

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

A Year of Aggression

Chapter 1 : Introduction and Key Findings





About The Beacon Project

The Beacon Project seeks to counter the Kremlin's aggressive campaign to weaken democracies by polluting the information space and eroding confidence in public institutions. Beacon addresses disinformation primarily as a political problem and bolsters vulnerable democracies' ability to track and identify narratives injected by malign actors, conducting extensive quantitative and qualitative public opinion research and media-monitoring focusing on vulnerabilities to disinformation narratives in Central-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, among others. IRI uses this data to inform policymakers and develop integrated responses.

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Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine A Year of Aggression (February 2022 - February 2023)

Introduction

February 24, 2023 marks one-year since Vladimir Putin ordered an unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine in an attempt to complete the annexation that Putin started ten years before by sending Russian troops to invade Ukraine in 2014. This renewed invasion that the Kremlin thought would be over in 3 days has now lasted for more than 365. Putin's war of aggression has so far been thwarted by the bravery of the Ukrainian people and the resolve of its allies around the world. With the significant support provided by Ukraine's NATO and European Allies continuing to hold steadfast, fears of war fatigue eroding this support have grown.

It was no secret that the Kremlin would attempt to undermine support amongst Ukraine's allies by continuing its modus operandi of spreading disinformation, however, initial conspiracy theories about President Zelensky being a Nazi or that American biological weapons labs existed in Ukraine [largely fell flat across Europe](#). Instead, supporters of the Kremlin and others seeking to benefit from the war in Ukraine have focused their attention on disseminating content that undermines support for Ukraine by exploiting socially contentious issues. To better track these hostile narratives the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project has established a series of reports to monitor the online media space of multiple Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.

Launched in March 2022, 18 [Hostile Narrative Briefs](#) have used media monitoring tools such as Pulsar, CrowdTangle, APIs and Python packages to filter and collect 23 million articles or posts that mention at least one of the select contentious topics for analysis (see methodology section). The primary topics of Ukrainian refugees, sanctions, energy security, and NATO were selected based on local expert knowledge, opinion research, and more than six years of monitoring the CEE media space as having a higher potential to resonate with the general public.

Together with local analysts in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine, keywords that represent general references to the topics are combined with those that are more likely to be used in framing it in a way that could erode support for Ukraine, and are therefore deemed potentially hostile.

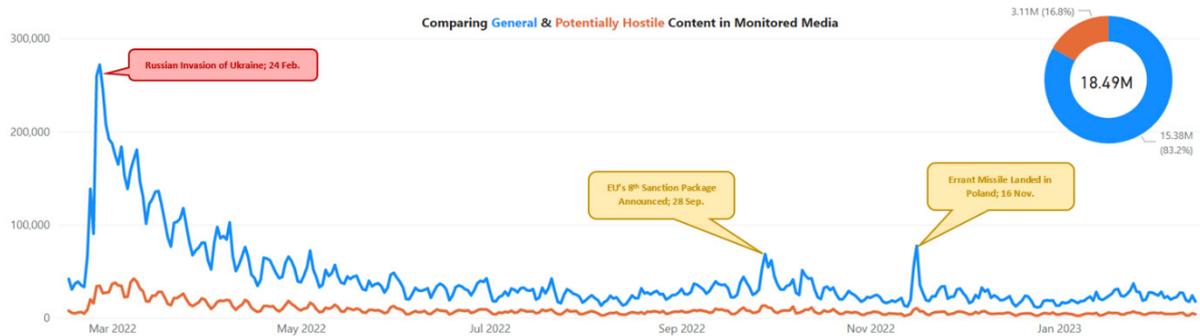
The guiding principle of this research is based on support for democratic norms and values that insist on a Ukrainian victory over the illegal and unprovoked invasion by Russia. With these values in mind, content that may be politically protected speech or even factually correct, may be classified as potentially hostile due to the possibility it may be used to erode support for Ukraine. For example, articles published by reputable media outlets like the Guardian about the Azov Battalion have been used to promote the Kremlin disinformation narrative that Ukraine is a fascist state. However, this report does not advocate for the removal of any such content, but instead provides increased awareness of the messaging that exists in the online media space and its potential impact on public debate for the support of Ukraine and perceptions of the war.

This report marks a year of intensified, and unprovoked aggression by the Russian federation on the Ukrainian people and provides an overview of how some of the key narratives have evolved across Central and Eastern Europe. It is being carried out in collaboration with local analysts to provide the most relevant details and will be serialized to enable easier reading with sections covering countries that have been assessed to have a High, Medium, and Low risk to follow this report. As should always be the case in these discussion the first perspective on the topic is given by a local Ukrainian analyst.



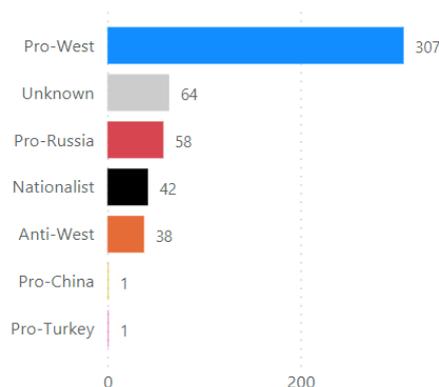
Key Findings

The Beacon Project and its local analysts monitored the trends across multiple online media sources from February 15, 2022 until February 14, 2023. As the war continues on and interest in it on daily media outlets wanes space appears to have been ceded to more hostile narratives. The proportion of potentially hostile content found in monitored media was 17.8% from February 24 until May 31, compared to 19.9% between June 01 and 31 August. After this summer peak the percentage went down to approximately 18% where it remains.



Although the overall decrease in coverage appears to increase the potentially hostile content, these effects dissipate when coverage returns. Significant events like the announcement of new sanctions or the missile that landed in Poland have grabbed the attention of media outlets and social media users across Europe that have largely reported on the incidents in a manner that is less likely to be hostile toward Ukraine. Even incidents which could have easily been exploited through hostile media campaigns, such as the missile which mistakenly fell in Polish territory, was met with the opposite reaction across most countries. Of the 87,403 collected articles and posts on November 16, only 11.7% of them indicated an increased likelihood of containing hostile narratives. Compared to the average for November 1-15 of 17.7% this shows a 6-point decrease in potentially hostile coverage and is one indication that the hostile narratives may be counteracted by more sustained messaging.

Geo-Political Views of Facebook Sources (Hand Coded)



Filtering for the most prevalent public Facebook pages discussing the topics based on number of posts and total interactions resulted in 511 pages which were hand coded by local analyst for general geo-political persuasion. Of these 58 pages were deemed to be openly pro-Russian. The pro-Russian pages accounted for approx-

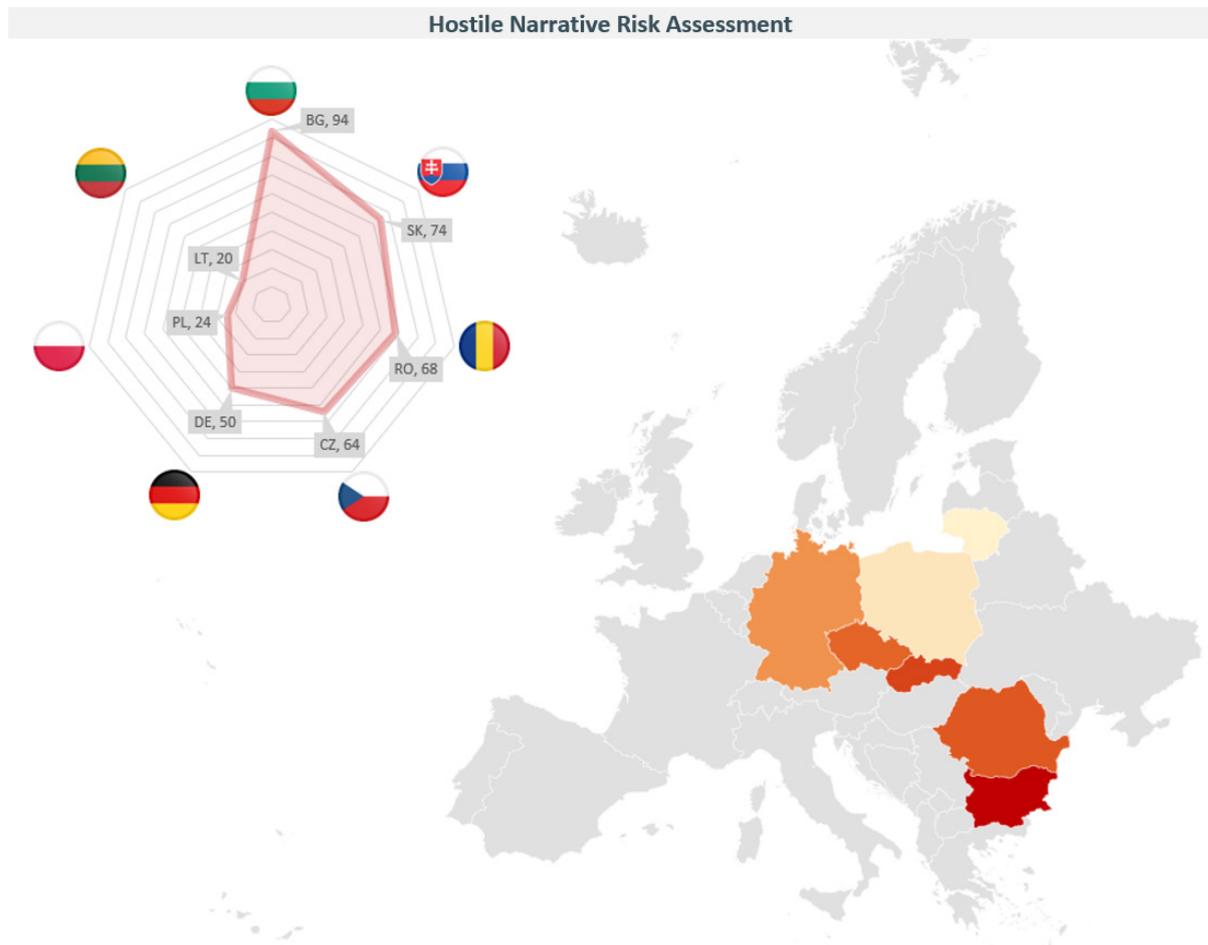


imately 11% of the total posts categorized and accounted for 17% of the total interactions while those with more general anti-Western views accounted for 7% of the posts but received 12% of the interactions. When compared to the fact that blatantly pro-Western pages comprised 62% of the posts but only 54% of the interactions, further establishes the well-known phenomenon that extremist content tends to perform better on Facebook.

To further examine content being shared online, IRI extracting all the hypertext links shared by the nearly 1.2 million Facebook posts scraped in this study, resulting in 2.2 million URLs from over 37,000 unique domains. The links were then filtered to remove irrelevant domains and identify those most likely to be contributing to the narratives. These domains were then checked by local analysts to identify those that are more likely to contain content that has the potential to undermine support for Ukraine. This analysis highlighted that the most linked to sources that were likely to spread hostile messaging were known Russian propaganda sites like Russian state linked outlets like Sputniknews.com, Tass.ru, and pages associated with Russian state institutions (e.g. Kremlin.ru). The majority of the most linked to domains, in fact, were foreign domains indicating the potential for foreign influence in domestic debates across all countries monitored.

Not surprisingly, the countries with the highest proportion of pro-Russian and anti-Western Facebook pages and links likely to spread hostile content were also those assessed to have the highest risk for a change in public perception on support for Ukraine. Most concerning was the situation in Bulgaria which had the highest proportion of hostile Facebook pages (42.2%) and the highest proportion of hyperlinks to potentially hostile websites based on the top ten most linked to domains (6/10). Meanwhile, Slovakia had the second highest proportion of hostile Facebook pages (20.4%) and 6/10 of the most linked to domains in Romania were assessed to have an increase probability of containing hostile content.





By combining data collected from media monitoring with the winter 2022-2023 Eurobarometer survey and local analysts' assessments, a risk rating has been given to the primary EU countries included in this study. The risk rating is a rank ordered score relative to the other countries in the study and provides a basic assessment of the potential risk for hostile narratives to gain traction in the local media environment. The two countries found to be most at risk were Bulgaria and Slovakia. Out of a maximum possible risk score of 100 Bulgaria received 94 and Slovakia 74. This score, however, does not fully account for the current political environment, such as the upcoming snap elections in Bulgaria and Slovakia which is likely to substantially increase the presence of hostile narratives and provide additional socio-political context for audience receptiveness. Not surprisingly, the two countries assessed to have the lowest risk are Lithuania (20/100) and Poland (24/100). These two countries have shown strong sustained political unity against Putin's actions by all major parties, overwhelming support for the Ukrainian people amongst the general public and have historically been very sceptical of the Kremlin's foreign policy.

High Risk

In addition to Bulgaria and Slovakia, Romania also scored just above the top 33% percentile (scores between 66-100) placing it in the high risk category. Although each country has its own complex social and historical drivers enabling some hostile narratives to flourish, all three are marked by significant economic and political concerns. Unstable governments have resulted in snap elections being called in both Bulgaria (April 2, 2023) and Slovakia (September 30, 2023) while Romania's governing grand coalition of traditionally opposing parties has not been able to effectively communicate the governments policy of support for Ukraine that has left room for criticism



by political extremists and conspiracy theorists. This space for hostile narratives is reflected in the relatively high proportion (19.9%) of monitored media content that has an increased possibility of containing hostile narratives.

Similar to all the countries in this study, some of the most prominent voices spreading disinformation and other hostile narratives targeting support for Ukraine in the online debates have come from fringe far-right and ultra-nationalist parties. Although extremist parties such as AUR in Romania, Revival in Bulgaria, and Republic in Slovakia have used the context of the war for political advantage, they are still largely minority parties that have been kept out of government by the main parties of the democratic center. However, as political stagnation and instability increases these parties may further increase their support to a point they are in a position to join a governing coalition.

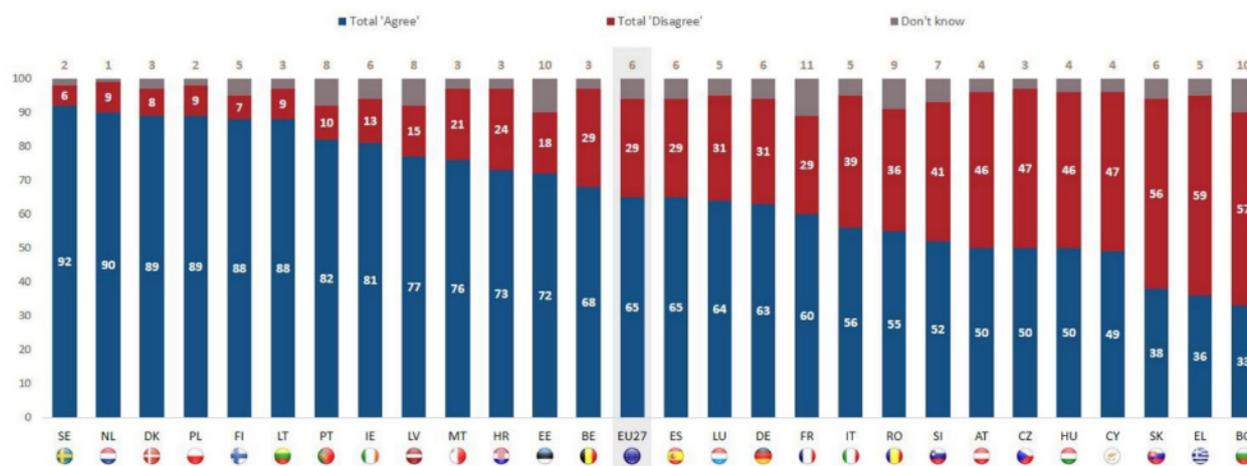
One country where this is a very real possibility is Slovakia, where the most prominent voice in undermining support for Ukraine is the main opposition social-democratic party, SMER-SD. Despite being a member of the second largest political grouping in European politics, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, which largely supports Europe's position on Ukraine, the rhetoric from SMER-SD politicians severely undermines this policy. Statements from the party's leader, former Prime Minister Robert Fico, have called for an immediate end to military support for Ukraine and the halting of sanctions targeting Russia while another member of the parties leadership, Luboš Blaha, has been banned by Facebook for using his page to promote disinformation. With elections taking place on September 30, Robert Fico has openly stated his willingness to form a coalition with the far-right Republic party and others to ensure his party is in the next government.

Medium Risk

Countries that fell in the middle of the risk scale, scores between 33-65, were assessed to have a medium risk. The Czech Republic, with a risk score of 64, was at the high end of the medium scale, while Germany's 50 put it squarely in the medium risk category. Both countries have shown strong political unity in supporting Ukraine and are amongst the most significant contributors of military aid. The Czech Republic was one of the first countries to send lethal military aid after the February 24 invasion and have offered to repair damaged Ukrainian tanks from their own stocks, while Germany recently allowed it's much requested Leopard II main battle tanks to be sent to Ukraine.

After Ukraine, Germany is probably the country which has seen the greatest impact from Russia's war of aggression. Germany had long been criticised by its allies for its pragmatic approach to Russia which many argued bordered on appeasement. Chancellor Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* speech, in response to Russia's invasion, however, marked a nearly 180-degree shift in German foreign policy that marked an end to Germany's more conciliatory approach to Putin.

QE2.3 The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (% - Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine)



Source: Eurobarometer 98: Winter 2022-2023; February 2023



Despite the staunch support shown by the political leaders of both countries, public opinion of these policies is less clear. Both countries score below the EU-27 average on almost all Ukraine related question in the Winter 2022-23 Eurobarometer poll, including on military support. However, the results of the recent Czech presidential election as well as the Berlin municipal elections point to a more stable political environment which largely supports Ukraine. In particular, the Czech presidential election held in January 2023 saw the war in Ukraine feature heavily and resulted in overwhelming support for the former NATO general, Petr Pavel, over the previous Prime Minister and critic of the countries policy toward Ukraine, Andrej Babiš.

The media environment of both the Czech Republic and Germany are assessed to be less hostile than those of the high-risk countries with 17.4% of the monitored media having an increased probability of containing hostile narratives. However, neither country is without its risk factors. Of the most prominent Facebook pages in the Czech republic 16% of them are assessed to be generally anti-Western and a further 16% are classified as nationalist, including the most prominent voice in the online debate about Ukraine, Tomio Okamura who is the leader of the far-right nationalist SPD party who routinely has the best performing posts across all monitored topics. Despite Germany having the highest proportion of pro-Western Facebook pages (77.2%), it also has the second highest percentage of pro-Russian pages at 18.2% that may have an increased voice in the significant Russian diaspora living in the country.

Low Risk

In the low risk category are two countries which have been the most consistent and vocal supporters of Ukraine's territorial integrity since the previous Russian invasion of 2014, Poland and Lithuania. Both countries represent a significant decrease in relative risk with scores of 24/100 and 20/100 respectively. Certainly, contributing to this risk assessment is the fact that both countries share a border with Russia and Belarus meaning that the full-scale invasion of Ukraine was seen as an existential threat that necessitated a unified response from the whole of society.

This broad support is largely shown in public opinion research and the media monitoring data collected for this study. According to the Winter 2022-2023 Eurobarometer survey Lithuania and Poland exceed the EU-27 average for all but one question regarding support for Ukraine. However, the only question that Poland did not exceed was related to providing humanitarian support to the people affected by the way which is approved of at 91% of the respondents which was equal to the EU-27 average. As far as the proportion of monitored media that had a higher probability of containing hostile content, the figure for the low risk countries was similar to that of the medium risk, 17.6%.

The media environment appears to be an even lower risk when the assessment of the most prominent Facebook pages are taken in to account. Of the 155 hand coded public Facebook pages assessed by local analysts, 119 (77%), were labelled as generally pro-Western, with only 9 listed as Pro-Russian, 8 nationalist, and 6 broadly anti-Western, combining for less than 15% of the total pages. Furthermore, sources that are generally considered to be supportive of Ukraine accounted for the vast majority of Facebook interactions received, 92% in Poland and 84% in Lithuania.

Despite this show of resilience in the media space of both countries, the significant level of refugees present in Poland does provide potential vectors for hostile narratives and the refugee topic does rank highest for the proportion of content that has an increase risk of containing hostile content at 28.1% of the scraped data. The hostile narratives in both countries, however, have been almost entirely limited to fringe ultra-nationalist and pro-Russian sources that have no significant audience or influence in either country.

General Risk

Overall the biggest risk for hostile narratives impacting support for Ukraine remains limited to Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Romania while strong political leadership and broader societal resilience has reduce the risk for other countries examined in this study. However, each country has potential pressure points which can be exploited in the future. The following specific country sections will provide some additional insights to the situation in each country including from Ukraine itself which for obvious reasons remains an outlier when compared the risks in its media environment of its EU allies. Each country has an immense level of nuance which could not fit in to this overview, therefore, additional more detailed country specific publications will also be publish separately.





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