 months and makes the prospect of increased EU sanctions very unlikely without substantial derogations offered to countries.**

ANTI-NATO

Over the last 6 months anti-NATO narratives have been largely confined to far-right and far-left political extremists without a substantial following in the monitored countries. **Overall, the coverage of mentions of NATO have been largely in general terms with potentially hostile narratives failing to reach the 10% share of voice in the online conversations.** The democratic center of the political spectrum in all countries has continued to be largely positive of NATO and supportive of their countries position within the Alliance. The announcement of Sweden and Finland joining NATO also provided a significant amount of positive coverage. An average of 7% of the conversations around NATO since February 24 had a higher potential to erode support for the Alliance, however, it has been trending up with an average of 11% since week 21.

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



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

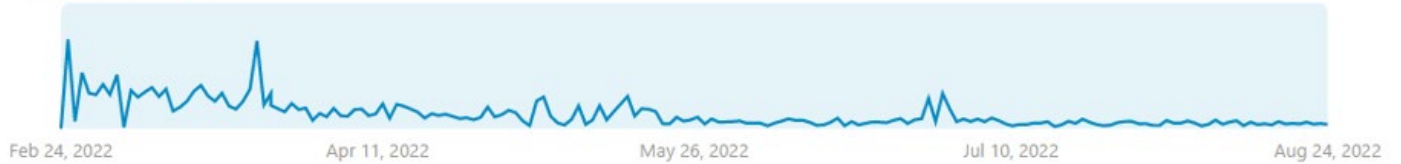


Facebook Content:

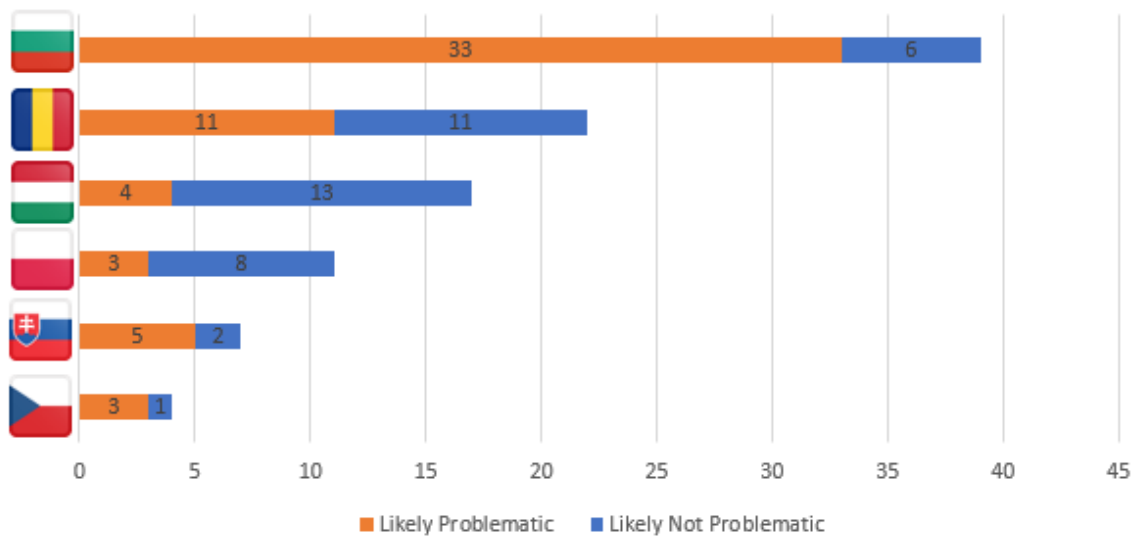
General references to sanctions or cost of living on Public Facebook Pages and Groups (PL, CZ, SK, HU, RO, BG)

INTERACTIONS
39,773,329

POSTS
205,151



Top 100 Facebook Posts by Engagement Referencing NATO 24 Feb - 24 Aug



Source: IRI Beacon Project; data from CrowdTangke

Potential Impact:



The primary anti-NATO narrative to gain traction in some online spaces has been focused on presenting it as a puppet of US or Western imperialism often tying it in to other broader anti-US and anti-EU narratives. In particular this narrative has received traction amongst far-right extremist parties seeking a referendum on NATO membership. In particularly the far-right Bulgarian

nationalist, Revival Party, has been using it extensively in its messaging ahead of snap elections due to be held at the beginning of October. **However, the current risk of this messaging endangering NATO membership is low while there is a medium risk to undermine military support for Ukraine where it currently exists.** Although the overall risk remains relatively low, there still remains a risk that anti-NATO narratives will be successfully used by extremist parties to build support and potentially become more legitimized in their respective countries.