the beacon project | IRI

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

A Year of Aggression

Chapter 2 : Ukraine

Issue 19 • February 2022-2023

About The Beacon Project

The Beacon Project seeks to counters 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.

Publication Details

The Beacon Project
Hostile Narrative Brief: A Year of Aggression • February 2022 - February 2023

Brief no: 19
Published: March 03, 2023
Research Coordinator: Brady Hills
Editing Support: Iva Merheim-Eyre, Adam Lelonek, Jonas Syrovatka
Data Processing: Oleksandr Nadelnyuk
Local Analysts: Dmytro Tuzhanskyi, Tihomira Doncheva, Devora Kotseva, Todor Kiriakov, Lubomir Donchev, Valentin Valkanov,Nikola Tulechki, Kristina Sefcikova, Urte Andriukaitytė, Michał Krawczyk, Madalina Voinea

Layout Design: Nicoleta Diaconu
Cover Photo: Roma Kaiuk

Ukraine

Author: Dmytro Tuzhanskyi – Institute for Central European Strategy

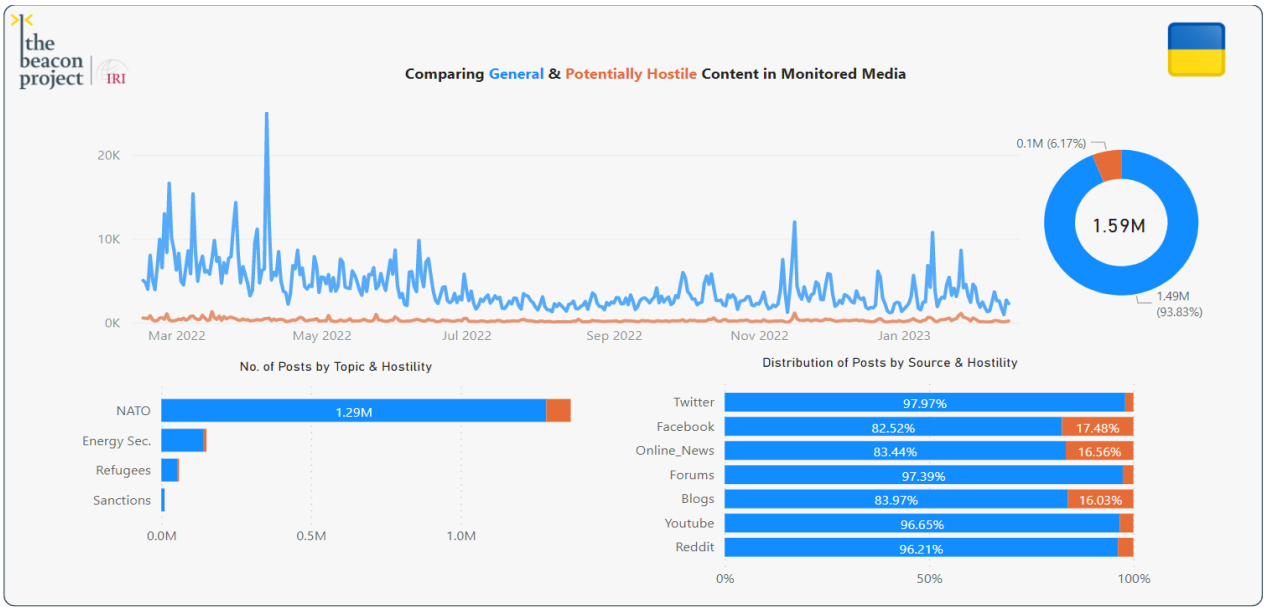
Top Line Summary

Despite different expectations and an obvious underestimation of the Ukrainian ability to resist, after the year of the Russian invasion, Ukraine remains a more united community / political nation than ever with relatively stable state institutions and an unambiguous orientation towards the West; of course, with complete and even more growing dependence on the West, first of all, militarily and financially. At the same time, Ukrainian society is in a unique and very complex emotional state: it is a mix of hope (54-60%), optimism (36-40%), anxiety (33-24%) and confidence (21-27%) about their own and the future of the state, respectively. Less than 10-15% of Ukrainians experience confusion and fear.

As of December 2022, 93% of Ukrainians believe in a Ukrainian victory in the war. Only 3% of respondents doubted this victory. The majority (54%) of Ukrainians see victory in the expulsion of Russian troops from the entirety of Ukrainian territory with the restoration of borders based on its establishment in international law in 1991.

Since the full-scale Russian invasion, the Ukrainian pubic's support for accession to NATO and EU reached record levels. From February 2022, just before the most recent invasion started, to January 2023 support NATO membership rose from 62% to 86%, and support for EU membership increased from 68% to 87%. While this is a natural and certainly positive development for the future of Ukraine, it also carries with it some risk of inflated expectations regarding integration into the EU and NATO. This must be carefully managed through clear roadmaps and communications to counteract one of the primary hostile narratives being pushed by pro-Russian actors is that *Ukraine is being used as a pawn by the EU and NATO to attack Russia and will never actually become members for the institutions*.

Media Overview



1,588,540 pieces of online content were collected based on keyword matching of monitored media in the Ukrainian language to indicate those which potentially contain hostility regarding Western support for Ukraine and its ability to resist Russian aggression. Keywords that indicate a higher probability of hostility were found in only 6,17% (97,993 pieces).

All the topics monitored contained a relatively small percentage, between 6%-7%, of content that contains potentially hostile messaging. However, the vast majority (86.1%) of all media content collected in this study was related to the NATO topic. This topic importantly also contains references to military support more generally as well. Therefore, despite the potentially hostile messaging only accounting for 5.96% of the topic's coverage, it still amounts to 81,494 articles or posts which is larger than the total amount of content discussing refugees or sanctions combined.

All these data look logical taking into consideration two main factors; the unprecedented national unity inside Ukraine, and **Ukraine's growing dependence on Western support.** This support covers nearly everything – from macro financial and military support to fulfilling public expectations regarding Ukraine's future in EU and NATO.

Anti-NATO / Anti-Western sentiments in Ukraine, unfortunately, have significant potential. While all opinion polls in Ukraine in 2022 showed an unprecedentedly high level of support for Ukraine's membership in NATO, Ukrainian expert and political communities were one of the key sources for anti-NATO and anti-Western messages in Ukraine. This is largely assessed to stem from a perception that the Western response to the 2014 occupation of Crimea and Donbas was weak. They believe that the Minsk agreement and sanctions targeting Russia have not gone far enough and that some sense of past appeasement has directly resulted in the most recent invasion.

Thus, despite the encouraging opinion polling and media monitoring data, there is still a significant danger that such anti-Western narratives will persist in the expert policy and politics communities. This brings a risk that Ukraine will follow a trajectory closer to Orbán's Hungary. The Ukrainian and international expert community must switch from their zero-sum approach to one of greater pragmatism which examines when and why some decisions should be made

at different times. International donors and initiatives such as the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project should continue to support and even expand integrating these communities in Ukraine within transatlantic expert community networks and media organizations to become facilitators between political leaders of the West and Ukraine.

Through monitoring public Facebook pages in Ukraine, a new feature was revealed – the **rapid and total "Ukrainization" of the public information space that displaces Russian language from it.** This is not, however, assessed to be connected with new language legislation which obligates sites to have Ukrainian language versions of web sites, but instead is a result of the public's reaction to the Russian invasion. Now Russian language equals 'Russia' to a degree not seen prior to February 2022. As a result of the war, the Ukrainian language has now established itself as the predominate language for public discourse in Ukraine. **The dominance of the Russian language, especially in the online space of Ukraine and the clear division of the media by language are a thing of the past.**

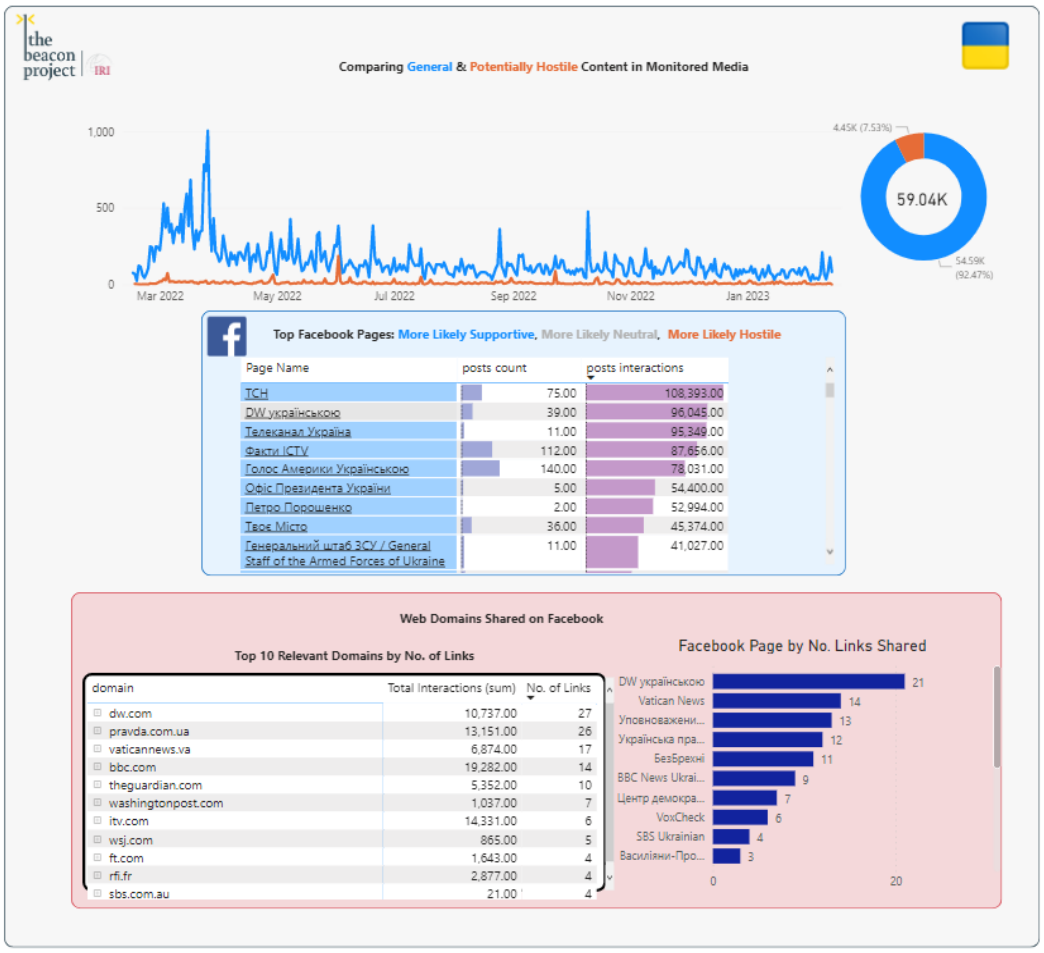
As a result of most pro-Russian content being written in Russian language, much of it has been pushed out of the media space and did not appear in the top performing Facebook pages in Ukraine. When focused specifically on Russian language content, the predominant pages found discussing the topics in this study were from Russian media outlets and well-known pro-Russian Ukrainian politicians from the Yanukovich regime, such as former Prime Minister Mykola Azarov and former Minister of Revenue and Duties, Oleksandr Klymenko. Their level influence and penetration in the Ukrainian media space is very difficult to assess as many of them are blocked in Ukraine. At the same time, Facebook pages from Russia, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, RIA Novosti and other tools of Russian state propaganda, are still available for viewing in Ukraine, but are likely to have limited social influence amongst the Ukrainian general public given their well established allegiances.

However, this exclusion from some major media platforms have led many pro-Russian actors to migrate to other platforms such as Telegram, which is not currently blocked in Ukraine. Platforms like Telegram remain a significant problem for pro-Russian propaganda and they offer high levels of anonymity and have enabled sources to gain a large audience quickly. For example, the Telegram channel of the pro-Russian blogger Anatoly Shariy, whose Youtube channel and Facebook page were blocked in Ukraine in 2022, has more than 1 million subscribers.

By checking relevant hyperlinks that were shared on Facebook only one domain was found to have an increase potential of containing hostile content out of the top ten performing pages. This same domain was actively communicating on all the primary topics of this study - NATO, sanctions, refugees, and energy security. The site was bn24.biz.ua, which is linked to Facebook page Informbomb. According to data from CrowdTangle, the page was established in 2018 and has four page administrators who self-reported their location as Ukraine. The page has nearly one million followers after a massive spike from 135,152 followers on July 31, 2022 to 954,290 by November 30. Both the Facebook page and website outlet are typical disinformation outlets employing clickbait, spreading fakes and conspiracy, using hate speech, nationalistic rhetoric, and playing with emotions.

Despite sites like Informbomb actively growing their audience, it is counter balanced by other trends on Ukrainian Facebook. **For example, messaging from official Ukrainian state institutions have seen an organic increase in** their audience and interactions on posts. These include, for example, important national voices such as the Office of the President, General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine as well as local authorities like the Mayor of Lviv, Andriy Sadovoy, as well as others with a focus on civil, security and military information. This is assessed to be a response to the need for reliable information in wartime conditions.

Anti-Refugee



- There is a clear separation of the refugee topic into three subtopics focused on the attitudes toward– internally displaced persons (IDPs), Russian-speaking Ukrainians, and Ukrainian refugees abroad. These subtopics were often strongly interlinked and engaged with through the two main triggers – language issues (Russian vs. Ukrainian) and collaborationism or loyalty towards the "Russian world". For example, a typical narrative hostile toward IDPs and refugees is related to their perceived allegiances which is exemplified by One of the most popular tweets in Ukraine in November 2022 which discussed a couple who supposedly supported the Russian occupation of Crimea and voted for its annexation in Russia's fake referendum, but are now asking for asylum in the West.

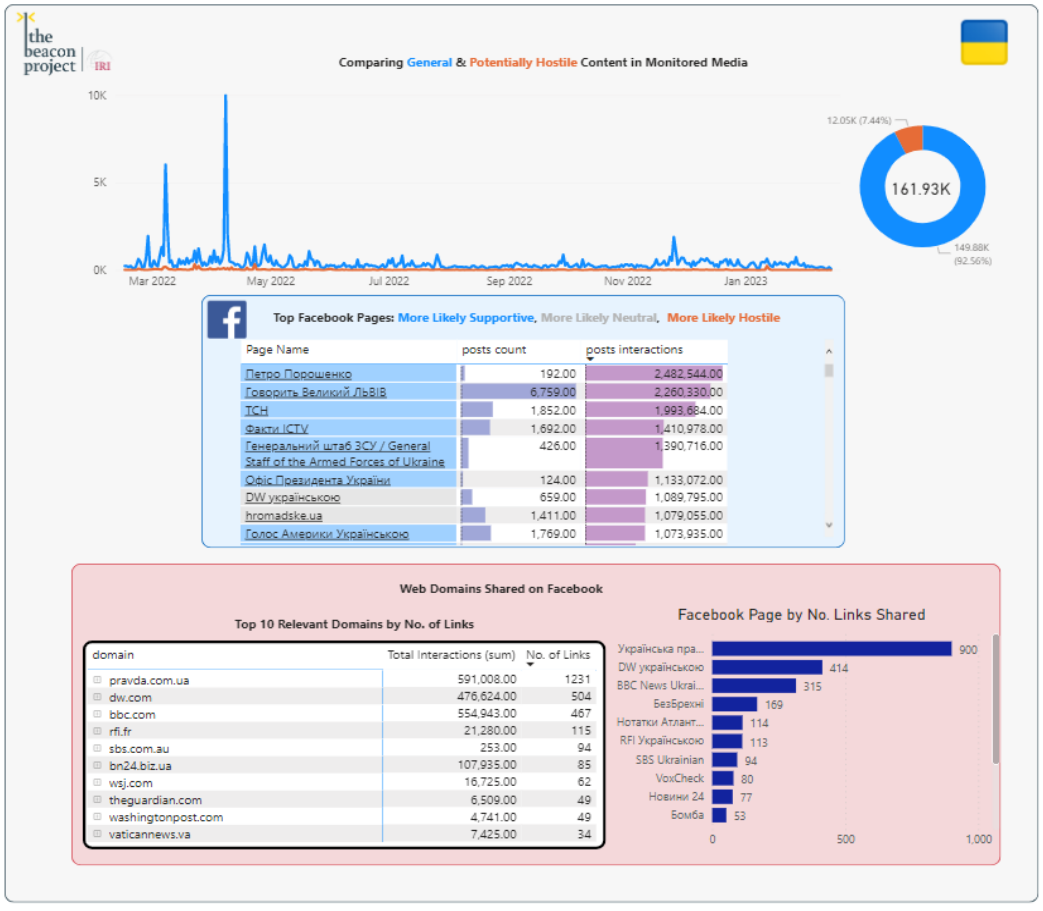
- Many of the arguments used to attack IDPs in Ukraine during the first half of the war were the same as those that have been found in bordering countries used to attack Ukrainian refugees, namely that they have better lifestyles than local residents and are ungrateful. While since the end of summer 2022 the focus has been on the language spoken and a perceived lack of allegiance to Ukraine for Russian speakers.

Assessed Audience: *supporters of populist political actors.*

Risk Assessment: *Low*

Potential Impact: While the vast majority of messaging around the topic is overwhelmingly supportive and highlights the high level of unity currently found in Ukrainian society, there are some populist political actors who will continue to exploit the topic. Although the risk for widespread acceptance of these hostile narratives is low, changes on the front lines could yield and increase in collaborationism narratives that should be countered by preventative communications campaigns and policy changes. Any campaign should also take in to account the risk of 'traitor to the nation' narratives used against refugees to do not immediately return to Ukraine once they are able to as this will undermine social cohesion and could weaken the overall resilience of society.

Energy Security and Anti-Sanctions



- The energy security topic and sanctions were completely overlapping in the Ukrainian media space.
- Ever since Russia refocused its efforts on destroying civilian critical infrastructure in October 2022 the dis-

cussions online about how to deal with blackouts and *life without electricity* became some of the most popular topics, sometimes surpassing updates from the front. The conversations would often be polarizing and pitted those without power against those with it. This was one of the narratives that had the biggest risk as it had the potential to exacerbate regional polarization as the western part of Ukraine was less affected by the blackouts. President Volodymyr Zelenskyi even reacted to this issue/narrative in one of his public statements. Other hostile narratives were similar to those in other countries, as some sources tried to put responsibility for energy crisis on sanctions or on the owners of power companies for trying to inflate the cost of energy to make a profit.

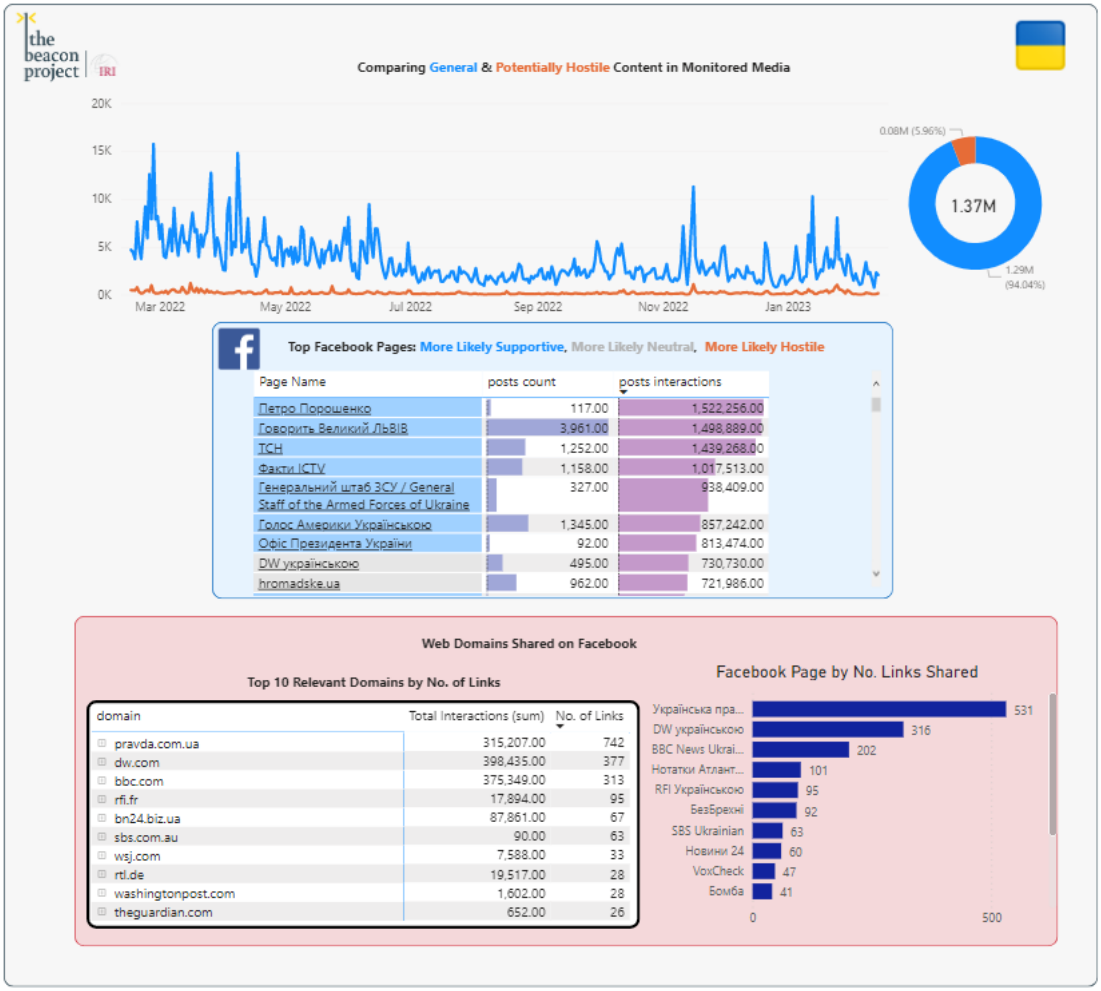
- Since November the profitability narrative was extended to include the conspiracy that Ukraine is actually selling electricity to Europe while Ukrainians suffer without electricity. One important spreader of this conspiracy was the generally pro-Western former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko.

Assessed Audience: *Populist politicians, as well as Russian and pro-Russian actors through Telegram.*

Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Potential Impact: Despite the energy topic became one of the most hostile in Ukraine media space from October 2022 until January 2023, the Russian tactic of exploiting the energy crisis to provoke anti-government riots and break Ukrainian resolved failed failed. After more than 3 months of regular massive shelling and blackouts provoked by it, the situation in Ukraine looks more stable and under control. According to sociological survey by Razumkov Centre, 55.5% of respondents positively assess the actions of the authorities in managing the consequences of Russia's strikes on the energy infrastructure of Ukraine. However, the topic is very much linked to the ability for Ukrainians to have access to energy, so increased disruptions could increase the risk to Ukrainian unity and resolve. This can potentially be mitigated through more proactive communications by state and local authorities to prevent future protests like those seen in Odessa.

Anti-NATO



- Content related to NATO and broader military support for Ukraine accounted for the largest amount of content collected in this study with 1,367,566 articles or posts amounting to 86.1% of all media content collected for Ukraine. As covered in the country overview section, there is little risk of the hostile narratives spreading amongst the general population at this time, but there is an increased risk that hostile narratives toward NATO will persist amongst some members of the expert policy community. In particular, the narratives focus on a perceived policy of appeasement by some Western leaders and possible double standards for joining NATO. The latter received some traction amongst the general public as the most popular tweet (almost 10K interactions) about NATO related topics on Twitter in November 2022 was made by Ukrainian comedian Anya Kochegura who said that "NATO's rules for joining are interesting - for some it is enough to fill out a questionnaire, and for some it is only necessary to defeat Russia".
- A noticeable spike in references occurred November 16, 2022 when an errant Ukrainian air defence missile landed in in Polish territory just a few kilometers from the Ukrainian border. This particular incident, which

resulted in the deaths of two people, was used to promote anti-NATO narratives by highlighting supposed disagreements between Ukraine and its allies by focusing on President Zelensky's comments that he had "no doubt that it was not our missile or our missile strike". He continued to insist on this despite official information from Poland that found it to be a Ukrainian missile. This publicly highlighted disagreement with the position of NATO and U.S. in particular and provoked a flood of speculation in Ukraine's expert community, such as military expert Oleh Zhdanov who received more than 1 million views on a Youtube interview (with more than 1 million views) in which he stated that "This is a deliberate strike on the part of Russia"; "Putin raises the stakes and provokes NATO", "NATO will swallow this provocation, because they are weaklings."

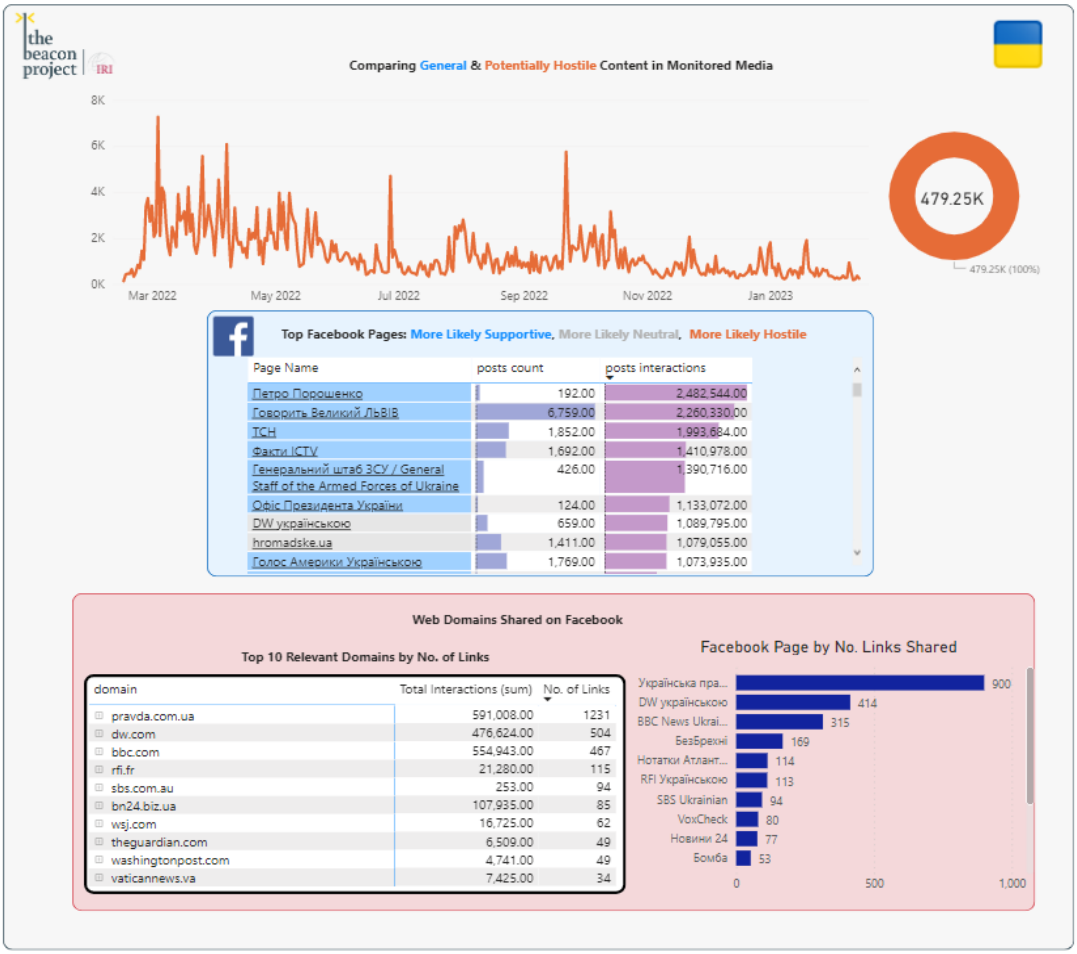
Assessed Audience: *Expert community, politicians and officials*

Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Potential Impact: The primary concern is not that Ukrainian society will turn its back on NATO or other Western institutions, but rather that potentially hostile perspectives are maintained in the expert policy community and reflect a trajectory closer to Orbán's Hungary.

To mitigate this risk the Ukrainian and international expert community would benefit from switching from their zero-sum approach to one of greater pragmatism which examines when and why some decisions should be made at different times. International donors and initiatives such as the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project should continue to support and even expand integrating these communities in Ukraine within transatlantic expert community networks and media organizations to become facilitators between political leaders of the West and Ukraine.

Biolabs +Denazification +Nuclear War



- Overall the content that had a higher potential to be related to the established disinformation narratives of Biolabs being in Ukraine, that Russian troops are fighting fascists, and that the war will escalated in to a nuclear exchange did not resonate in the Ukrainian media space. The three topics combined for 479,248 articles or posts in the 12 month period of this study, but the majority of reference to these topics were largely informational, debunking, or satirical in nature.
- In addition to Ukrainian media being more cautious about promoting these hostile narratives, preventative actions by the Ukrainian state likely also helped to curtail their spread. A year before the invasion, narratives about "biolaboratories" and "nazis" were quite actively spread in Ukraine by media close to Viktor Medvedchuk - an indirect relative of Vladimir Putin and his main agent of influence in Ukraine. Since February 2021, 3 TV channels from Medvedchuk's media main infrastructure (primarily the NewsOne, ZIK, and "112" TV channels) were blocked as well as their social media accounts.

Assessed Audience: *pro-Russian actors*

Risk Assessment: *Low*

Potential Impact: With the Ukrainian public well aware of disinformation campaigns emanating from the Kremlin, most of these blatant narratives fail to resonate outside of the most extreme pro-Russian circles. Overall these narratives are unlikely to have any serious risk to the unity and resolve of the Ukrainian public.

IRI Beacon Project
Sq. de Meeûs 37 • 1000 Bruxelles, Belgium • beaconproject@iri.org