

ASK THE EXPERTS

No. 1: Hostile Narratives Eroding Support for Ukraine



Established in 2016, the Beacon Project works with a network of experts on disinformation and Russian malign influence to bring data-driven analysis and insights to the forefront. Within a network of over 150 organizations in 34 countries the Beacon Project works with partners to improve common methodological approaches and seeks to increase the impact of analysis and insights. Through the provision of tools and expertise, the Beacon Project supports comparative analysis and cooperative projects with researchers and practitioners across Europe.

The International Republican Institute (IRI)'s Beacon Project is launching a new expert comments series. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the IRI's Beacon Project has been analyzing online media data from several Central and Eastern European Countries to track key narratives that have the potential to erode support for Ukraine. This tracking and mapping of meta narratives in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia is planned to continue through June 2023. For more of our bi-weekly reports, go here. To begin, we have asked an international team of analysts to share their expert opinion and estimations of Russian information activities and their countries' internal vulnerabilities. In addition to the aforementioned countries, we include guest experts from Germany and Ireland. This inaugural report will focus on the prospective evolution and impact of narratives monitored over the past several months through the end of this calendar year. Please note this prognosis is based on the expert opinions of researchers from the region.

This forecast has been prepared with support from IRI's Beacon Project.

The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of IRI.

BULGARIA



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Anti-Refugee Narratives

The anti-refugee narrative in Bulgaria used to be very strong, especially during the first few months of the war. With the initial surge of refugees coming at the end of the winter, many of them were provided with shelter in hostels on the off-season Bulgarian coast. However, as preparations for the summer season began in the spring the hostile narratives successfully focused predominantly on the Bulgarian hotel business struggling to provide free accommodation as well as negative coverage of the state-sponsored program that covered the expenses. It seems as though the permeability of this narrative has gone down, especially since refugees have now returned to Ukraine, as well as the fact that we are past the summer season. It seems that in the next few months, this will not be the predominant narrative. However, there are still occasional articles here and there, as well as politicians who sometimes speak rather negatively on this specific topic. In the upcoming months, though, there is a potential for a sub-narrative to emerge, focusing on the Ukrainians who are or have already settled in Bulgaria. With a difficult winter coming up, the uncertain political environment and the looming global recession, a negative sentiment may be utilized and heightened as to whether the Bulgarian state is, will be and should be offering stipends to refugees (as opposed to providing social care to its citizens). Questions about the job market may also arise, mainly in the very successful pro-Brexit narrative of 'migrants are stealing our jobs'.

Social media discourse appears dominated by users with strongly hostile views toward Ukrainian refugees. The most pervasive narratives include allegations that Ukrainians in Bulgaria are wealthy, receive taxpayer money, and reside in the country only during the summer to take advantage of free luxury accommodation. Comparisons are frequently drawn between the conditions that Ukrainian refugees live in and the living conditions of Bulgarians in need, such as pensioners or flood victims. These moods are likely to be exacerbated as winter approaches and inflation erodes the living standards of many. Outbursts of hostility are likely to be triggered each time the media reports on sensitive topics, for example: 1) large groups of refugees arriving in Bulgaria within short periods of time; 2) new tranches of government subsidies for Ukrainians in need; 3) disasters and accidents affecting Bulgarians. Bulgarians often tend to shift their frustrations with the political elites over to Ukrainian refugees. Unfortunately, if social media conversations are any indication of the prevailing moods in society, a new refugee wave caused by Russia's indiscriminate destruction of civilian infrastructure or by another escalation of the war will be met with far less compassion and support.



Anti-Sanction Narratives

The anti-sanction narrative is probably going to remain rather powerful and common for several reasons. On one side, there is a very strong local narrative about a looming gas crisis and the need for Bulgaria to stay friends with Russia (as we are completely dependent on them). While it is true that Bulgaria is more dependent on Russian gas than other European countries, we have now filled in our gas storage facilities. That said, the narrative remains that the current gas price is high, and it will only keep increasing over the winter months, pushing some companies out of business and impacting the daily lives of Bulgarians, who will have to keep cooler room temperatures just to get by, according to a common narrative. Thus, there will probably be an increase in the anti-sanction sentiment as the sanctions against Russia will be seen as the main pusher of the higher prices. The contractual arrangement with Gazprom will probably be another hot topic that includes the anti-sanction narrative. The main narrative thread has been – and probably will continue to be – about the instance where Bulgaria and only a couple other countries refused to pay Gazprom in rubles and thus there had been a breach of contract. On the other side – and somewhat connected to the last point – there is another sub-narrative emerging that the West is saying one thing and defending sanctions, while doing the opposite (like paying Russian companies in rubles, for example). This also relates to the sentiment that it is only a matter of time for the West to take a step back on sanctions, due to the perceived high number of protests that will be happening in the coming months, and once again highlighting Bulgaria's position in all of this. Many voices also call into question the effect of these sanctions, backing these statements with examples about the relative stability of the ruble, highlighting the Sino-Russian flourishing relations, etc. Finally, another sub-narrative that may emerge is around the required diversification from Russian gas. The opponents of the idea of Bulgaria getting LNG slots in Greece say it is significantly more expensive than Russian gas, while those who disagree with a potentially long-term contract with Azerbaijan ask whether Bulgaria is right to sanction Russia but is gladly doing business with another autocratic country.

Bulgarian social media users usually discuss the impact of the sanctions against Russia on the rising costs of gas and electricity in Europe as a whole. Bulgaria is rarely mentioned on its own and more often as a member of the EU. Germany and the USA are criticized as the main instigators of the sanctions that exacerbated the ongoing inflation, with some users arguing that Russia was victimized by the West. In this context, Bulgaria is discussed for its dependence on Russian gas. Here some users claim that the rise in electricity and fuel costs was a political move meant to make the country fully dependable on 'greedy' American gas companies. Some users also allege that company announcements wrongly attributed the rising inflation to the war in Ukraine, suggesting instead that it was the result of a perceived failure of green energy policies or of a supposed US strategy to establish a gas monopoly in Europe. Generally, Russian sympathizers tend to see the sanctions as both unfair and ineffective and present them as a form of economic warfare. These attitudes are likely to be displayed each time a new round of sanctions is announced, while the opinion that Russia is able to withstand the economic pressure will likely become deeper entrenched as the war drags on.



Anti-NATO Narratives

Bulgaria has always been and most probably will continue to be fertile ground for anti-NATO narratives. In relation to the war in Ukraine, the anti-NATO narrative has been heightened and includes everything from conspiracy theories about chemtrails to people claiming NATO is to blame for Russia's aggression. These are most likely to continue to be popular topic threads, especially with the high percentage of Vazrajidane MPs in the current Bulgarian parliament. The anti-NATO sentiment will continue to be a hit topic amongst the different political parties trying to form a government and most likely will also be one of the main reasons why another snap election will be called early next year. The linkage between the Crimea bridge bombing and the claim that the truck (with the bomb) had gone through Bulgaria was another topic that became a fertile ground for anti-NATO sentiment to flourish, specifically on the role of NATO in the war, including around weaponization of the Ukrainians with Western-made weapons.

The prevailing sentiment concerning NATO is negative, with anti-NATO rhetoric dominating social media discussions. Some users argue against the notion that Bulgaria's membership in the Alliance grants the country a degree of safety in the current political situation. Ukraine is often portrayed as an American proxy used in what is envisioned as a war between Russia and NATO, sponsored by the West (including Bulgaria). Bulgarian social media members expressed fear that the country would get involved in the conflict due to its NATO membership and often speculated that specific pro-European and pro-NATO parties are funded by the West and act like foreign agents. News on NATO military training, state purchase of military equipment and supplies (including aircraft), and arms donations to Ukraine are topics likely to boost conversations around NATO. Bulgarian Russophiles will likely attribute further Ukrainian military successes to direct NATO involvement on the frontlines, whereas any escalation by Russia will be seen as a justified response to alleged provocations. Fearmongering related to WMDs and hypothetical Russian 'super-weapons' will continue. On the other hand, any potential setbacks for the Ukrainian military will be presented as proof of an alleged Russian military supremacy. Such events will likely be exploited to promote the statement that NATO membership only compromises Bulgaria's national security.

CZECH REPUBLIC & SLOVAKIA



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Anti-Refugee Narratives

Anti-refugee sentiments in the Czech and Slovak Republics have been less intense than expected since the start of the invasion, considering the negative experience from the 2015 migrant crisis. According to opinion polls, the majority of the population still feels solidarity and expresses willingness to aid refugees. This trend is expected to continue in the upcoming months. Of course, there are some manipulative narratives circulating, mainly claiming that the refugees are ungrateful for the assistance provided and the government prioritizes the needs of refugees over their own citizens. But these are not the dominant attitudes so far.

The upcoming Czech presidential elections slated for January 2023 have the potential for serving as a crucible for various harmful narratives. Pre-election campaigns could exploit the sensitive topic of refugees, and one of the biggest potential candidates, former PM Andrej Babiš (ANO), has already been posting agitational content about refugees on

Anti-Sanction Narratives

The anti-sanction narrative is expected to continue to be the most prevalent, triggered by the ongoing economic and energy crisis which impacts everyday lives of citizens both in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In both countries' online spaces, politicians are the most active and interacted with on this topic, which creates a considerable reach of this narrative. This topic has the biggest potential impact also because of its fear-mongering character and appeals to emotions due to pessimistic predictions about the upcoming winter that will be spent freezing and hungry. In this context, the presentation of Russia as a reliable ally with stable energy supplies in contrast to lowering standards of

Anti-NATO Narratives

Anti-NATO messaging has not been too intense, and the Slovak and Czech public remains mostly in favor of the Alliance, perceiving it to provide security guarantees. Accusations that NATO (or the West more generally) is the real aggressor are limited to the political fringes. However, the longer the war continues and sanctions are in place the chance of fatigue reducing resolve amongst the general public is likely to increase. Furthermore, should it be perceived that the war has reached a stalemate, there is an increased possibility that the public will grow sensitive to anything military-related, since it could be misrepresented as NATO/the West prolonging the war.

GERMANY



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Anti-Refugee Narratives

There has been limited agitation against Ukrainian refugees, mainly focusing on the cost of hosting and extending social benefits to hundreds of thousands of refugees. These critiques are coming mostly from pro-Russian and far-right political actors like the AFD. These narratives often pit the cost of the Ukrainian refugees against perceived issues in Germany that this money could be spent on instead. To a lesser extent, there are also narratives from the far-right that Ukrainian refugees are ungrateful for their received support. Anti-refugee narratives are generally unpopular and will probably not catch on in the mainstream sentiment and will remain low in their spread for the remainder of the year.

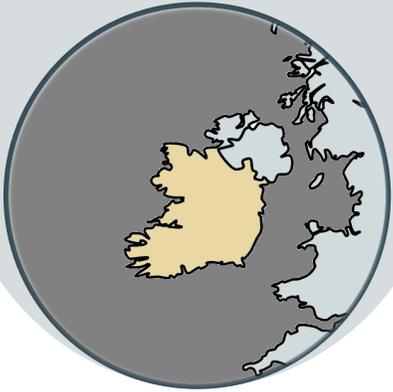
Anti-Sanction Narratives

The energy sanctions and embargoes on Russian fossil fuels and the shutdown of Nord Stream 2 have been criticized by fringe political groups. These narratives also appeal to more mainstream voters as inflation, in part caused by energy shortages, erodes household income, consumer spending, and in turn, support for the government among traditionally mainstream voters. Much of the current support increase for the far-right AFD can be linked back to anti-sanction narratives about rising inflation and energy shortages brought forward by the party. If prices for energy and inflation continue to rise in the coming winter, these narratives will increase both in frequency and effectiveness for the rest of 2022, becoming the main threat to German support for Ukraine.

Anti-NATO Narratives

There are narratives circulating that NATO does not want to end the war in Ukraine in order to weaken Russia by sacrificing Ukraine and forbidding Ukraine to make peace. Another narrative accuses the US of blowing up the Nord Stream pipelines to make Germany dependent on US natural gas. These narratives have some amount of backing from far-left and far-right fringe groups but are generally seen as conspiracy theories. The only major narrative against NATO that the far-left Linke and the far-right AFD back is that NATO is partly or wholly responsible for the war in Ukraine. By admitting Russia's neighbors into NATO and allying with Ukraine, NATO forced Russia to attack Ukraine. These narratives are relatively unpopular in light of obvious Russian aggression and probably will not gain traction through the rest of the year.

IRELAND



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Anti-Refugee and Anti-Sanction Narratives

The anti-refugee and anti-sanction narratives in Ireland are likely to increase over the coming months. Ireland has faced rising house prices and supply issues described as a ‘housing crisis’ and the impact of an increase in energy prices, heating costs and cost of living will be felt more strongly throughout the winter. These are both areas we have seen far-right nationalist actors emphasizing when discussing Ukraine. In the context of Ukrainian refugees, the argument is that Ireland has no room to host refugees or that the Irish government is prioritizing resource allocation to Ukrainians rather than Irish people. In terms of sanctions, the rising cost of living or concerns around power cuts, heating costs etc. over winter are being used to suggest that sanctions are having a damaging effect on Irish people/society and as such represent poor policymaking or should not be supported.

Anti-NATO Narratives

Ireland is not a NATO member due to its policy on military neutrality. While some anti-NATO sentiment exists in niche disinformation spaces, we don’t anticipate much growth in this area as it seems less emotive and more difficult to gain traction among the public compared to the risks associated with the anti-refugee and anti-sanction narratives.

LITHUANIA



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Anti-Refugee Narratives

The anti-refugee narrative in Lithuania has experienced a massive spike as the first waves of refugees from Ukraine started coming to the country. As many volunteer centers have been opened to deal with their accommodations, preparing packages of food or clothing, searching for possibilities to work, study or generally – adapt in the country, narratives preventing smooth process appeared. Until 2023, another stage of the anti-refugee narrative development might be seen, related to diminishing their integration. Narratives based on “stolen jobs”, creation of a “hostile environment” in their new workplaces, general ingratitude towards Lithuanians, and hostile or even unlawful behavior are believed to take over in the upcoming months. Generally, anti-refugee narratives are likely to be further escalat-

Anti-Sanction Narratives

Anti-sanction narratives are slowly dying down at present. However, with wintertime approaching, they might rise and intensify again. People are constantly complaining about high electricity and heating prices; meanwhile, disinformation actors seek to blame Ukraine and Ukrainians directly. When temperatures start to fall, anti-sanction narratives are likely to appear, stating that the skyrocketing electricity/heating prices are the consequence of “unreasonable” sanctions against Russia that, eventually, only hurt Lithuanians.

Anti-NATO Narratives

The anti-NATO narrative has been spreading steadily in Lithuania, mostly avoiding sudden shifts of intensity. In the last months of 2022, this narrative is also believed to remain relevant, considering the ammunition, provision of military appliances to Ukraine, etc. Still, no massive development of the narrative is expected.

POLAND



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Anti-Refugee Narratives

Two narratives in particular, concerning refugees and sanctions, have been most exploited by pro-Russian actors and circles in Poland. The anti-refugee narrative has been used and spread since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, which is closely linked to the huge number of Ukrainian refugees seeking help in Poland. One can state with a high degree of probability that this will continue, especially in the context of the economic crisis, the negative impact of which will only be amplified by the coming winter and rising energy commodity prices.

The well-known anti-refugee narratives, which focus, inter alia, on portraying Ukrainians as wealthy people who only use the Polish state for their particular - economic - needs, may be linked to the increasing economic problems of the country and individual citizens. In this context, an increase in messages condemning state assistance to Ukrainians and attempts to create the image of Ukrainians as responsible for the worsening economic situation can be foreseen. The economic situation and the coming winter are also undeniably linked to the anti-sanctions narrative, which will also likely gain strength with the upcoming heating season and the Kremlin's increasingly aggressive energy policy - including the blowing up of the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines, attributed by many to Moscow.

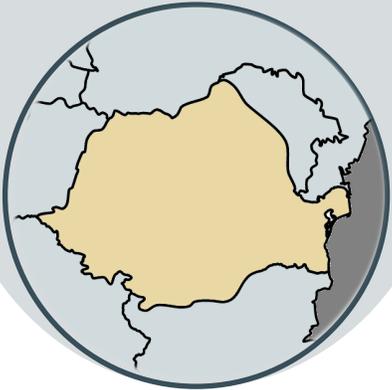
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Anti-NATO Narratives

The anti-NATO narrative, although discernible and focused on accusing individual alliance countries of warmongering and nuclear conflict, is the least popular of the three in the Polish information space. This is not expected to change dramatically in the coming months, mainly due to the very high support for NATO among the Polish public and the equally strong anti-Russian sentiment, which makes the effectiveness of openly anti-NATO and pro-Russian content very low.

ROMANIA



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Anti-Refugee Narratives

Anti-refugee sentiment in Romania is moderate to low, mainly because of a deep empathy towards the Ukrainian cause and due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of the refugees were women and children. According to the [UN Refugee Agency in Romania](#), until July, 2022 1,237,596 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in Romania, with some 86,154 choosing to remain.

The main disinformation narratives about refugees were spread on disinformation websites that aimed to create rejection through discrediting messages such as: “the state takes better care of refugees than its own citizen”, “we are sick of taking care of refugees”, “refugees are a burden when the Romanian state should prioritize taking care of the energy crisis, inflation, etc.”, “refugees will receive free housing and property in Romania without working”. These narratives have been pushed consistently on over 100 pages and public groups with over 10,000 followers.

Its reach has been limited, though. Both to the lack of interest from the general public, but also because the Ukrainian community has made significant steps in integrating itself in Romanian society. The temporary protection mechanism offered by the EU granted them the right to work. Ukrainians took this opportunity and success stories of working Ukrainians are common knowledge in urban Romania. In the capital city, Bucharest, Ukrainians even built a youth center for Romanians and Ukrainians that aims to foster communication and create common cultural events such as quiz nights, theater plays and so on. The biggest threat throughout 2022 in the rise of anti-refugee narratives is the inter-

Anti-Sanction Narratives

Sanctioning the Kremlin was overwhelmingly supported by Romanian society as it was seen as a logical response to what has been largely recognized as Russia’s war of aggression. There has however, been some hesitance for more robust sanctions as Romanians fear potential Russian retaliation in the form of energy disruptions or even military activities across the shared border with Ukraine or from Russian activities in the Black Sea. The concerns around energy have so far been the only significant retaliation that has had an impact with the resulting ‘energy crisis’ also causing an increase in political instability. Even though [Romania produces almost 90% of its energy internally](#), those numbers are decreasing due to a lack of investments in new extraction projects. Also, the Romanian Ministry of Energy [delayed its communication](#) about internal gas reserves, which gave room to speculation and outrage in the public sphere. Alternative theories and misinformation also filled this space, further exacerbating the problem. Narratives that “The EU doesn’t want us to use our own gas” or the “Government is sabotaging its own citizens with high prices” were able to rapidly spread on social media. Also, we have little communication and [transparency from the Ministry of Energy](#) regarding future extraction plans for natural gas, which makes the known natural resources a wasted potential and a source for public frustration, outrage, and hostile narratives online.



Anti-NATO Narratives

According to a survey conducted in January 2022, [70.3% of Romanians](#) trusted that NATO would protect Romania in the event of a conflict between Russia and Ukraine. This statement proved to be true, since NATO had a strong presence that reassured the Romanian population and brought a sentiment of safety. The general position is pro-NATO and Romania's membership is viewed as highly valuable in keeping Russia's ambitions in the region in check. Romanians have a clear position against alliances with Russia due a collective memory of the horrors that happened during the Soviet occupation of Romania from 1944 to August 1958, during which the Soviet Union maintained a significant military presence. Rapes, confiscation of properties and brutality have been the memories passed to younger generations that have sparked strong pro-NATO feelings and also strong feelings of empathy towards Ukrainians. This does not mean that anti-NATO content is not pushed by propaganda groups and disinformation websites, but its reach and impact is limited. We can estimate that this trend will remain until the end of 2022.

UKRAINE



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Anti-Refugee, Anti-Sanction, & Anti-NATO Narratives

Each of these narratives has a significantly different context and content in the Ukrainian information space. In particular, anti-refugee has several contexts at once: the first concerns the attitude towards internally displaced persons (IDPs), especially from predominantly Russian-speaking regions of the East and South of Ukraine, triggering both language and political views from the past (i.e. support for pro-Russian forces, “you have brought Putin to Ukraine”, “Putin came to protect you”); the second is towards Ukrainian refugees who are still abroad and do not return, saying that they are “traitors”, men are “fugitives” and “evaders”. Anti-sanction and anti-NATO narratives follow almost the same track, and are connected by one big anti-Western idea, that is, the West is not doing enough, the West does not want Ukraine to win, the West does not see Ukraine as its part, the West does not see Ukraine in EU and NATO, the West continues to finance Russia.

The problem with all these three narratives in Ukraine is that they not only have objective grounds, as in the other countries of the study, but also that these narratives, which are incredibly harmful to Ukraine, are very often promoted by representatives of the authorities and/or politicians under the guise of patriotic and ‘tough’ positions. In combination with rational public demands (mainly regarding weapon supply) from official Kyiv to the West as such or its leading countries (most frequently to Germany, but also to others, for instance to Hungary), all this provokes a mass syndrome of unjustified inflated expectations, and therefore, in the end, disappointment.

As winter approaches, the number of refugees and IDPs will only increase. After the adoption of the 8th package of sanctions, as well as after the adoption of the 6th, the question will arise even more about whether these sanctions are working and whether it is possible to adopt further packages. After Ukraine formally petitions to join NATO, as with the candidate status for the EU, the question will regularly arise as to when official negotiations will begin or when Ukraine will in fact, join the EU and NATO. Similarly, with repeated Russian shelling of Ukrainian infrastructure and civilian objects, the anti-Western mood regarding the provision of air defense, closing the sky, etc., will grow, which Ukraine and public opinion already experienced in the first weeks and months of the Russian invasion.