

# HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

## WAR IN UKRAINE

Political Context: Czech Republic



June 2023



## About The Beacon Project

The International Republican Institute strengthens citizen voices and helps make their leaders more accountable and responsive. To put it simply, IRI encourages democracy in places where it is absent, helps democracy become more effective where it is in danger and shares best practices where democracy is flourishing.

Vladimir Putin is actively trying to sway public opinion throughout Europe using hostile propaganda, disinformation, and political subversion as a way to destabilize its neighbors. Therefore, in 2015, IRI launched the Beacon Project to counteract this misinformation.

The Beacon Project does not prevent disinformation from occurring—a laudable but impossible goal. Nor does it confront every instance of disinformation—though we work with partners who do just that. IRI's focus is to dismantle the underlying conditions that allow disinformation to spread. Strengthening democracy is the best approach for nations to respond not just to today's threat, but to better endure in the face of future threats in whatever form they take.

## Publication Details

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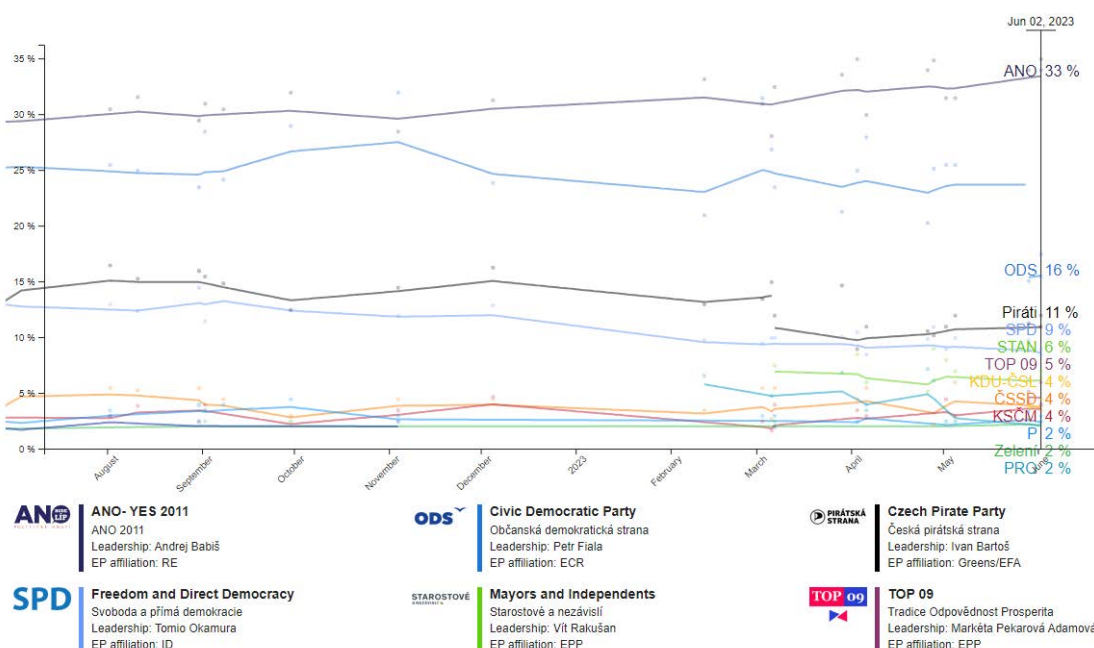
# Introduction

Since December 2021, the Czech Republic has been led by a pro-Western five-party coalition of both conservative and liberal parties consisting of two electoral alliances that formed before the parliamentary elections in October 2021. One was the center-right alliance SPOLU (Together) led by current Prime Minister Petr Fiala from the liberal-conservative Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS), joined by TOP 09, as well as the Christian democrats from KDU-ČSL. The second alliance – Pirates and Mayors – consisted of the liberal progressive Czech Pirate Party (Česká pirátská strana) led by Ivan Bartoš, current Minister of Regional Development and Deputy Prime Minister for Digitalization. The Pirates were joined by Mayors and Independents (Starostové a nezávislí), led by Vít Rakušan, current Minister of the Interior.

In the 2021 parliamentary elections, these two alliances ran in opposition to an “entrenched leader”, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, a businessman and one of the richest people in the Czech Republic. He was the leader of a minority coalition government consisting of ANO 2011, a populist center-right political movement, and the Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická, ČSSD) on the center-left. This coalition led the country from 2018 to 2021, with external support from the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy, KSČM). Babiš’s leadership was a significant topic of the 2021 elections, which even received **the label** “the referendum about Andrej Babiš” in the media. Babiš’s movement is currently the strongest opposition party and is leading **the polls** with 31 percent.

The Czech Republic also faced a presidential election in January 2023 which saw **the victory** of a pro-Western candidate and a firm supporter of Ukraine, former Chair of the NATO Military Committee and retired general Petr Pavel.

Fiala’s government has been praised for a strong foreign policy, in which the PM himself took on a very active role. This included the successful **Czech presidency** of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022. The government has been praised for improving the Czech image abroad, though **criticized** for lacking communication and economic policies, especially its slower reaction to the economic crisis following the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine. These circumstances led to discontent among the population and anti-government protests both in the fall of 2022 and spring of 2023 with slogans such as “**Czech Republic First**” or “**Czechia Against Poverty**”, organized by representatives of anti-system movements and fringe political parties and attended by thousands.



Source: Politico Poll of Polls

## War in Ukraine in the Political Discourse

Since the beginning of the war, the ruling parties have expressed strong support for Ukraine. PM Petr Fiala was the first Western leader **to visit** Kyiv after the start of the invasion, together with his Polish and Slovenian counterparts, to pledge his support.

Fiala's government took on a firm supportive stance and since the beginning of the war, provided material and military support, being **among the first** to send weapons to Ukraine and **receiving** the biggest number of Ukrainian refugees per capita. During the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of the year, Czech politicians and diplomats were also to maintain the support towards Ukraine among EU member states. The recent victory of a presidential candidate firmly supportive of Ukraine also suggests Czech support of Ukraine is unlikely to waver in 2023.

However, his opponent Andrej Babiš, a critic of the government's support of Ukraine who used **fear-mongering** about Czech involvement in the war, still received 2.4 million votes. Hostile narratives about Ukraine are also actively spread by the far-right, mainly Tomio Okamura, leader of Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD) currently at nine percent in **polls**, and members of anti-system movements that helped organize the recent anti-government protests. But despite their effective use of social media messaging resulting in viral Facebook posts, their real social impact will likely remain limited.



# Main Political Actors

Party/Party Leader	Number of Followers on Facebook	Poll of Polls Voting Intention
ANO 2011	99,000	32%
Andrej Babiš	371,000	
SPOLU (Together) alliance	10,000	26%
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana, ODS)</li> </ul>	73,000	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Petr Fiala</li> </ul>	103,000	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TOP 09</li> </ul>	126,000	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Markéta Pekarová Adamová</li> </ul>	52,000	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• KDU-ČSL (Christian democrats)</li> </ul>	28,000	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marian Jurečka</li> </ul>	40,000	
Czech Pirate Party (Česká pirátská strana)	186,000	11%
Ivan Bartoš	95,000	
Freedom and Direct Democracy (Svoboda a přímá demokracie, SPD)	33,000	9%
Tomio Okamura	394,000	
Mayors and Independents (Starostové a nezávislí)	44,000	6%
Vít Rakušan	80,000	


**SPOLU**

## SPOLU (Together)

The center-right alliance is led by current PM Petr Fiala from the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), with a pro-Western and ultimately pro-European agenda, but with Eurosceptic factions within the party. The party is often described as liberal-conservative and compared with the British Conservative Party. The Civic Democratic Party, founded in 1991, is the only one that has always been represented in the Czech Chamber of Deputies. In forming the SPOLU (Together) alliance, the Civic Democratic Party was joined by liberal-conservative TOP09 (standing for Tradition, Responsibility and Prosperity), led by the current Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová, and KDU-ČSL, a Christian democratic party led Marian Jurečka, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Labor and Social Affairs.

SPOLU's **program** professes unequivocal pro-Western orientation and sees the future of the Czech Republic in the EU and NATO, and focuses on NATO first, security policies or fiscal responsibility. PM Fiala himself took on a very proactive and noticeable role in Czech foreign policy. In their communication, the alliance declares firm support for Ukraine as well as firm condemnation of Russian warmongering, and emphasizes the need to clearly denote the aggressor.



The Civic Democratic Party's Facebook page followed by 73,000 is an example of such active messaging,<sup>1</sup> along with **pointing out** hostile narratives spread by opposition parties such as ANO or Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and advocating for a hard stance towards Russia and **imposing** hard sanctions. The party's generally popular posts promote the work of the PM and the government's steps in terms of providing help during the energy and economic crisis, but posts promoting Czech help to Ukraine and standing up to the Russian aggression also draw attention. PM Fiala, followed by 103,000, **posts** frequent declarations of support and documents Czech cooperation with and support of Ukraine, whether symbolical or military. His most popular **post** about Ukraine touches upon his claim, sometimes deemed as controversial, that the recent anti-government protests were the work of pro-Kremlin actors. In this popular post, he reiterates that he means the organizers, not the protesters. His generally popular posts mostly involve photos with world leaders, criticism of the opposition ANO movement and more personal posts, but also support of Ukraine.

TOP 09's (126,000 followers) general popular communication also **involves** pride about the Czech Republic supporting Ukraine and standing up to Russia, besides internal politics, EU agenda, and criticism of the opposition for attempts to undermine the support for Ukraine. Its communication on Ukraine specifically also emphasizes the need to **defund** Putin's war machine and the link between Ukrainian and Czech security. This also applies to the communication of the party leader Markéta Pekarová Adamová (52,000 followers), which also frequently involves the issue of **the energy crisis** and clearly linking its causes to Russian aggression.

The Christian democrats' (KDU-ČSL) (28,000 followers) general popular posts do not seem to include a common narrative, although a firm stance against Russia is one of the recurrent topics. Its popular messaging specifically about the war emphasizes that Russia is the aggressor and it is **not an option** to negotiate with the aggressor, and also involves **debunking** activities about the war. The party leader Marian Jurečka, followed by 40,000, promotes a clear and hard stance towards Russia and **criticism** of the opposition's less supportive stance towards Ukraine both in his generally popular posts and those specifically about Ukraine and Russia.

PIRÁTI  
STAROSTOVÉ

## Pirates and Mayors

The second alliance that makes up the government coalition consists of the liberal progressive Czech Pirate Party led by Ivan Bartoš, current Minister of Regional Development and Deputy Prime Minister for Digitalization whose program focuses on civil rights and political transparency. The Pirates were joined by Mayors and Independents (STAN), with an **agenda** of localism and subsidiarity, led by Vít Rakušan, current Minister of the Interior.

The current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Lipavský from the Pirate Party, is a staunch supporter of Ukraine. He promotes a **strict stance** towards Russia without the room for negotiations with an aggressor, **territorial integrity** of Ukraine including the return of Crimea, but also more generally, a firm Czech partnership with the West when it comes to defense against Russia, but also China. Similarly to the Pirates, the Mayors and Independents party has also been a proponent of designating Russia a **terrorist state**.

<sup>1</sup> During a monitoring period of 14 February 2022 - 15 May 2023.



The Pirates, followed by 186,000, were vocal supporters of **cutting off** energy supplies from Russia and emphasize the need to support Ukraine with **military material** alongside other forms of support. This messaging is also part of their general popular communication, alongside progressive issues such as empowering the LGBTQ+ community or legalization of marihuana. The party leader Ivan Bartoš (95.000 followers) generally draws attention with his **criticism** of the Freedom and Direct Democracy party and Babiš, especially for their hostile narratives about refugees or alleged Czech warmongering. About Ukraine, Bartoš frequently expresses support and gratefulness to Zelensky and calls out Russian disobedience of international law which needs to be duly punished without compromises.

The communication of the Mayors and Independents party (44,000 followers) is naturally impacted by the agenda of its two ministers, Vít Rakušan at the Ministry of Interior and Jozef Síkela at the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Besides the party's general communication on domestic issues and **firm support** of Ukraine, it also emphasized the importance of lowering dependence on Russian energy and Síkela's work towards this goal, as well the importance of helping refugees along with debunking hostile narratives about the people fleeing the war. Vít Rakušan (80.000 followers), who is also the party leader, frequently criticizes the opposition in his popular communication, and debunks the **hostile narratives** they support, and pushes for unwavering aid for Ukrainian **refugees**.



## ANO 2011

ANO, standing for Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, is a populist and centrist political party, and currently the strongest opposition party. It is led by former PM Andrej Babiš, businessman and one of the richest people in the Czech Republic. He owns one of the largest firms in the country and is also known for disputes with the European Commission about an accusation of conflict of interest and EU subsidy fraud. Babiš previously served as Minister of Finance and Deputy Prime Minister, and between 2017 and 2021, he led two minority governments from until Fiala took over at the end of 2021. Babiš also lost the presidential elections against current president Petr Pavel at the beginning of 2023, although in second place, he still received 2.4 million votes.

Besides its populist character, ANO is frequently described as a catch-all party and has also been labeled as *"Euro-opportunist"* due to its switching messaging towards the EU. However, especially in recent years, Babiš has relied on a rhetoric that emphasizes national interests and even anti-immigration stances, and grew close to his "friend" Orban.

ANO is followed by 99,000 users on Facebook and its popular general communication, the movement mostly criticizes the current government, especially its economic policies. When it comes to Ukraine, it is also mostly used as **a proxy topic** to support the government criticism, with arguments about **neglect** of Czech citizens on behalf of Ukrainians. Andrej Babiš is followed by 371,000 users. His popular communication in the last year was dominated by his presidential campaign as well as criticism of the government. His popular communication about Ukraine is topped by the narrative of the government's **neglect** of its own citizens. However, his stance towards Ukraine as such is supportive. Babiš generally promotes solidarity with Ukraine and perception of **Zelensky** as a *"cool"* leader, and **perception** of the Russian regime as war criminals, on the other hand.



Babiš is in **support of Ukraine**, but coordinated on the EU level rather than on the national level. He supports Ukraine's entry into the EU if it meets all conditions, and at the same time refuses the idea that Ukraine would skip ahead of countries which have been waiting for a membership for some time. Ukrainian membership in NATO is not *"on the agenda"*, according to Babiš, considering the issue of territorial disputes. When it comes to military aid, Babiš and ANO's message is a little mixed: in the Chamber of Deputies, they **approved** training of Ukrainian soldiers on Czech soil (only Freedom and Direct Democracy voted against), but at the same time, Babiš calls for **lowering** the volume of weapon supplies for Ukraine to avoid escalation. Babiš also used the argument *"we are not at war"* before his movement **abstained** (along with Freedom and Direct Democracy) from the vote on prolonging temporary protection of Ukrainian refugees until March 2024.



## Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)

Freedom and Direct Democracy represents the national-conservative opposition. It is a populist party on the right-far right part of the political spectrum, led by Tomio Okamura, and known for staunch **Euroscepticism** and a strong anti-immigration stance. Recently, the movement lost a **case** against the Czech weekly Respekt which called the party *"a parliamentary fascist movement"* and was subsequently sued by Freedom and Direct Democracy. The party received 9.56% votes in the last election in 2021 and its preferences have remained stable, currently at 9% according to Politico's **Poll of Polls**. The party leader Tomio Okamura is one of the most active Czech politicians online which reflects in the volume of his followership (394.000 Facebook users) and his posts rank among the most popular ones based on number of interactions on Czech Facebook. Previous research also showed that he is the most active political figure when it comes to spreading **hostile narratives** about Ukraine, or manipulative **narratives** about energy security and green issues, among other topics.

Although right after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, Freedom and Direct Democracy **joined** the general political consensus on the condemnation of Russian aggression and support for Ukraine's right to defend itself, it quickly went back to opposition. The party quickly turned to a pacifist narrative and started demanding a stop to Czech weapon supplies for Ukraine, as well as demanded pressure on Ukraine itself to lay down weapons in favor of peaceful negotiations.

Okamura's general most popular posts (based on the number of interactions) criticize the Czech government's handling of the energy and economic crisis and present the government as the cause of these crises, without a mention of the Russian aggression and its consequences on the region. His most popular posts on Ukraine include hostile narratives towards **refugees** and military **aid**, and also the narrative of neglecting Czech citizens on behalf of Ukraine. Generally, Okamura and Freedom and Direct Democracy use many of the buzzwords used by the Czech anti-system and fringe scene which was also involved in organizing the anti-government protests in the recent months. This mainly involves pushing for peace and peaceful negotiations with the aggressor or *"Czech Republic in the first place"*.





# Main Challenges

So far, Fiala's government has been viewed positively when it comes to foreign policy and establishing a positive Czech image on the European and international level. However, economic policies have proven to be a weaker point for this government. According to the latest **Eurobarometer** data, Czechs find rising prices the biggest challenge facing the country at the moment and 79 percent of Czechs perceive the state of the national economy negatively. 59 percent expect the economic situation to only get worse in the next year. The population's dissatisfaction with how Fiala's government handled the recent crises reflects in the lowering trust towards public institutions - 71 percent distrust the parliament and 68 percent distrust the government. This perception could also be partially explained by the government's neglect communicating its steps to its citizens, which leaves the information space open to manipulative actors and narratives. All in all, the need to improve the state of public finances is more and more pressing which might lead to unpopular but inevitable steps by the government.

This dissatisfaction, feeling of neglect by the government and negative future prospects also led to anti-government protests both in fall of 2022 and spring of 2023 with slogans such as "**Czech Republic First**" or "**Czechia Against Poverty**". Anti-system actors and movements as well as the political fringe were involved in organizing these events and using them to gain media and political capital, exploiting the vulnerabilities of a society going through multiple crises.

Czech support of Ukraine remains strong, but the future still poses challenges in this regard, considering the above-mentioned discontent and vulnerabilities. Economic worries will likely play a primary role. If the feeling of neglect and dissatisfaction with the government's response to the ongoing crisis prevail, it might translate into lowering support for the government's policies in general, support for Ukraine not being an exception.



# Forecast

The next Czech parliamentary elections are coming in 2025. But if there was a hypothetical election in the upcoming month, the result and its consequences for the support of Ukraine are debatable.

Babiš's ANO is currently leading the **polls**, with its electorate likely strengthened after Babiš's presidential candidacy. The question is what kind of coalition Babiš would be able to form in case of a victory. ANO's previous government partner, the Czech Social Democratic Party, has been stable under the electoral threshold. However, even before the parliamentary elections in 2021, there were speculations about an ANO cooperation with Freedom and Direct Democracy, the current most vocal voice against increased support for Ukraine.

Such a cooperation would entail at least much less clear and less straightforward support of Ukraine, mainly when it comes to military aid which is generally the most controversial form of aid in the eyes of Czech society (according to **Eurobarometer**, 52% disapprove or tend to disapprove). The current level of support for refugees could also be potentially threatened considering the parties' narrative of Czech interests in the first place and spreading hostile narratives about the neglect of Czech citizens on behalf of Ukrainians. Freedom and Direct Democracy as a strongly Eurosceptic actor would also likely attempt to push away from unified European policies. On the other hand, Babiš is a **proponent** of coordinating aid for Ukraine on the EU level. He has also been associated with a double-faced position on European policies, criticizing them in front of the domestic audience but supporting them in Brussels during his government, as was the case with the European Green Deal.

Polling in the Czech Republic also shows that despite war fatigue and slightly decreasing **interest** in the events of the war, Czechs are still supportive of Ukraine. Help for refugees is **approved** by 60 percent which is an increase compared to last summer. 28% support an active pro-Western position regarding Ukraine, including moving NATO troops to the borders of Ukraine and Russia, 24 percent are for a pro-Western passive approach, refusing activity of NATO troops. A potential vulnerability are the 34 percent of uncertain people who wish for a more neutral position. In a similar way, in voting intention **polls**, 35 percent are yet unsure about their participation and choice of a party, but that is likely partially given by the remote election date, too.

The **polling** also shows that Czech dissatisfaction does not stem primarily from the response to war in Ukraine, but reflects the response to the energy and economic crisis, both from the side of the national government and the EU. All in all, the Czech perception of the current (geo)political and social situation is still determined through the economic lens. Therefore, the vulnerability of the Czech position of Ukraine, currently largely supportive, will also depend on how successful the opposition and anti-system actors will be in pushing forward economic hostile narratives towards Ukraine.





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