

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.

ASK THE EXPERTS

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. More of our bi-weekly briefs can be found [here](#).

To begin we have asked an international team of analysts to share their expert opinion and estimations of hostile information activities and their countries internal vulnerabilities. In addition to the aforementioned countries, we include guest experts from Germany and Ireland. The second part of the inaugural report is focusing on the broader spectrum of other narratives, that may undermine the support for Ukraine, a well as new, potential information threats in CEE.

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.

Questions:

2. Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

3. Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

BULGARIA



Tihomira Doncheva
Center for Information, Democracy, and Citizenship

Devora Kotseva
A Data Pro

Todor Kiriakov
A Data Pro

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

It is unlikely that wholly new narratives will emerge but many sub-narratives within the three groups are likely to emerge. Mainly, the sub-narrative about gas security seems to be the one with the highest permeability. Another potentially new sub-narrative – and somewhat already in the news – concerns the potential threat of nuclear escalation. The narrative there will most probably circle around whose fault would it be if Zaporizhzhia, for instance, were to emit a radioactive cloud. The narrative has every potential to become an important one, especially given the history with Chernobyl and the already panic-like sentiment building up in Bulgarian society.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

There are many new information threats that have the potential to negatively influence the Bulgarian society. Many of these have to do with larger processes – such as a global recession, lack of preparedness to overcome crises, the many challenging crises that seem to have grabbed the world, etc. The new international order, which is grounded more in big power competition, is definitely a topic that could be exploited by harmful narratives. Internally, Bulgaria seems to be in a never-ending cycle of elections with no clear majority. Thus, this internal stability provides the perfect ground for malign foreign influence. The growing success of the anti-West and pro-Russian party Vazrajdana is (as well as the newly formed Bulgarski vazhod) is another worrying factor. The political elite seems to draw red lines in terms of the future of Bulgarian foreign policy, however, these remain in words only with little actions (for example which party has an Euro-Atlantic orientation and which doesn't). In terms of systematic issues, the low quality of the media environment and the high polarization of the Bulgarian society are another potential opportunity for malign influence.

CZECH REPUBLIC & SLOVAKIA



Kristina Sefcikova
Prague Security Studies Institute

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

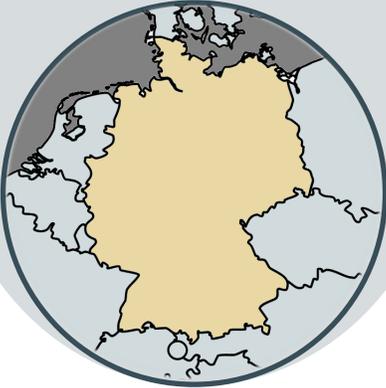
An intensification of the so-called peace narrative, which has been subtly present since the start of Russia's invasion, is gaining more traction as the war continues. This narrative includes appeals to stop the war, to stop military and/or humanitarian aid to Ukraine or even symbolic steps in the name of Ukraine's support. It calls for a total focus on solving domestic concerns such as the economic and energy crisis and securing stable energy supplies and better standard of living, whatever it takes, even once again relying on Russian gas. Consequently, it refuses any further investment of resources into aid for Ukraine. Considering the immediate impact these domestic concerns have on the population, the prominence of this narrative is expected to increase.

Another potentially dangerous narrative considers the crisis and increasing prices as an artificial problem, caused by the governments and their policies, including support for the EU, which is also seen as destructive. This stems from both dissatisfaction with the current political representations and general Euroscepticism, which are underlying long-term issues. The risk of the narrative lies in its potential to underplay or even deny the role of the invasion and Russian weaponization of gas supplies in the crisis, which can also weaken condemnation of the Russian aggressor and support of solidarity for Ukraine.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

New potential information threats can surface mainly on the political and government levels. Firstly, there are major political events such as the Czech presidential election, scheduled for January 2023, where the pre-election campaigns can exploit any of the mentioned Ukraine-related topics for political gains. Secondly, the internal political situation in both CZ and SK can create space for new information threats. In Slovakia, the collapse of the governing coalition and the resulting minority government, continuing inter-party and interpersonal conflicts are causing frustration among the population and a distraction from the ongoing crisis and war. In the Czech Republic, it is the constant attacks of the (mainly right-wing) opposition on Fiala's government as the alleged culprit of the crisis. These events and trends are causing general frustration and distrust towards the governments and can cause systemic lack of support towards their policies and political steps, including those in support of Ukraine.

GERMANY



Lukas Becker

*IRI Beacon Project; Vesalius College/Brussels School
of Governance*

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

Since the beginning of the war, there have been narratives focusing on reducing German arms shipments to Ukraine. According to these narratives, arms deliveries encourage Ukraine to keep fighting a lost cause, or will escalate the war. What makes these narratives unique in the German context is that the main spreaders of this narrative are not just far-right or far-left political actors but also those from the center-left, including some representatives from governing SPD party and public intellectuals. Within the SPD the narratives are largely spread by a minority of MPs who belong to segments of the party that are more sympathetic to the Russian position. While these narratives are less relevant now, they may increase in popularity if the war in Ukraine escalates or spreads to engage NATO.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

With two high-profile cases of the [sabotage of the Nordstream pipelines on the 26th of September](#) and the [sabotage of the German train network on the 8th of October](#), there are renewed fears of Russian hybrid operations against Germany. While in both cases, willful sabotage could be proven, there is no definitive proof that Russia was involved. However, the timing, high coordination, and sophistication of these attacks have produced strong suspicions among the German public and politicians that Russia is behind these attacks. Adding to the fears of sabotage are alleged Russian reconnaissance activities on Norway's energy infrastructure and Norway arresting an alleged Russian spy. This is particularly concerning for Germany as Norway is now Germany's largest gas supplier, and sabotage on Norway's gas infrastructure would have catastrophic consequences for German energy supply. Russian or Russian-sponsored disinformation actors may seize upon the fears of Russian sabotage exacerbating Germany's energy crisis to undermine Germany's support for Ukraine and increase German demands that Ukraine accept a negotiated settlement with Russia.

IRELAND



Kirsty Park
EDMO Ireland

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

We have seen some evidence of narratives trying to discredit President Zelensky or suggesting that Ukraine has a Nazi problem although it is unclear whether these will grow over the rest of the year.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

Ireland is somewhat susceptible to narratives coming from the US and, consequently, any Russian disinformation which targets the US around their upcoming midterm elections may also reach Ireland. Emerging situations relating to the housing crisis, cost of living or energy prices are the most likely to pose an issue here.

LITHUANIA



Urte Andriukaitytė
Civic Resilience Initiative

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

News about partial mobilization in Russia initiated talks in Lithuania that local men could also be mobilized as part of NATO. Even though the narrative spread among specific audiences and didn't reach national media, it was still visible. It started spreading panic and pushing an anti-NATO narrative, seeing NATO as a reason to mobilize its troops. Moreover, another anti-Ukrainian narrative is gradually growing connected with anti-government sentiments. Since Lithuania has been among the main supporters of Ukraine since the first day of the Russian invasion, the narrative states that the government of Lithuania prioritizes help for Ukraine over dealing with domestic issues. By criticizing the work of local officials, malign actors seek to picture Ukraine as the main reason for most of the hardships that Lithuanians need to overcome. Furthermore, this narrative is likely to intensify as the talks of the financial crisis and further growing inflation are now often escalated. Moreover, as the wintertime comes, the visibly grown electricity/heating prices might significantly expand the narrative.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

Considering other narratives potentially undermining support for Ukraine, one questioning the actual benefit of the support provided thus far must be closely monitored. Stories that assistance - usually financial but may include other forms of support - to Ukraine doesn't reach the final destination have been circulating since the war broke out. Among the most common false claims - is that money raised is benefitting those gathering donations, and all the organizations declaring themselves as voluntary are part of this massive scam. This narrative has gradually intensified as the war continues and people point out that despite the support already given the war has not ended yet. Therefore, this narrative questioning the reasoning behind the pro-Ukrainian support might further develop and attempt to erode the well-needed support for Ukraine. Other narratives, considering the case that "support for Ukraine is only prolonging the war", might appear over time. If there is no visible movement on the battlefield and no signs of the war ending, narratives urging to stop supporting Ukraine and, thus, shortening the war might become widespread in the media space. Arguments could also back them up, that a sooner end would eventually mean lesser losses.

POLAND



Michał Krawczyk
Kosciuszko Institute

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

There is a very high probability of narratives focused on the exploitation of high energy commodity prices being used to pressure Ukraine into making peace with Russia on the latter's terms, which would supposedly have a positive effect on the economic crisis in Europe. In Poland, this narrative could be very strongly linked to the issue of Ukrainian refugees, who could be blamed for Poland's weakening economic condition, especially in the context of financial aid from the Polish government.

The narrative of Poland's aggressive stance, seeking a direct clash with Russia, into which it wants to draw the whole of NATO, will also likely be exploited. Poland's actions are presented as motivated by its 'innate Russophobia' or by its desire to take over its pre-1939 territory in western Ukraine.

A narrative already heavily used is the threat of nuclear war or radioactive contamination. Pro-Russian and other disinformation sources report on the potential consequences of a nuclear catastrophe and create a picture of NATO as the instigator of a potential nuclear clash. They use a mix consisting of misinformation through the manipulated real events – such as accusing Ukrainians of shelling the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (actually carried out by the Russian Army) or claims that the Polish government's stockpiling of potassium iodide is a sign nuclear war is imminent and more general anti-Western narratives (often claiming the West as a provocateur seeking a nuclear clash with Russia).

These narratives, which are already gaining higher traction in the Polish information space, may have the biggest potential to get prominence in the coming months.



Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

Reference should be made once again to rising energy prices, which will increasingly affect society in the coming months. In Poland, this is a highly political issue, used by different sides of the political scene to fight each other. This can be used by Russian propaganda to create political chaos within the country, especially in the context of the parliamentary elections scheduled for next year.

The upcoming parliamentary elections, due to be held in autumn 2023, could also be a very important factor influencing the disinformation messaging and the whole information ecosystem in Poland. One of the parties currently sitting in the Polish Parliament, the Confederation (Polish: Konfederacja), has been openly basing its recent activities on promoting anti-Ukrainian narratives which may intensify in view of the upcoming elections. If its representatives decide to focus their election campaign on promoting anti-refugee and pro-Russian attitudes, they could serve as elements of a disinformation effort actively supported by extreme pro-Kremlin circles. Of course, this is just one example of how the upcoming elections could intensify disinformation content in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Another factor could also be the growing conflict between the Polish Government and the European Union and Germany. The growing dispute over rule of law with Brussels, and the suspended disbursement of funds from the Recovery Fund, is creating tensions within the European Union, whose unity is a prerequisite for effectively resisting Russian aggression. These tensions may serve as part of the disinformation narratives being created to undermine the unity of the European Union on the subject of Russia. Similarly, the fact that the Polish Government has formally begun the process of obtaining reparations from Germany for the damage caused by the Third Reich to Poland during World War II may be exploited.

To summarize, the economic crisis fueled by growing energy prices, upcoming parliamentary elections, and growing political tensions with the EU and Germany could serve as key factors igniting new potential information threats.

ROMANIA



Madalina Voinea
Expert Forum

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

The most dangerous narrative in Romania that could undermine support for Ukraine is the crisis narrative that requires putting Romanian's needs first in the context of a probable hard winter ahead. Romania's annual inflation rate rose to [15.32 percent](#) in August of 2022 from 14.96 percent in July. The energy prices could soar in the coming months due to lack of mobilization and proactive measures from the government even though Romania had the possibility to boost its internal production and establish clear and sound policies on the energy market.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

Internal factors

Political instability is one of the major threats. A scandal around [plagiarism during their studies saw the resignation of Education Minister, Sorin Cîmpeanu](#), and has seen the Prime Minister also targeted by similar credible accusations by independent journalists. In addition to Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă, Transport Minister Sorin Grindeanu and Interior Minister Lucian Bode are also accused of past academic dishonesty. These accusations are being viewed very seriously and the journalist that carried out this investigation has received death threats and attempts at blackmail from former high-ranking officials of the [Police Academy in Romania](#). It is possible that further resignations could occur and decrease the stability of the current government, potentially undermining continued support for Ukraine.

Far-right extremism - AUR party

Far-right extremists together with ex-members of the far-right AUR party (Alliance for the Union of Romanians) are organizing public protests that appear to be gaining more attention in the last months. The last gathering in October had over 5,000 participants and the topic of these gatherings is voicing concerns about inflation, the energy crisis and quality of life. The underlying message, however, is always aiming at destabilizing the government, claiming treason from ruling politicians and asking for patriotic politicians.



Justice Laws - Corruption

The Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly's monitoring report on Romania notes progress made in key areas, but expresses concerns about non-compliance with Venice Commission opinions on justice reform and the fight against corruption. [Laura Stefan, an anti-corruption expert](#) has been the leading voice in explaining that the disappearance of provisions for the appointment and dismissal of police officers in the judicial police by order of the Prosecutor General will cause a lot of harm. Removing these provisions from the law paves the way for political control over some key police officers. The Venice Commission will issue its opinion on Romania's justice laws until the end of 2022.

Mass-Media

Large media outlets in Romania increasingly censor topics of major public interest, falsifying the editorial agenda by omission. It has gotten to the point where, at a recent press conference on a crucial internal issue - controversial public procurements worth thousands of millions of Euros, only three journalists were present. It is not the first time that important topics for society are either totally ignored, minimized or ridiculed. In this context an [awareness campaign was started by G4MEDIA, Freedom House Romania, and Expert Forum.](#)

UKRAINE



Dmytro Tuzhanskyi

Institute for Central European Strategy

Question 2: Do you expect other narratives that have the potential to undermine support for Ukraine to gain prominence in your country throughout the rest of the year?

The “anti-sanction” and “anti-NATO” narratives may finally merge into a single anti-Western narrative, which can be simplified as follows: “The West left Ukraine to fend for itself in the war with Russia, which the West itself either provoked or enabled through its inaction since 2014.” This narrative is especially dangerous in the context of Ukraine's growing dependence on the West in all aspects, from finances to weapons and critical resources.

Question 3: Do you anticipate the emergence of other information threats that may weaken the resolve of your government, political parties, institutions, general public, CSOs, or private sector, in supporting Ukraine? (e.g., political or social shocks, economic crises, etc.)

The lack of open and mutually comprehensible dialogue at the highest level with allies might create unrealistic expectations and demands in Kyiv as well as in Western capitals. Such misunderstandings can create a confusing environment in which the public will be more vulnerable to Russian disinformation and malign special operations.