

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

A Year of Aggression

Chapter 4 : Slovakia





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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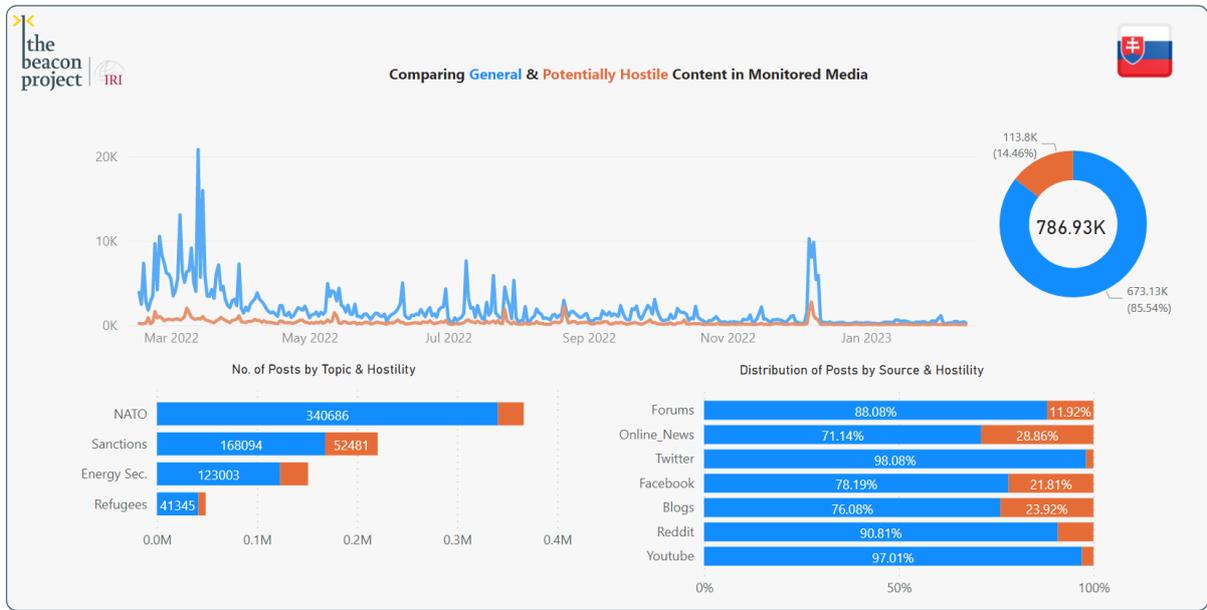
Top Line Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine split Slovak society in half: as the [Eurobarometer report](#) from fall 2022 shows, 49% of Slovaks disapprove of the European Union's support of Ukraine, whether humanitarian, financial, or military. This split is not inconsistent with assumptions about the causes of the war — according to [Globsec Trends 2022](#), 28% of Slovaks think the West provoked Russia into a war. The invasion also did not diminish pro-Russian sentiments in the country — for 37% of Slovaks, Russia is still an important strategic partner. On the other hand, the war also seems to have somewhat consolidated the pro-Western part of the population since 62% of Slovaks perceive Russia as a threat, three-times higher than the year before, which was the most significant increase in the region according to the Globsec Trends data.

The Slovak debate about the war in Ukraine was closely entangled with the turbulent domestic political developments. The second half of the year was marked by a protracted political crisis resulting in the fall of the government in December 2022. The government, together with the head of state President Zuzana Čaputová, were the most vocal advocates for supporting Ukraine in the Slovak public debate while many of the opposition parties appeared to use the war as an opportunity to attack the government and score political points by making criticism of this support a centerpiece of their rhetoric. This is visible from the debate in the monitored media space which increased in intensity when Slovakia announced further aid commitments. All such occasions were utilized by opposition parties, primarily by the leader of the social democratic SMER-SD party and former Prime Minister, Róbert Fico and the leader of the far-right Republic party and Member of the European Parliament, Milan Uhrík. Both individuals and parties have significant social influence and impact on the Slovak media space with their parties ranking second and fourth in public opinion [polling](#) from February 2023. With a snap election is announced for September 2023 these parties have grown closer together in both rhetoric and cooperation with a willingness to form a governing coalition being announced. Based on current messaging, it is likely that these parties will continue, if not intensify, their hostile rhetoric toward support for Ukraine as part of their pre-election campaign similar to what Andrej Babiš did during the Czech presidential elections held in January.



Media Overview



In total, more than 786,000 articles/posts were collected based on keyword matching of monitored media in Slovakia. Based on keyword matching this resulted in 14.5% of the content being marked as having an increased potential to contain hostile messaging on the four primary topics of the research, NATO, sanctions, energy security, and refugees. The dynamics of the Slovak debate about the war show two notable spikes in the middle of March and the beginning of December 2022. Both these spikes of interest were the result of domestic actions which were perceived as increasing Slovakia’s involvement in the war. In the middle of [March](#) the Slovak National Council ratified an agreement on defense cooperation with the United States which allowed the US military to use Slovak military bases resulting in an increase in references to NATO on March 13, while another spike was seen on March 15 referencing the EU’s adoption of a new round of sanctions targeting Russia. At the beginning of [December](#), the online debate focused on the visit of three Slovak ministers to Kyiv, in which they promised continued military and humanitarian assistance.

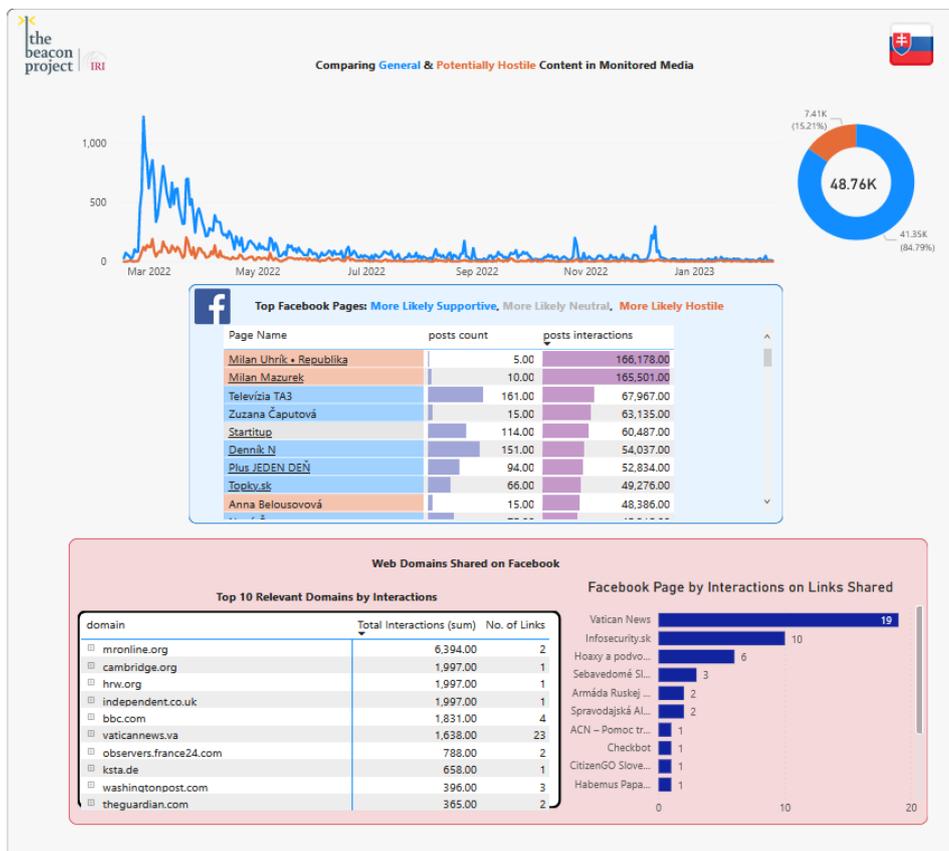
Despite NATO and military support more generally being the topic that received the most overall attention with 366,597 articles/posts, it had the lowest proportion of potentially hostile mentions at only 7%. The topic with the highest percentage of potentially hostile messages was the topic of sanctions where 23.8% of the content had an increase probability of being hostile. The primary hostile narrative about sanctions was typical of other countries in which opponents [claimed](#) that the policy was economic suicide and the country cannot do without Russian gas. Instead they argued that Slovakia should abandon sanctions and pursue an independent policy towards Russia.

Based on an assessment of the most prominent Facebook pages posting about the monitored topics, it was assessed that 62% of them have a generally pro-Western geopolitical leaning, while 10% were considered to be anti-Western, 11% were pro-Russian, and 7% classified as nationalist. An assessment of the amount of content posted by the pages deemed



to be more hostile toward support for Ukraine revealed that they accounted for 32% of posts collected in the last 12 months. However, even though sources more likely to spread hostile messages towards Ukraine are a minority, they often enjoy significantly higher engagement rates on Facebook. Milan Uhrík of the Republic party amassed the most interactions from posts with 1,307,219 interactions from just 90 posts (14,525 avg. interactions/post), while President Čaputová received 784,355 interactions from 102 posts (7,690 avg. interactions/post). Robert Fico, however, received an even higher interaction rate averaging 31,431 interactions per post related to the primary topics of this study. In fact, of the politicians in the top ten most interacted with pages four are assessed to have more hostile rhetoric toward Ukraine, with President Čaputová being the only politician clearly supportive of Ukraine in the top ten.

Anti-Refugee



- The topic of refugees was not overly polarized in the online space considering it shares a border with Ukraine and has seen an influx Ukrainians fleeing the war. Based on media monitoring data it is assessed that 15.2% of the 48,759 articles/posts referencing refugees had a higher probability of containing hostile content. Some prominent narratives targeting the government’s policy on refugees portrayed it as an “extremist liberal” agenda being pushed by President Čaputová. Particularly significant drivers of this narrative were the major opposition social-democratic SMER-SD party with [similar messaging](#) coming from the ultra-nationalist Slovak National



Party. Additional narratives attempted to present the refugees as [puppets and victims](#) of a war of aggression incited by NATO or the West in general. However, the online debate about refugees was stirred up in December by [a GLOBSEC opinion poll](#) which found that among the V4 countries, Slovaks bear the biggest aversion toward Ukrainian refugees (52%), but most of the Slovak media reported on the poll in a neutral manner or even with [more open disappointment](#) about the Slovak results, causing some national reflection that was largely positive toward the view of refugees.

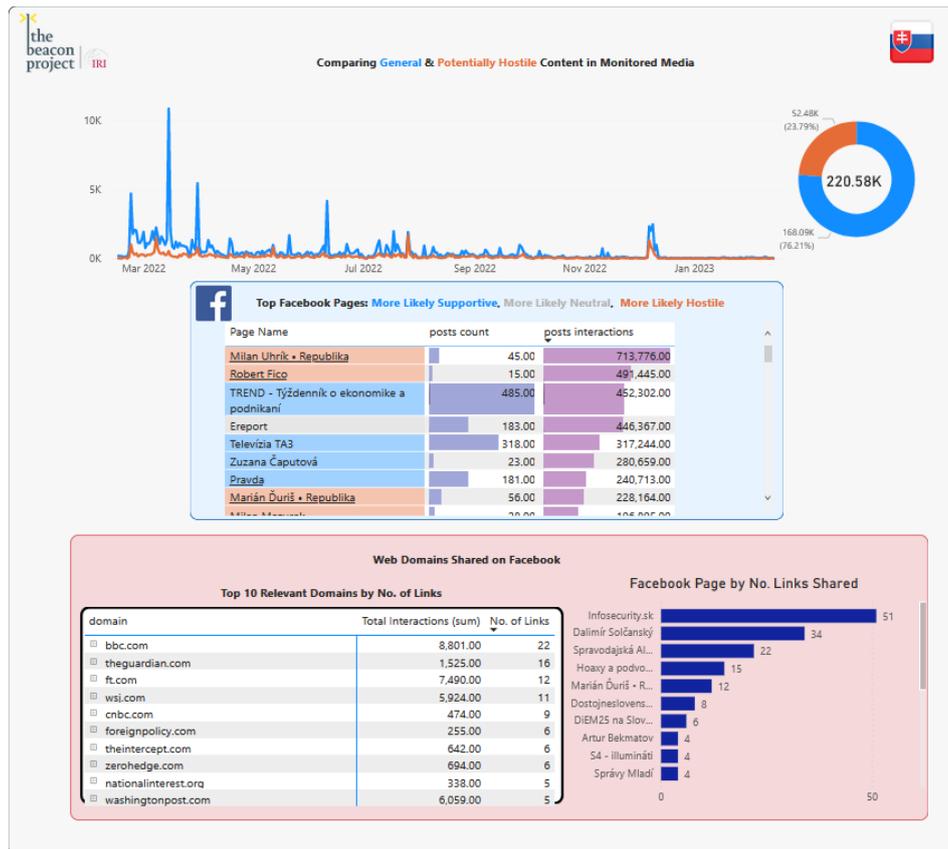
- Analysis of the most prominent Facebook pages mentioning the discussion found that the main interacted with pages belong to members of the far-right Republic party, Milan Uhrík and Milan Mazurek, who routinely post content hostile to the support of Ukraine. Each page received over 160,000 interactions from only five and ten posts respectively. They received nearly 100,000 more interactions than the second highest page, TV channel TA3, which only managed to attract 67,967 interactions from 161 posts.
- When it comes to shared web domains, the most interactions were drawn by the socialist leaning [mronline.org](#) which is considered as a page that spreads disinformation. In the past it has promoted disinformation narratives about Nazi infiltrating Ukrainian institutions or that the war is just a proxy war initiated by the United States to defeat Russia. Otherwise, the majority of the most shared domains consisted of more generic foreign media outlets such as the BBC or Vatican News.

Assessed Audience: far-right supporters, extended to general public based on economic concerns

Risk Assessment: Medium



Anti-Sanctions



- The topic of sanctions was the second most discussed topic in this study with increased coverage largely coinciding with announcements of new sanctions. However, it was the topic with the highest proportion of content that contained potentially hostile messaging at 23.8% of the total articles/posts recorded. One of the primary narratives against the sanctions was that Slovakia simply cannot do without Russian gas and it should [prioritize](#) its national energy needs over everything else. A proposal of a more independent policy towards Russia was often promoted to achieve this.
- The two most prominent actors on Facebook criticizing sanctions were opposition politicians – leaders of the far-right Republic party, Milan Uhrík and of the social democratic SMER-SD party, Robert Fico. Both party leaders emphasized the fact that sanctions are [self-inflicted harm](#) which does not help to solve the conflict and blamed the government for not taking into account the needs of Slovak citizens. Together they received 1,205,221 interactions on Facebook, compared to President Zuzana Čaputová who was the sixth most interacted with page on the topic by receiving 280,659 interactions.

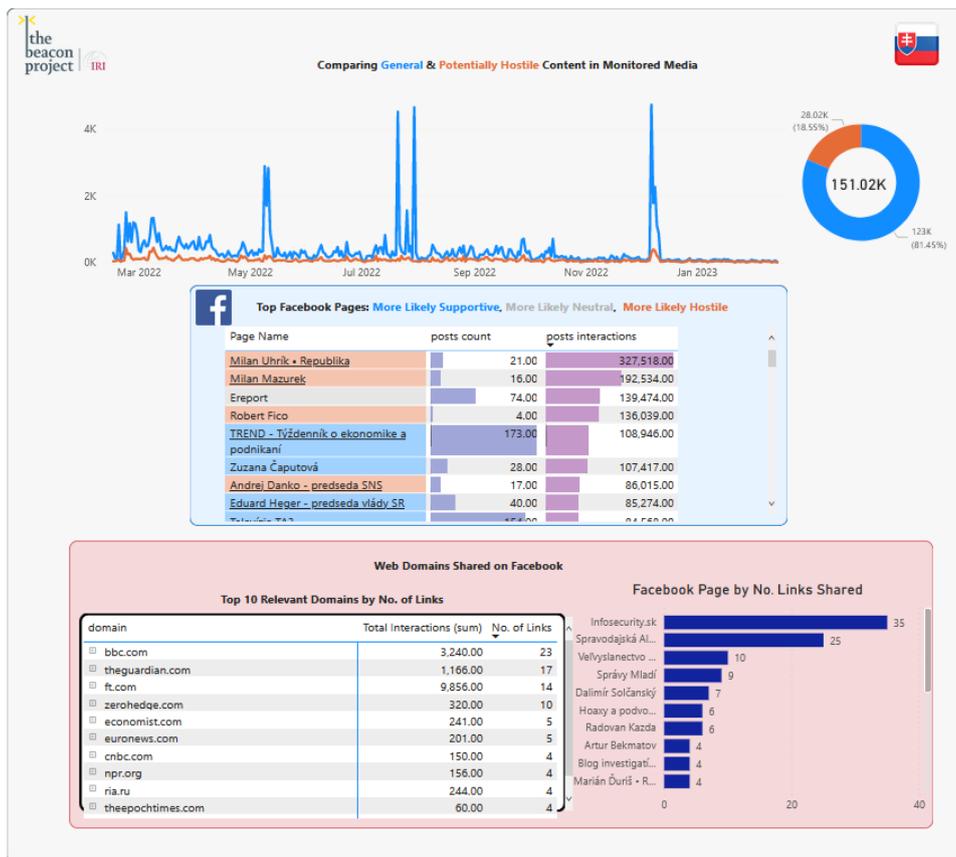


- Messaging that questions the effectiveness of the sanctions were also brought in via foreign far-right website Zero Hedge and the U.S. conservative outlet the National Interest, although they did not attract many interactions. The Zero Hedge article was translated into the Slovak and posted by the Facebook page of a well-known conspiracy website, Spravodajská Alternatíva (News Alternative). However, the data of hyperlinks from Facebook posts also revealed that counter disinformation campaigns were also prevalent with an NGO researching information operations – Infosecurity.cz – as well as the account of Slovak police dedicated to fact-checking Hoaxy a podvody - Polícia SR (Hoaxes and Scams - the SR Police) featuring as some of the most prominent Facebook pages in the debate.

Assessed Audience: Supporters of Opposition Parties

Risk Assessment: Medium

Energy Security



- In general, the topic of energy security was heavily linked to the sanctions topic. Of the 220,575 articles/posts



that contained references to energy security 18.6% contained potentially hostile content. The topic of sanctions was often linked to blaming the West for the energy crisis - up to half of the posts blaming the West criticized the sanctions imposed on Russia. The most common narrative was [the uselessness](#) of sanctions which have not managed to end the violence in Ukraine but only increased the price of energy and therefore, Slovaks [should look](#) for the money they do not have to pay for energy bills in Ukraine. Some of the most extreme conspiracies claimed that the EU sanctions were [forced by the United States](#) so that American companies could profit from increased LNG sales.

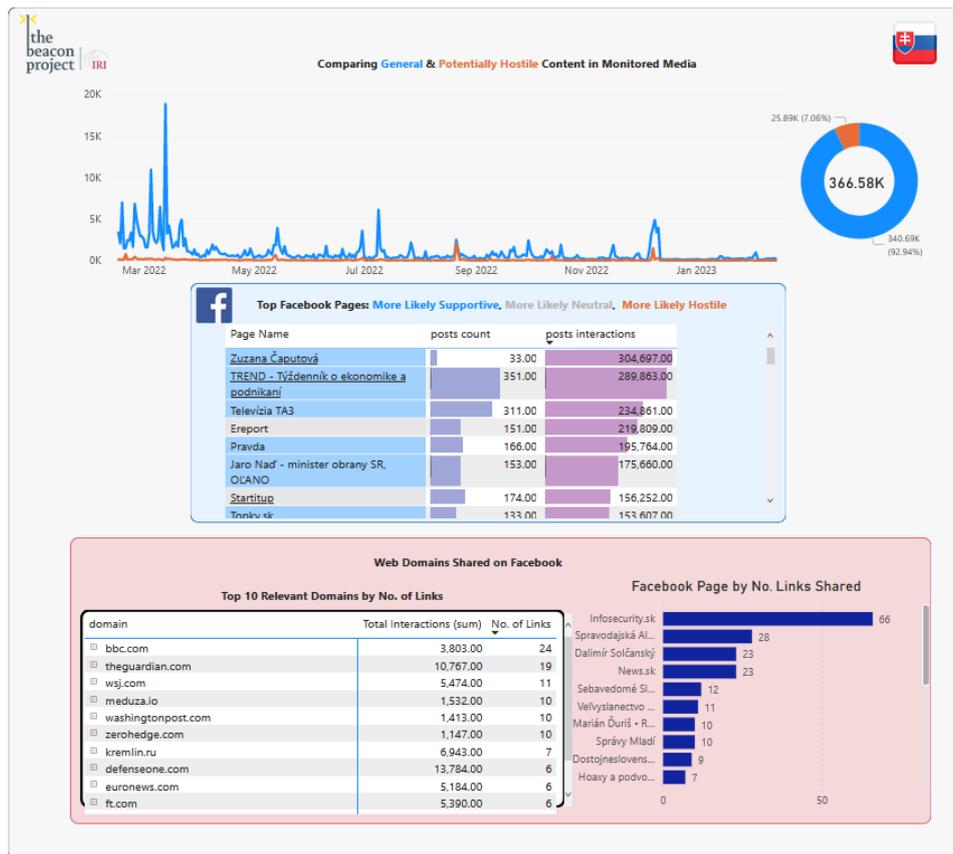
- The most popular posts consisted of hostile content posted by member of the Republic party, especially its leader Milan Uhrík, but SMER-SD's Róbert Fico also appears among top sources. On the other hand, president Čaputová and the Prime Minister Eduard Heger also caught attention with their communication about specific forms of assistance provided to counter the energy crisis, as well as quality mainstream media such as the weekly TREND or the TA3 Television reporting on the state of the energy market. Although the hostile narratives' impact can be exacerbated by the economic concerns worrying every household, it is positive to see some balance among the top sources and their stances to Ukraine.
- The most shared and interacted with domains consisted of generic foreign outlets such as The Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, BBC or the Guardian. In comparison, problematic websites such as the far-right Zero Hedge or the Russian state-owned RIA Novosti were interacted with minimally and also shared few times by the notorious conspiracy website Spravodajská Alternatíva (News Alternative) and the Russian Embassy in Slovakia.

Assessed Audience: opposition voters

Risk Assessment: Medium



Anti-NATO



- The topic of NATO and military support was by far the most discussed with 366,579 articles/post identified with 7.1% of the content containing potentially hostile messaging. However, if limiting the media source to only content on Facebook the proportion of potentially hostile content reaches 23.5% out of 15,683 Facebook posts. Some of the most prominent narratives were those presenting NATO as [an aggressive organization](#) rather than a defensive alliance and that it has been provoking Russia over Ukraine since 2014. [Alleged examples](#) from the past related to NATO’s engagement in Afghanistan and former Yugoslavia were often mentioned as proof for its aggressive nature. NATO was claimed to be “a part of the problem”, not the solution to Slovak security concerns, since it never wanted peace in Ukraine. Many popular posts included [appeals to stop the war](#), with many portraying the weapons being supplied to Ukraine as a reason for the war continuing.
- Despite the increased proportion of potentially hostile content on Facebook, the top ten most interacted with pages were entirely from sources generally supporting Ukraine or having largely neutral coverage. The typical sources of hostile messaging from the far-right Republic and Slovak National Party were just out of the top ten,



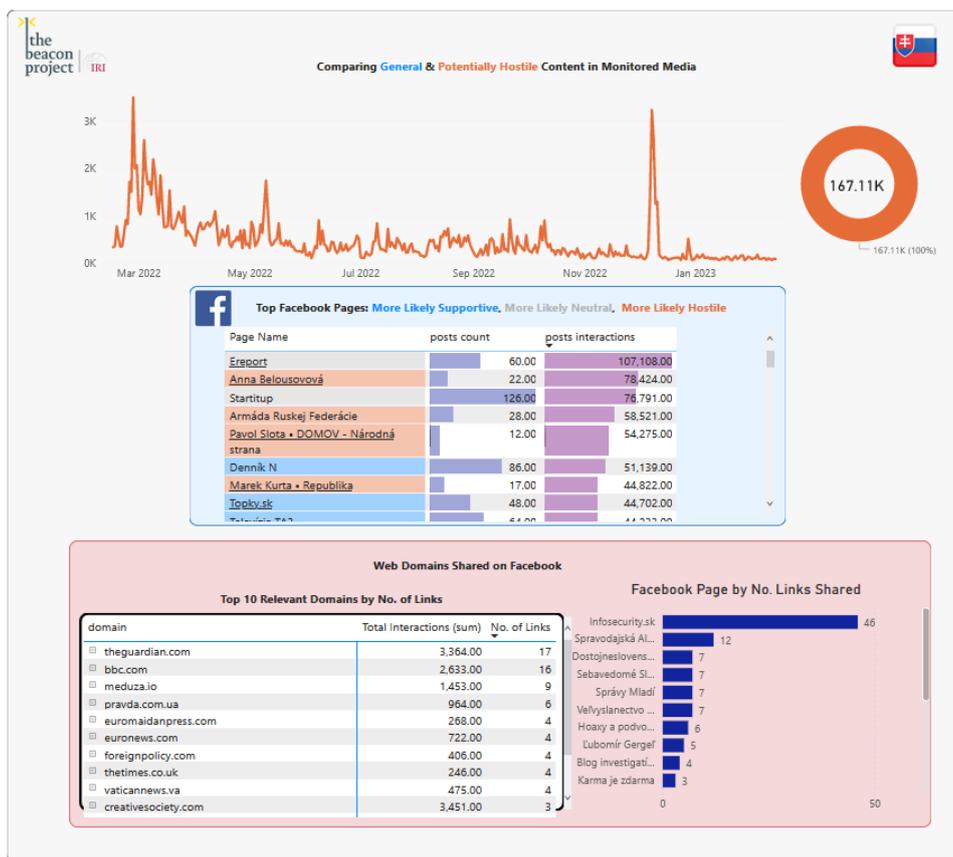
however. They primarily present NATO as the real aggressor who is leading a proxy war against Russia and does not actually care about Ukrainians. They claim that Ukraine is allegedly just a pawn for NATO's aggressive ambitions.

- The most interacted with web domains included generic foreign media as [Defense One](#) focused on U.S. defense and international security or the Guardian. Articles from the Guardian were, however, used by far-right politician [Dalimír Solčanský](#) and a Russian army fan page called [Armáda Ruskej Federácie](#) to criticise NATO.

Assessed Audience: supporters of ultranationalism, opposition voters

Risk Assessment: Low

Biolabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation



- Overall, the three well established Kremlin disinformation narratives that there are bio weapons labs in Ukraine, President Zelensky is a fascist, and that the war will escalate into a nuclear conflict did not resonate in the Slovak media space. A noticeable spike on December 8, 2022 is largely the result of comments from the debata.pravda.sk that are not actually relevant to the topic and can, therefore, be discounted in the analysis. Instead, while there were attempts to spread disinformation about secret weapons labs and fascists, these had only sporadic spikes.



- The so-called denazification [disinformation narrative](#) was spread by far-right actors like members of Republic even before the full-scale invasion. However, these narratives were only significantly spread by representatives of these far-right and ultranationalist movements like Republic, Slovak National Party, and HOME - National Party. The pro-Russian initiative called “Army of the Russian Federation” was also found to be spreading this disinformation. Despite these actors attempts, these narratives do not leave the extremist circles in any significant way. In fact when posts regarding these narratives were found outside the political extremist pages it was often from researchers like infosecurity.sk and Slovak government institutions [debunking the disinformation](#).
- The low popularity of these narratives was also reflected in the number of links that were shared on the Facebook posts. Only one link in the top ten most shared URLs was assessed by our researchers as a domain known for spreading disinformation narratives and it was only shared 3 times amassing a total of 3,451 interactions on the posts. The Facebook page that shared the most URLs in posts referencing the topics were from the aforementioned information security NGO, Infosecurity.sk.

Assessed Audience: far-right supporters

Risk Assessment: Low-Medium





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