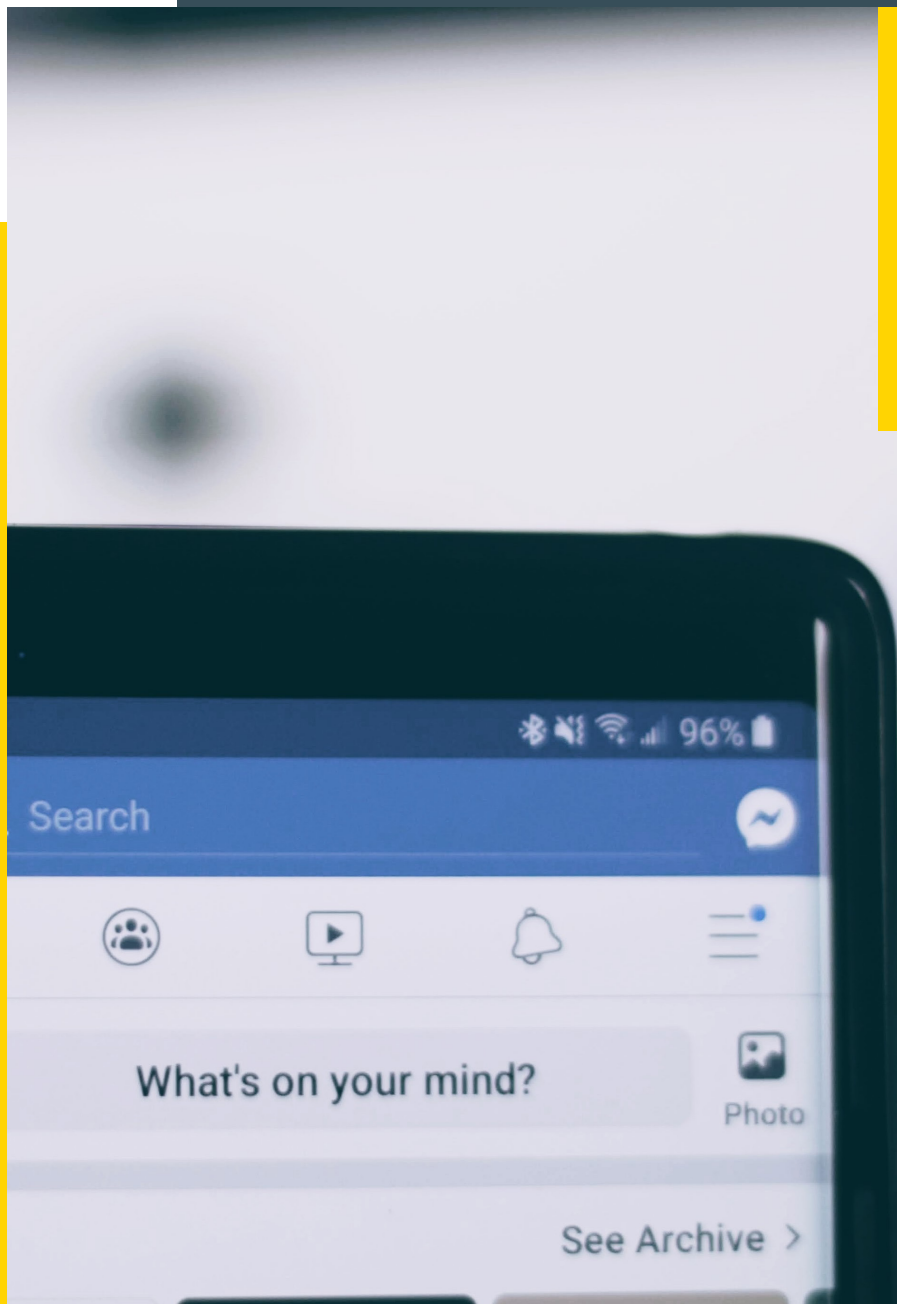


PORTRAYAL OF WESTERN ALLIES A YEAR AFTER **RUSSIA'S FULL- SCALE INVASION:**

What Ukrainian Facebook Tells Us



July 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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Portrayal of Western Allies a Year After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion: What Ukrainian Facebook Tells Us

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The key conclusion: Ukrainians highly value the unity of support from most Western partners: the level of solidarity, empathy and common emotion, regardless of the amount of aid provided by one or another country. However, one country stands out in contrast: Hungary. Although Hungary is formally adhering to the common line of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Hungary is not perceived by most Ukrainians as an ally. Careful observation of Facebook and data from sociological surveys indicates that the situation is getting worse day by day, and it started before the Russian full-scale invasion.

After February 24, 2022, the support of Western partners became for Ukraine not just a matter of diplomacy or a foreign policy course, but indeed a matter of life and death.

To be more specific and rational, this support was and is – a key condition for preserving Ukraine's statehood, protecting its territories, a chance to restore territorial integrity and rebuilding the state, and ultimately – joining the EU and NATO.

In public and media discourse, this Western support covers many aspects with very high expectations. Immediately after the start of the Russian invasion, the support of the allies became, (after frontline news) one of the most prominent topics in the public and media discourse of Ukraine. It remains the same more than a year after the beginning of the invasion.

Within our year study, 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. 86,1 percent of this content was related to the topic of NATO, which covers several subtopics – from very rational like the military support (amount, type, timing, logistics, etc.) for Ukraine and the EU and NATO integration, including membership, to debates around narratives like supporting Ukraine to “win the war”, not just “not to lose the war”.

We encourage you to read the full report [here](#).

Among a number of insights in this research, we also found that the perception of Western support in Ukraine has acquired a clear bilateral context. Therefore, we made a separate sample of the top 100 publications on Facebook regarding the Western support of Ukraine during the year of the Russian invasion. Moreover, we analyzed the 100 most popular posts on Facebook in the Ukrainian language about certain countries. The countries' sample was made based on the list of countries where our main study was conducted, as well as countries that are most often mentioned in Facebook posts in Ukraine regarding support. Therefore, our list of countries is as follows: USA, Great Britain, Germany, France, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary.

Such a study is important because it gives both Kyiv and its Western partners the opportunity to synchronize awareness on public perception and narratives, which dominate the Ukrainian information space about certain countries. And therefore, to adjust policy and strategic communications regarding assistance to Ukraine in defense of Russia's aggression, as well as within negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO.



Here are the five key observations from our study we can share with contextual explanations and disclaimers.

All the countries selected for the study, with the exception of Hungary, not only have a positive image among the Ukrainian audience, but are often perceived as leaders of the support for Ukraine. Even under the vocal leadership of the USA, Great Britain and Poland, countries such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia also received recognition from the Ukrainian audience, as the first European countries that began to supply Ukraine with tanks and air defense systems (S-300), respectively.

Within the sample of the top 100 most popular Facebook posts regarding a specific country, there are almost no potentially hostile or negative posts. The exception is Hungary.

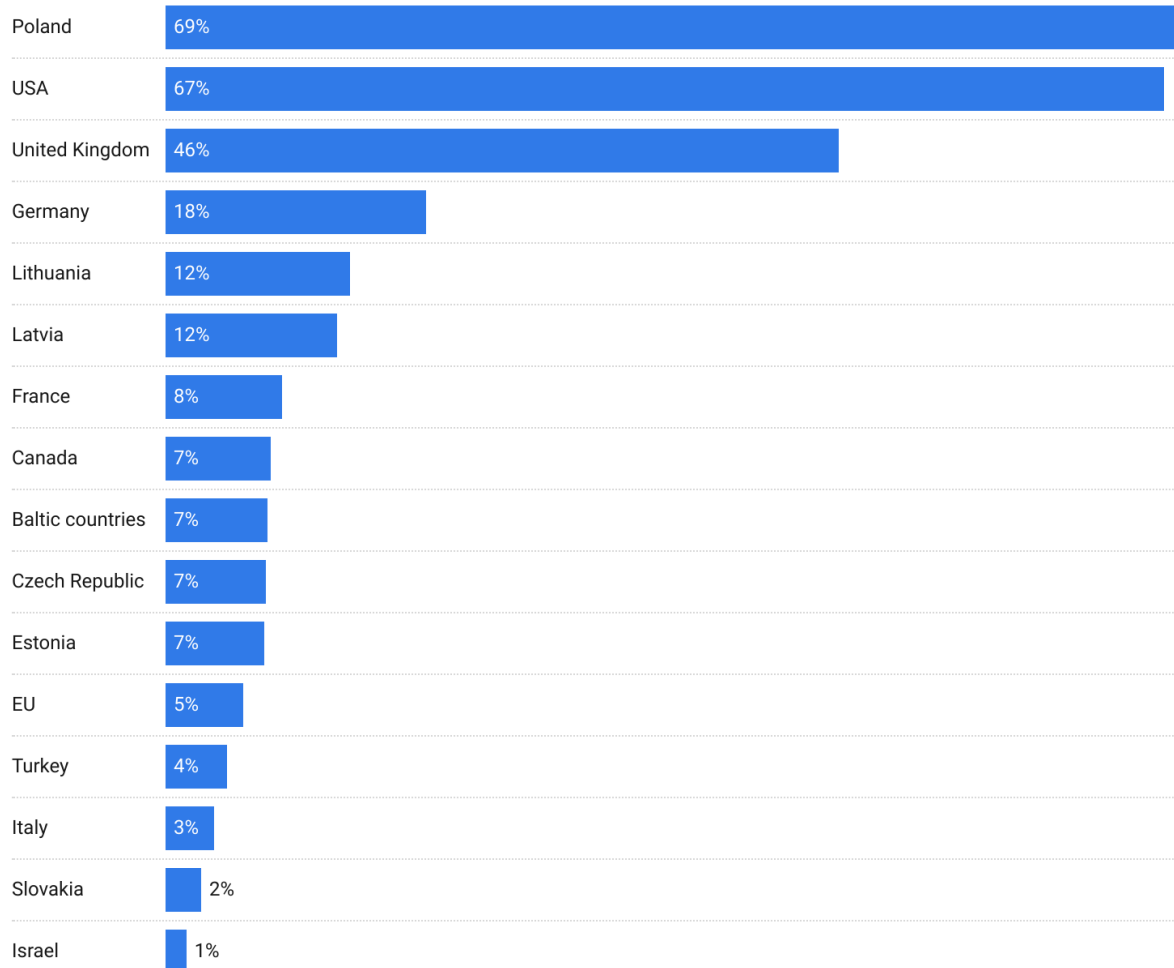
In the primary sample of selected countries, Ukrainian audiences perceive Hungary as the only Western country that does not support Ukraine and often advocates and supports Russia. The rhetoric of Viktor Orban and his team and the fact that Hungary does not supply weapons to Ukraine overshadows the fact that Hungary provides to Ukraine both on a bilateral basis and within the framework of the EU. According to the Kiel Institute, Hungary's support amounted to 0.03 percent of its GDP and 0.28 percent of EU aid over a year, more than Romania's support for Ukraine. But when the Hungarian government and political leaders constantly repeat that Ukraine cannot win this war and regularly declare their readiness to block Russian sanctions and financial aid to Ukraine (even if, in the end, they fail in these efforts), then such support naturally affects public perception.

The recent sociological surveys prove the moods on Facebook – a public opinion poll conducted in cooperation of two trustworthy think tanks, the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation and the Razumkov Center sociological service, from March 23 to 30, 2023.¹ This data has additional significance when one considers the methodology of the survey which asked open-ended questions as opposed to providing the respondents with a list of countries from which to choose.

1 The full report is available here https://dif.org.ua/en/article/symbols-events-and-personalities-shaping-ukrainians-national-memory-of-russias-war-against-ukraine#_Toc134379510



Which foreign countries, in your opinion, have played an important role in assisting Ukraine?



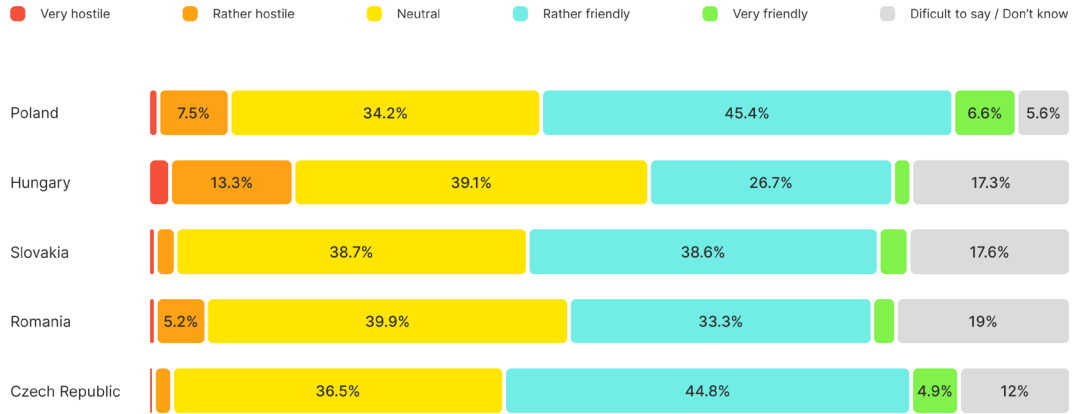
The results of the sociological survey conducted by the Democratic Initiatives Foundation in collaboration with the sociological service of the Razumkov Center from March 23 to March 30, 2023, have been obtained. A total of 2017 respondents aged 18 and above were surveyed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3%. However, additional systematic deviations in the sample may be caused by the consequences of Russian aggression, particularly the evacuation of millions of citizens.

Created with Datawrapper

Regarding Hungary, which was not cited by any survey respondents, we compare sociological data regarding Ukraine's attitude towards this country and the rest of its immediate neighbors of Ukraine as of October-November 2021 (before the Russian invasion) and August 2022, six months later.



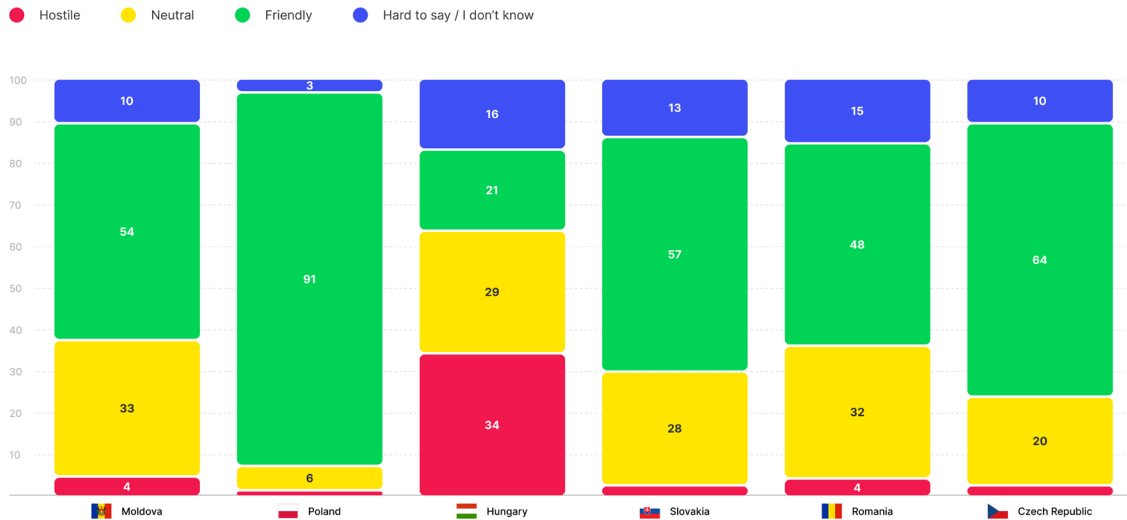
In your opinion, how do the following countries treat Ukraine



The opinion poll was initiated by the Institute for Central European Strategy and conducted by the Democratic Initiative Foundation in cooperation with the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology in all regions of Ukraine, except temporarily occupied territories, from October 22 to November 12, 2021 using the CATI method. The statistical error of the sample does not exceed 2.4%.



How, in your opinion, do such countries treat Ukraine?



The survey was conducted by the sociological service of the Razumkov Center together with the Iko Kucheriv Foundation "Democratic Initiatives" on the order of the Institute for Central European Strategy from August 5 to 12, 2022, in the territories controlled by the government of Ukraine and where hostilities are not taking place. 2024 respondents over the age of 18 were surveyed. The theoretical sampling error does not exceed 2.3%.

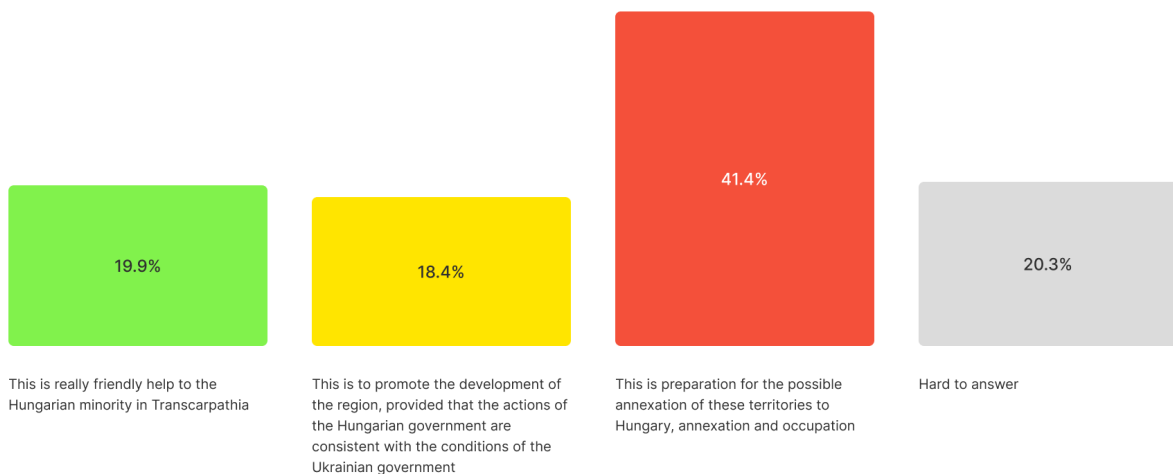


The number of Ukrainians who think Hungary is hostile towards Ukraine doubled.

Our research also included analyzing public perception of the Russian narrative that Ukraine's western neighbors are planning to divide Ukraine, by taking back territories within the current borders of Ukraine. This narrative was popular among Hungarians on Facebook since the Russian invasion². It is based on the conspiracy that Viktor Orban prepared to invade Ukraine after Russia and occupy Transcarpathia where the Hungarian community lives.

As of November 2021 (data just on Hungary):

What do you think about Hungary's current policy towards the Hungarian national minority in Transcarpathia – funding schools, teachers, providing grants to entrepreneurs, etc.?



The opinion poll was initiated by the Institute for Central European Strategy and conducted by the Democratic Initiative Foundation in cooperation with the Kyiv International Institute for Sociology in all regions of Ukraine, except temporarily occupied territories, from October 22 to November 12, 2021 using the CATI method. The statistical error of the sample does not exceed 2.4%



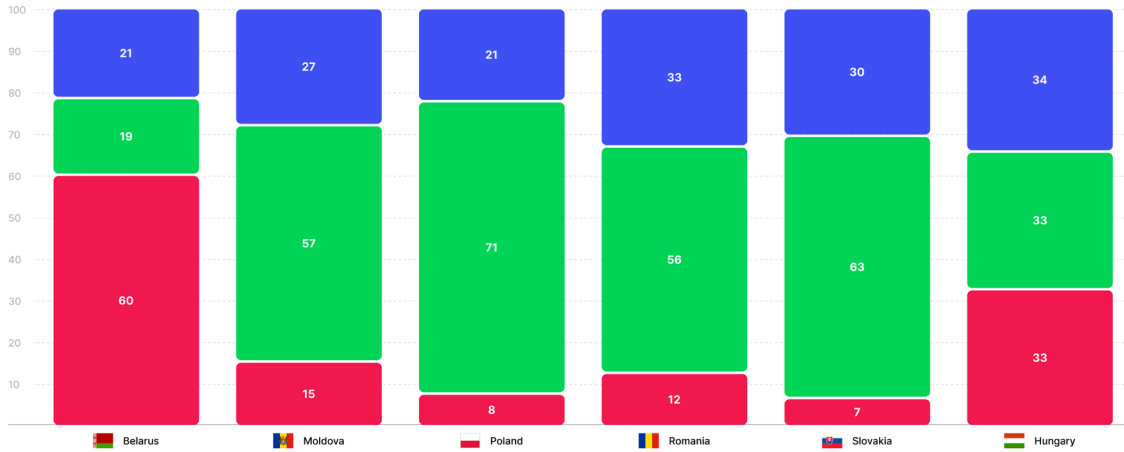
² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEZQSxGeD6g&t=0s>



As of August 2022:

For years, Russia has used the issue of history and "protection of the Russian-speaking population" to divide Ukrainian society and prepare for an attack. In your opinion, is there now a similar threat of speculation on the topics of history, language and minorities on the part of each of these countries?

● Yes, there is ● No, there isn't ● Hard to say / I don't know

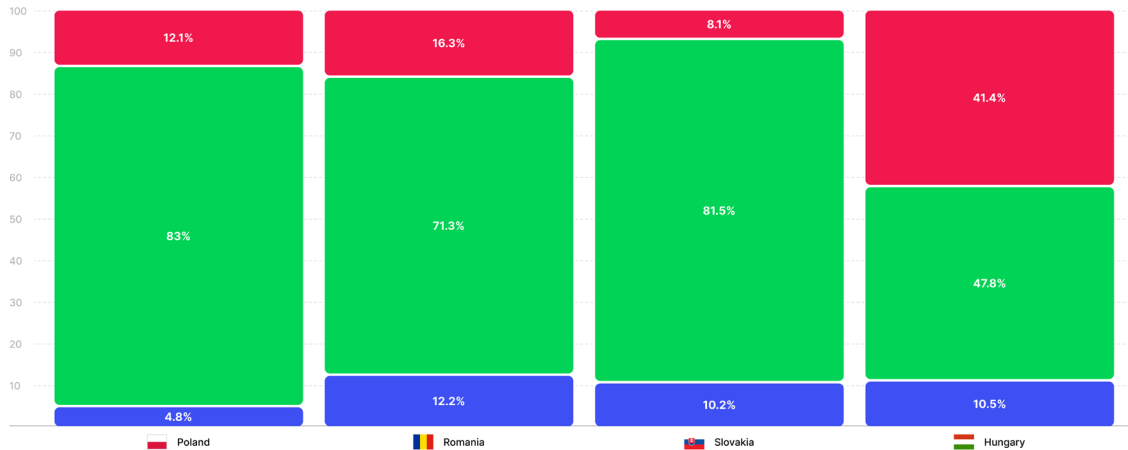


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As of February 2023:

For many years, Russia has used issues of history and "protection of the Russian-speaking population" to divide Ukrainian society and make territorial claims. In your opinion, is there a similar threat from each of these countries now?

● Yes, there is ● No, there isn't ● Hard to say / I don't know



The survey was conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology on the order of the Institute for Central European Strategy using the CATI method based on a random sample of mobile phone numbers. 2,002 respondents were surveyed. The survey was conducted with adults (aged 18 and older) citizens of Ukraine who, at the time of the survey, lived on the territory of Ukraine (within the boundaries controlled by the authorities of Ukraine until February 24, 2022). The sample did not include residents of territories that were not temporarily controlled by the authorities of Ukraine until February 24, 2022 (AR Crimea, the city of Sevastopol, certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions), and the survey was not conducted with citizens who left the country after February 24, 2022. The field stage lasted from February 14 to 22, 2023.



So, it looks like that this Russian narrative works the best on Hungary in Ukraine, and is fed well from Ukraine's perception of the Hungarian position on Russian aggression, as well as from the longlasting diplomatic tensions in bilateral Ukrainian-Hungarian relations.

In conversations on Facebook in Ukraine, news about the facts of solidarity with Ukraine, such as statements or symbolic gestures of support for Ukraine by celebrities (actors, athletes, show business stars, etc.) from various countries is as influential in the perception of Ukrainian audiences as the state's decision to grant Ukraine weapons or other urgent support.

Another vital context in this regard: manifestations of recognition and respect for Ukrainian symbols, such as language or culture in general, are also the decisive criteria for Ukrainian audiences on Facebook to treat one or another country. For example, Catherine Deneuve reciting Lesya Ukrainka's poem "*Hope*" on French television and the composition "*Shchedryk*" being played in New York's Carnegie Hall became actual "*viral content*," which forms the image of France and the USA in Ukraine.

That means not just weapon supply but also culture matters, as politicians and people of culture in a broad sense are on the frontline for Ukrainians. For many Ukrainians, this is a war for identity and decolonization.

Not uncommon globally, Facebook forms the image of a specific country through personalities – and heroes with whom this country is associated – as well as through the attitude of Ukrainian leaders towards these countries. For example: the image of Great Britain on Ukrainian Facebook is directly related to Boris Johnson and the United States to the speeches of Volodymyr and Elena Zelenska before Congress, as well as numerous words and actions in support of Ukraine by American celebrities such as Sean Penn, Mickey Rourke, Leonardo DiCaprio, Stephen King, and others. Stories of foreigners (non-celebrities) who came to Ukraine to defend it with weapons or to support Ukrainians is also a powerful tool for forming a positive image of a particular country among Ukrainian audiences.

Past trauma and seeking retribution/repentance are prevalent in Facebook discussions. For example, it is the popularity of the idea that Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy are responsible for the atrocities of the Russian invasion because they objected to the proposal from the American President George W. Bush to receive a roadmap for NATO membership at the 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest. Another example is the popularity of posts about sanctions against Russians or anyone for taking a pro-Russian position or justifying Russian aggression. This also applies to countries: for example, criticism of Hungary by other countries for its pro-Russian position is a popular topic on Ukrainian Facebook.

These narratives are not something extraordinary in wartime. On the contrary, it would be strange if they did not exist in the Ukrainian public discourse. However, this can develop over time into Ukrainian resentment which carries its own dangers particularly in Central and Eastern Europe.

The British Embassy in Ukraine demonstrates the highest class of strategic communications on Facebook. According to our sample, the diplomatic mission created and published the three most popular posts about Great Britain on Facebook in the year of the invasion. These are short slideshows with photos for a few seconds and a clear, simple message – the people of Great Britain support Ukraine.

The work of the British Embassy could become an example for the diplomatic teams of such research countries as Romania or Hungary. More information is needed about the assistance of these countries in the Ukrainian media space. Often, ordinary news from these countries overshadows any info about these countries in the context of the war in Ukraine and support for it.





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