

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

A Year of Aggression





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.

Publication Details

The Beacon Project

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

Brief no: 19

Published: March 03, 2023

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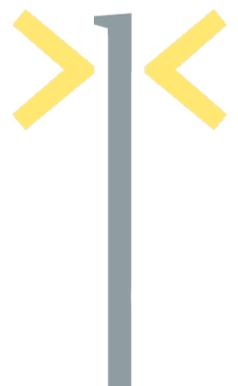
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Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine A Year of Aggression (February 2022 - February 2023)

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.

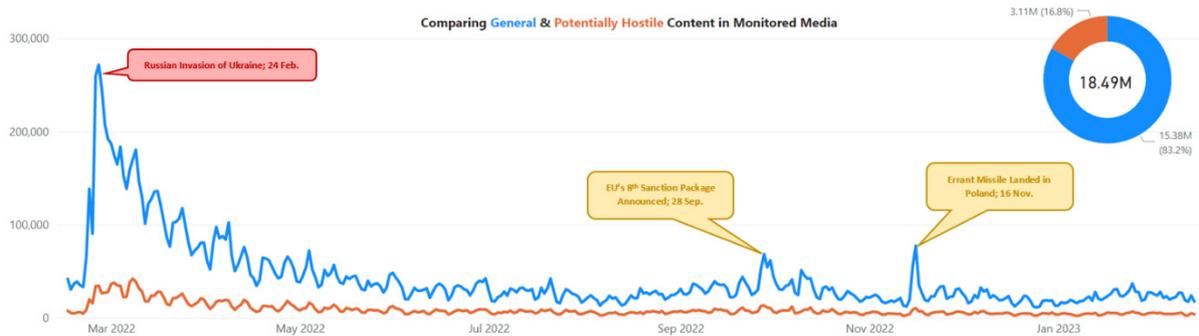
The guiding principle of this research is based on support for democratic norms and values that insist on a Ukrainian victory over the illegal and unprovoked invasion by Russia. With these values in mind, content that may be politically protected speech or even factually correct, may be classified as 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.



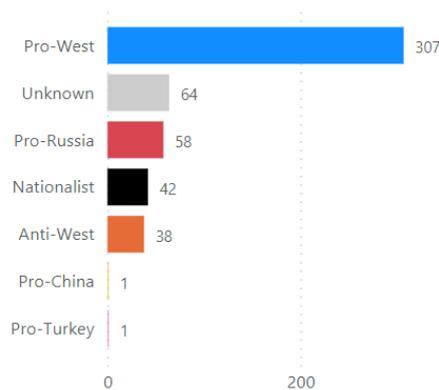
Key Findings

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-

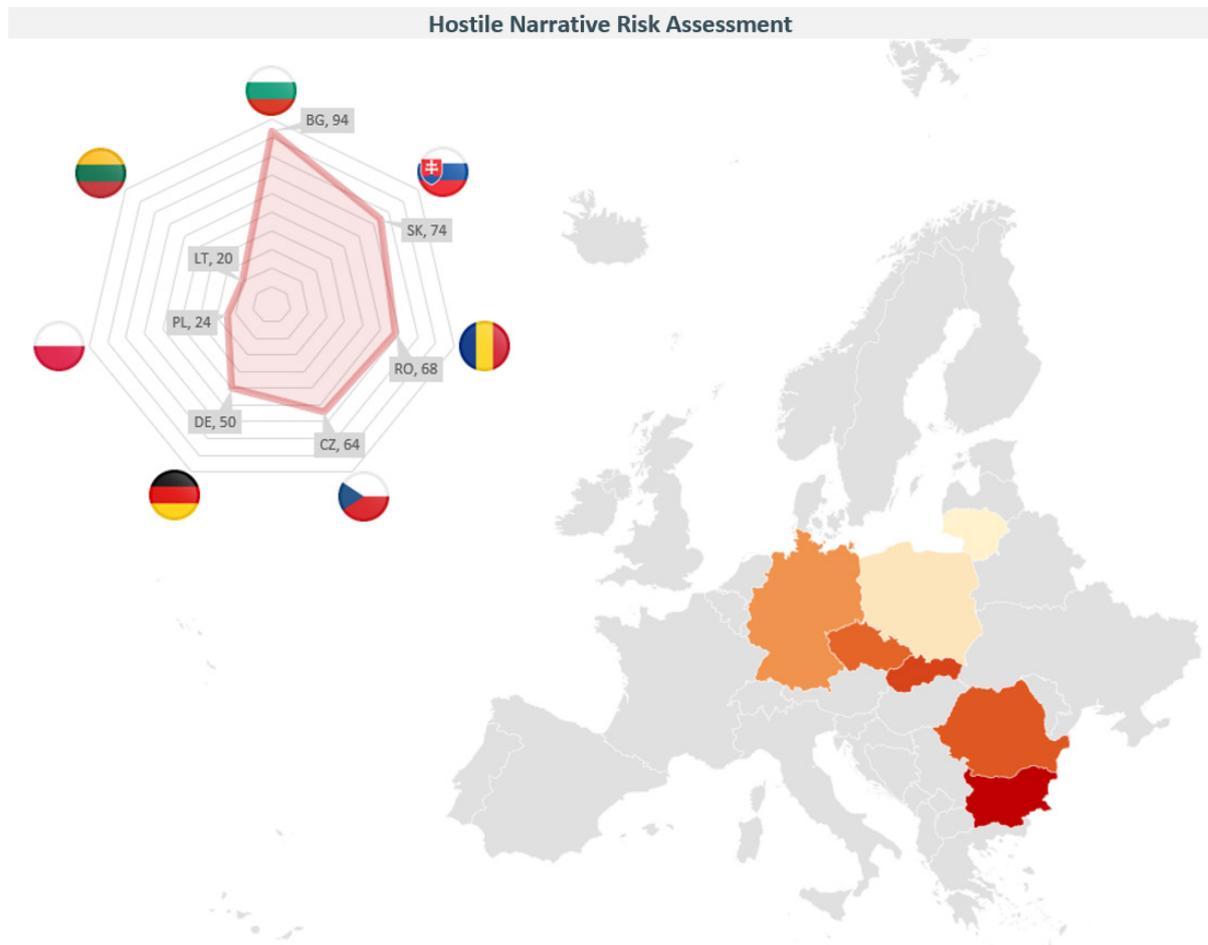


imately 11% of the total posts categorized and accounted for 17% of the total interactions while those with more general anti-Western views accounted for 7% of the posts but received 12% of the interactions. When compared to the fact that blatantly pro-Western pages comprised 62% of the posts but only 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.

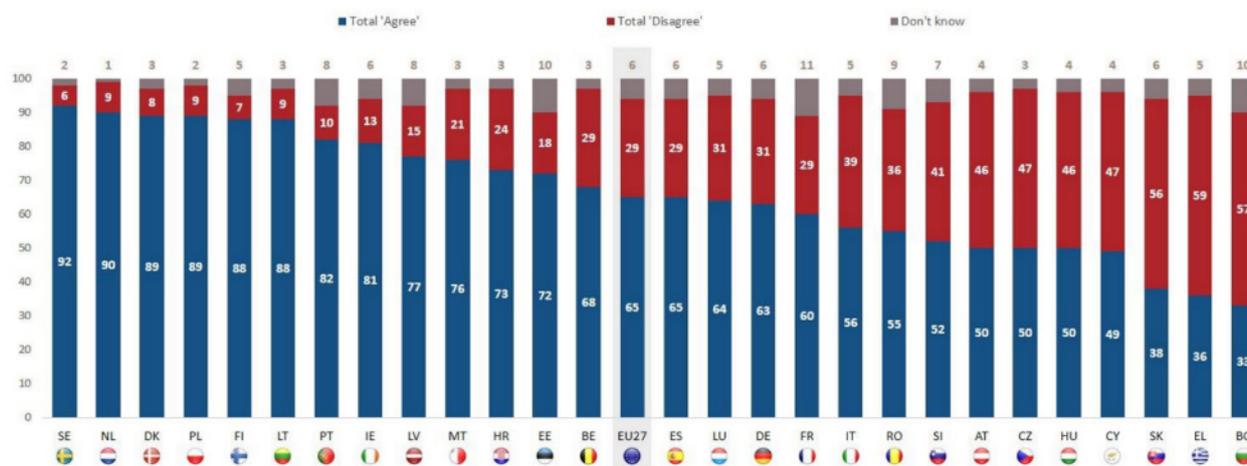
One country where this is a very real possibility is Slovakia, where the most prominent voice in undermining support for Ukraine is the main opposition social-democratic party, SMER-SD. Despite being a member of the second largest political grouping in European politics, the Progressive Alliance of Socialists 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.



Ukraine



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Top Line Summary

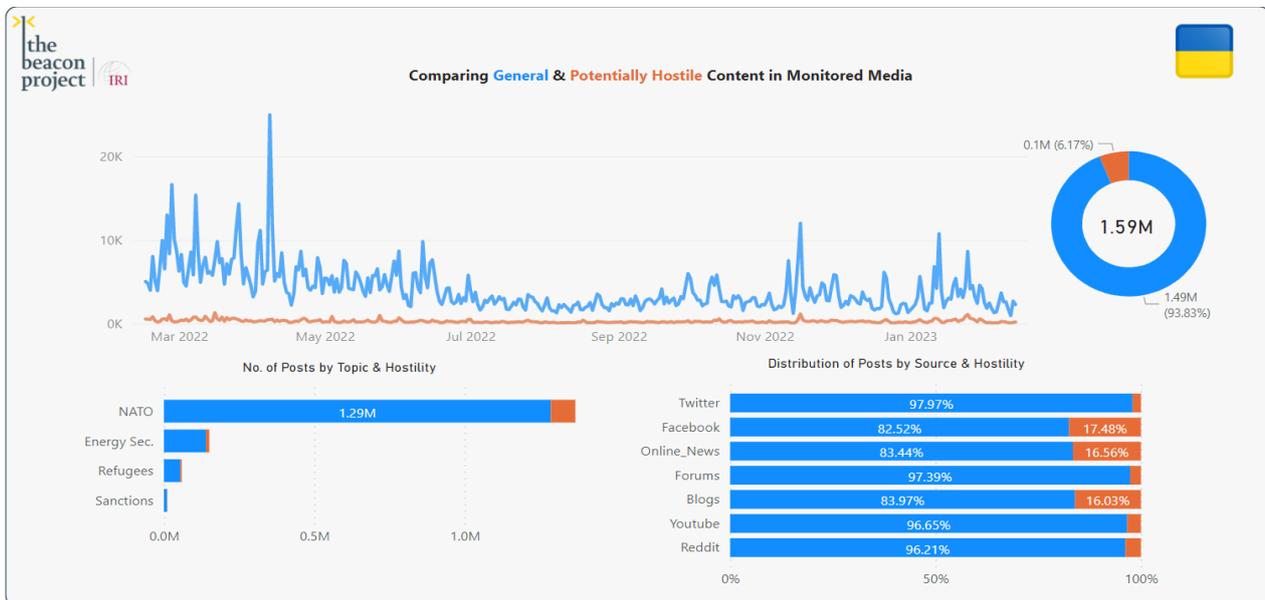
Despite different expectations and an obvious underestimation of the Ukrainian ability to resist, after the year of the Russian invasion, Ukraine remains a more united community / political nation than ever with relatively stable state institutions and an unambiguous orientation towards the West; of 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 public'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.

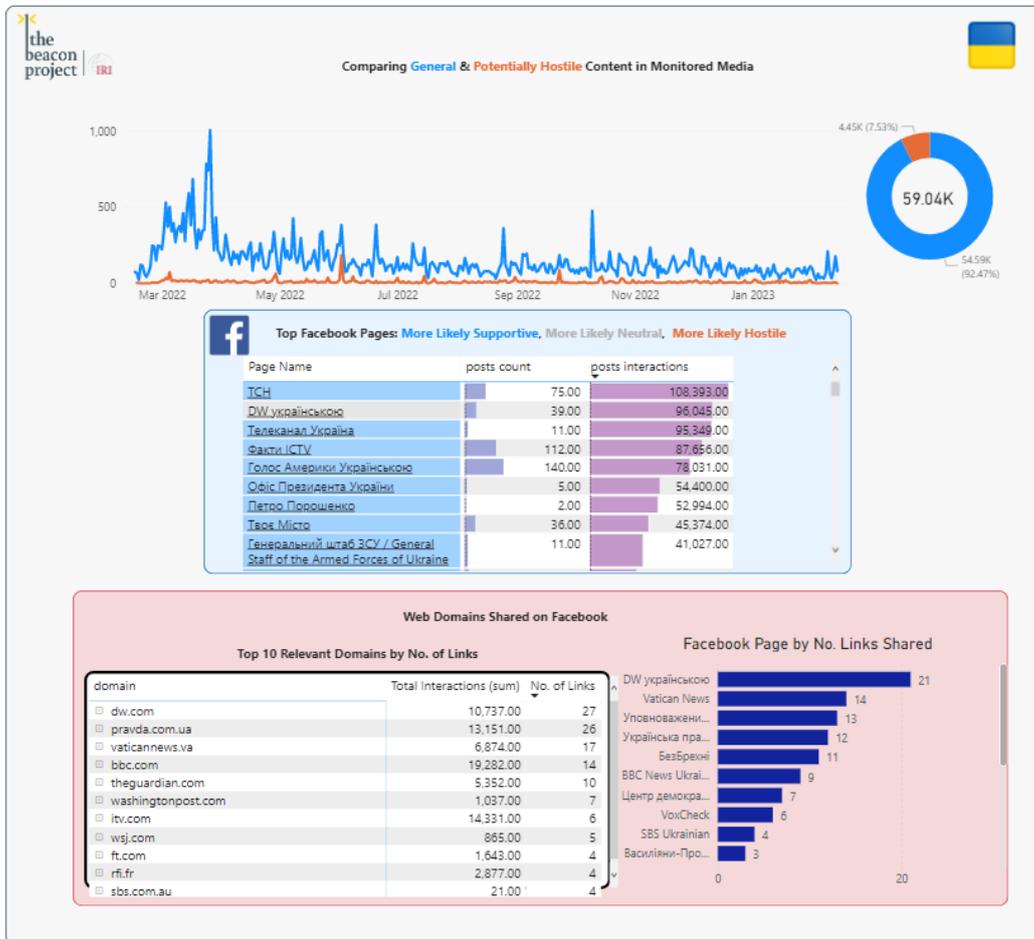
However, this exclusion from some major media platforms have led many pro-Russian actors to migrate to other platforms such as Telegram, which is not currently blocked in Ukraine. Platforms like Telegram remain a significant problem for pro-Russian propaganda and they offer high levels of anonymity and 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 Crowd-Tangle, 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.

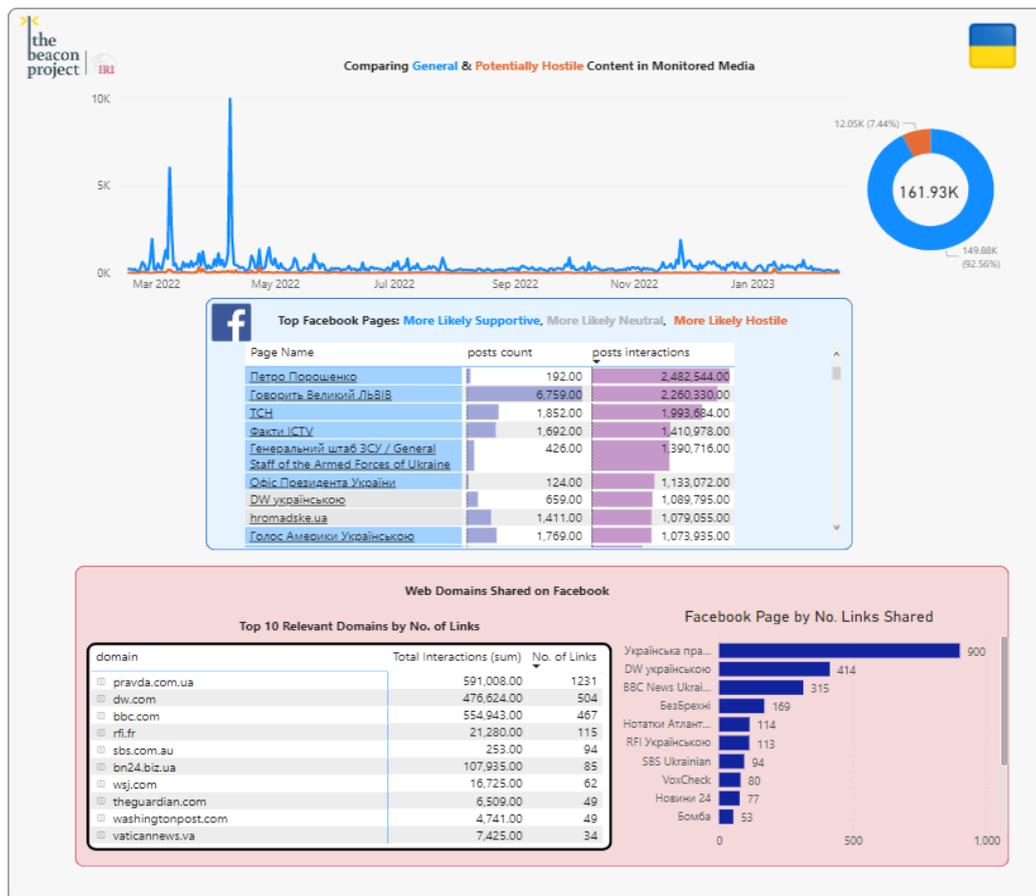


Assessed Audience: supporters of populist political actors.

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](#).

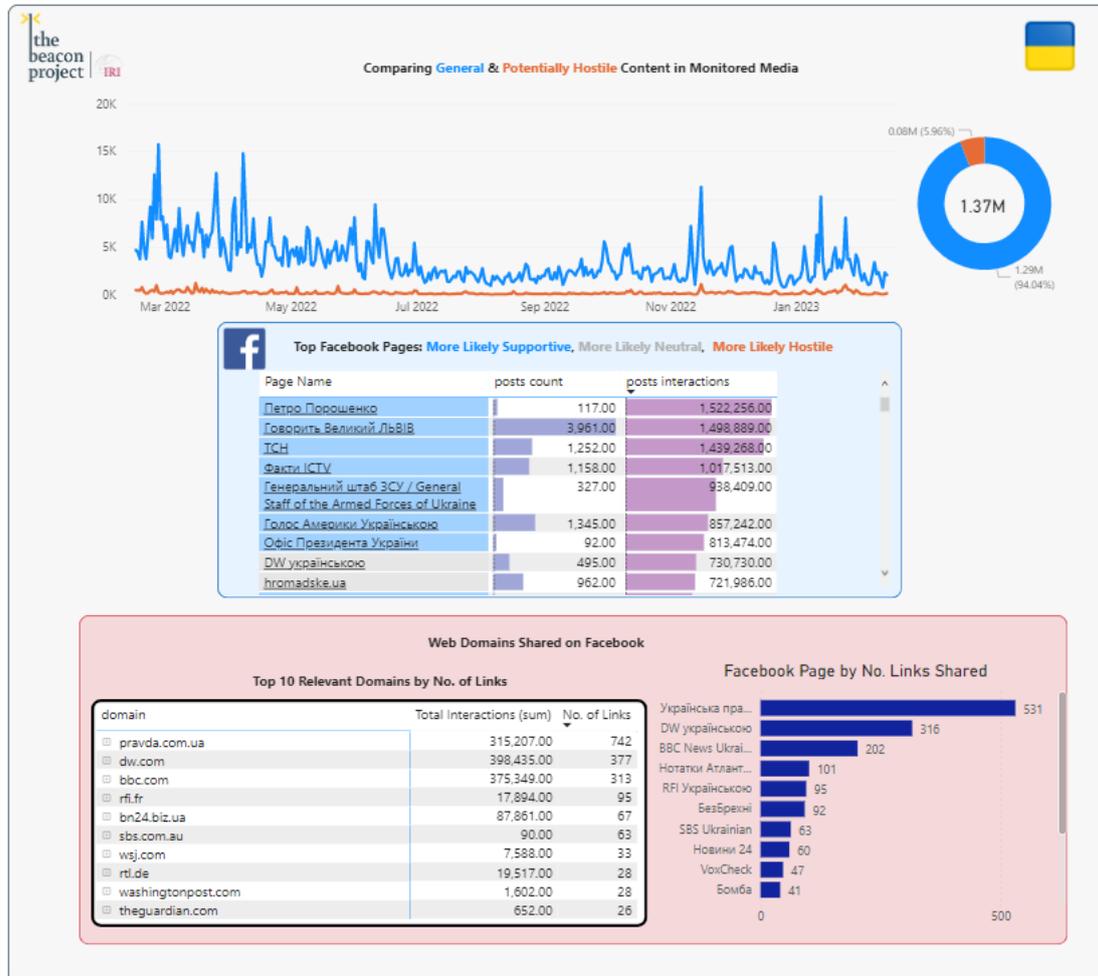
Assessed Audience: *Populist politicians, as well as Russian and pro-Russian actors through Telegram.*

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 Kohegura 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*

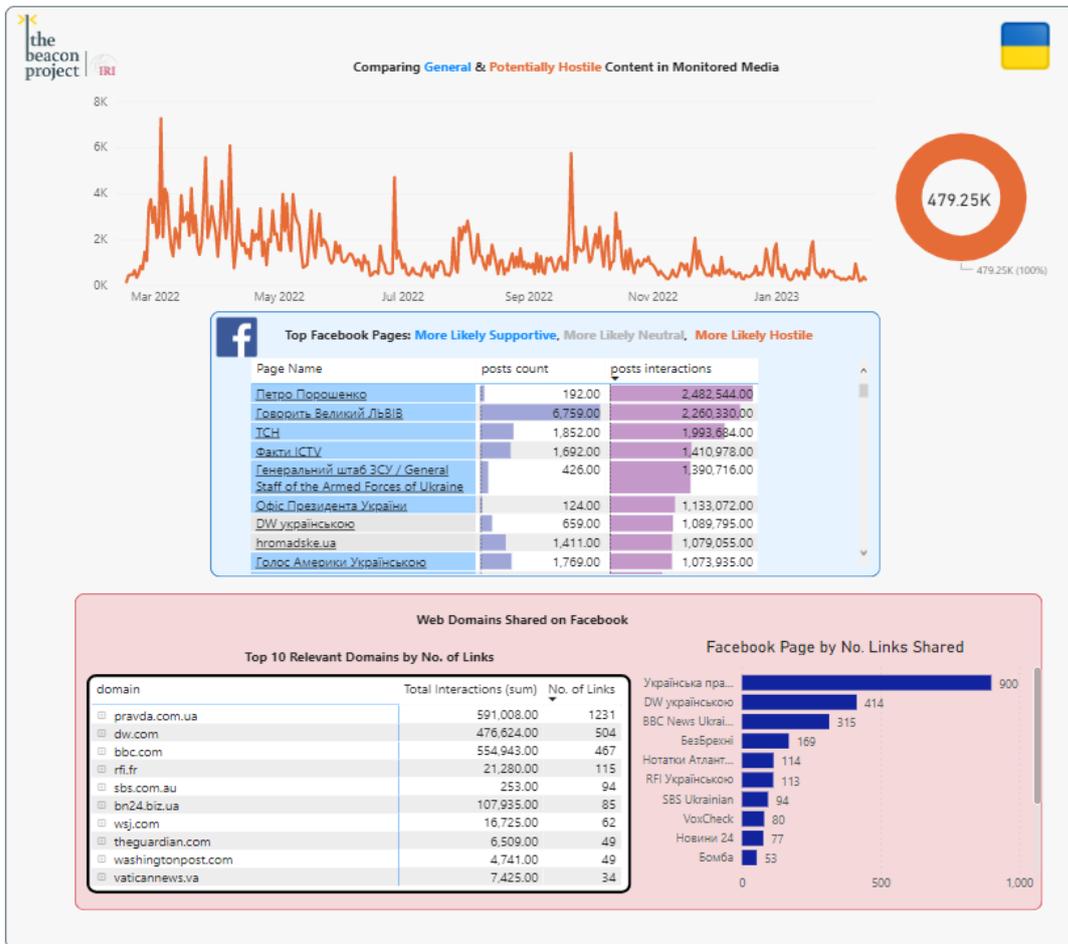
Risk Assessment: *Medium*

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 Escalation



- Overall the content that had a higher potential to be related to the established disinformation narratives of Bi-labs 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.



Bulgaria



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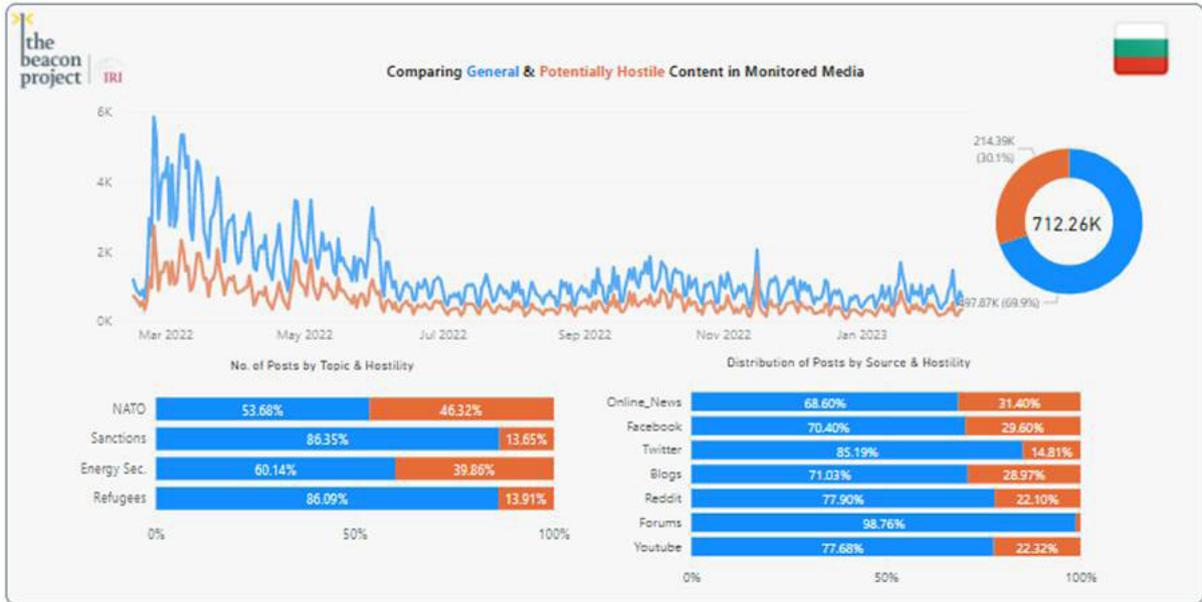
Top Line Summary

Generally, pro-Russian sentiments are deeply rooted in Bulgarian society due to historical, cultural and religious ties. In the first days of the Russian invasion, Bulgaria was shaken with the aftermath of the shock which generated significant support for Ukrainians. That, however, did not last long and over the following months Bulgarians were ranking amongst those [least in favor of EU sanctions](#) against Russia and overall EU support to Ukraine. Only about half of respondents (48%) agreed that the EU should provide continuous support to Ukraine, for example, according to an [Eu-robarometer poll from the fall of 2022](#). This result is much lower than the EU27 average, where general support reaches 74%. [A Globsec Trends 2022 report](#) further exemplifies such pro-Russian sentiments. According to the survey, more than half of Bulgarians (57%) reject the idea that Russia poses a threat, while one third see Russia as a strategic partner.

Internally, the political situation further highlighted this societal polarisation. Prime Minister's Kiril Petkov's ruling coalition (which also included pro-Western parties overwhelmingly in support of Ukraine) collapsed in the summer of 2022, allowing Russia-sympathetic president Rumen Radev to appoint a caretaker government. In the months since, Bulgaria's course towards energy independence from Russia was reversed, aided by another failed general election in the fall. In February 2023, Bulgaria paused the adoption of the euro currency for at least another year, further derailing the country from its Euro-Atlantic orientation. The turbulent political environment and the intense and prolonged political campaigning which will be exacerbated by another early election in April 2023, provides fertile ground for openly pro-Russian forces such as the far-right Vazrazhdane (Revival) political party, one of the main and most frequent spreaders of hostile narratives, to gain widespread general support.



Media Overview



A total of 712,261 pieces of online content in the Bulgarian media space were collected based on predetermined keyword sets relating to the war in Ukraine. Naturally, in the first couple of months, the discourse around the invasion was amongst the hottest news topics.

There were several significant spikes over the year. The first notable sharp increase in content was at the end of April, when Gazprom announced that it will stop delivering natural gas to Bulgaria (3,457 notes). This also generated a significant rise in hostile narratives. Another surge in content occurred in the final days of May. The most prominently debated topics concerned the treatment of Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria and the delivery of Western weapons to Ukraine. In September, conversations once again peaked due to the announced annexation of four Ukrainian regions by Russia, following sham referenda. Anti-Ukrainian narratives were amplified after an errant Ukrainian missile landed in Poland on November 15, killing two people. In the first two months of 2023, two other events stirred the conversation and led to an increase in both, general and hostile, content being published in the monitored online media. On January 18, in a highly polarising piece, the German newspaper Die Welt revealed that the then-government of Bulgaria, led by PM Kiril Petkov, had covertly assisted Ukraine with arms and fuel during the first months of the war. The final peak was on February 9, when President Radev spoke publicly against any future military aid for Ukraine.

Texts containing potentially hostile narratives in relation to the war in Ukraine accounted for one third of the overall monitored content (214,390 articles/posts). Overall, the topic that received the most attention was NATO



(207,995 articles/posts), where nearly half of the content was deemed potentially hostile. These results are in-line with the [Globsec Trends 2022 report](#) findings: not only is Bulgaria the most Eurosceptic amongst the surveyed countries, but is also the outlier in the region when it comes to opposition to NATO membership. Support for leaving the Alliance has risen to 38%, a 13% increase since last year, with the biggest increase share amongst the 18-34 age group. Such figures are hardly surprising since the far-right party Revival has turned leaving NATO and the EU into a cornerstone of their political campaigning.

Based on analysis of Facebook pages found in this study, Bulgaria had the largest share of pro-Russian sources which accounted for 37% of the most prominent public pages while only 29% were considered to be generally pro-Western in their geo-political outlook. Of the Facebook pages that received the highest number of interactions over the 12 month period many of them were linked to the far-right Revival party, such as its leader Kostadin Kostadinov who attracted 2,775,333 interactions from his 665 posts (4,173 avg./post). Also amongst the most outspoken public figures in support of Russia and against Ukraine were social media influencers Martin Karbovski and Kevork Kevorkian. Kostadinov's messaging has not only been supportive of the Kremlin, but also more generally anti-Western; notably, his party has recently initiated a referendum against Bulgaria's admission to the Eurozone. Karbovski and Kevorkian, on the other hand, belong to a large group of social media influencers who spread explicit Russian propaganda and conspiracy theories. Importantly, President Radev also plays an interesting role as an influential public figure. While his statements are not openly anti-Ukrainian, he has repeatedly opposed Bulgaria taking a more active role in the conflict, including sending military aid to Ukraine and imposing economic sanctions against Russia. Also noteworthy is the strong online presence of the Russian embassy, that has enabled them to influence debate in the country. In fact, according to the Beacon Project's [online tracker](#) receives by far the most shares (246.4 avg. shares/post) of any of the other Russian embassy monitored.

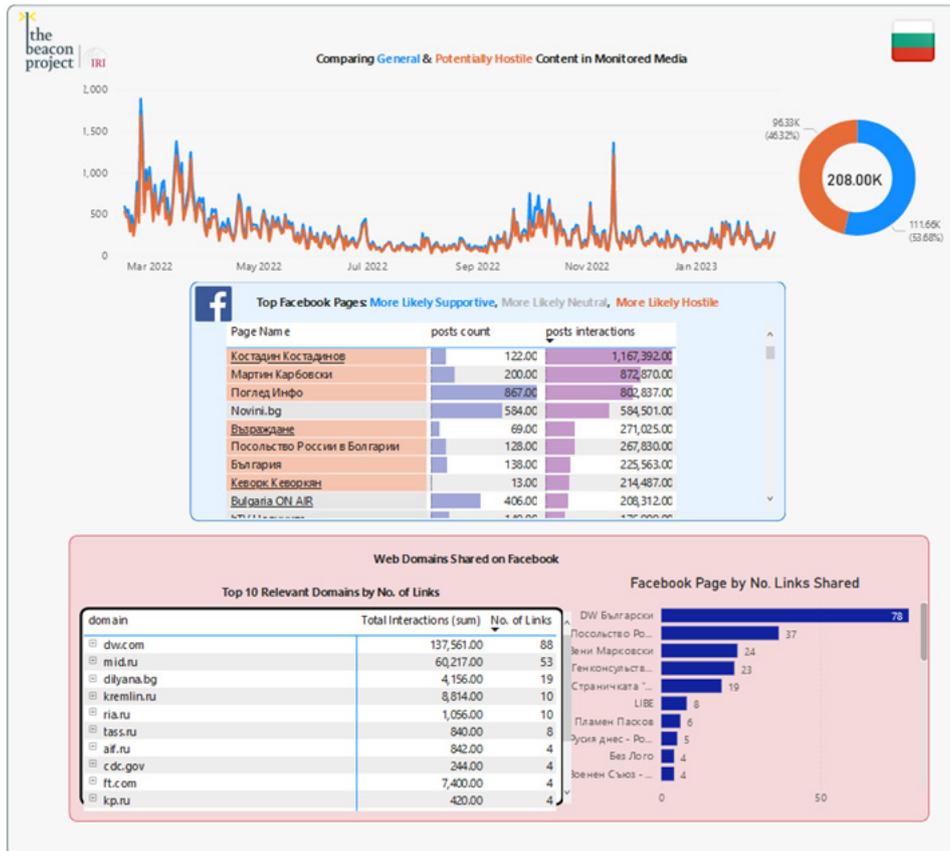
Overview of Selected Embassies' Facebook Activity (last update: Feb 23, 2023)

name	host_country	Posts by Date	No. of Posts	No. of Shares	Shares (avg.)	Post Performance (avg.)
Посольство России в Болгарии	BG		918	226190	246.39	-0.08
Ambasciata della Federazione Russa in Italia / Посольство России в Италии	IT		433	70606	163.06	2.04
Ambassade de Russie en France / Посольство России во Франции	FR		951	58816	61.85	-0.17
Russian Embassy in Greece	GR		813	42682	52.50	-0.04
Velvyslanectvo Ruska na Slovensku / Посольство России в Словакии	SK		4616	41439	8.98	-1.25
Russische Botschaft in Deutschland / Посольство России в Германии	DE		1073	41402	38.59	-0.23
Russian Mission to UN in Geneva	CH		385	20125	52.27	-0.26
Russian Embassy in London	GB		1483	18773	12.66	-0.18
Ambasada Rusiei in România - Посольство России в Румынии	RO		2925	17370	5.94	-0.90
Посольство России в Испании	ES		243	10189	41.93	1.82
Посольство России в Северной Македонии/Амбасала на Русија во Сев.Македонија	MK		1828	8243	4.51	-0.94
Russische Botschaft Wien / Посольство России в Австрии	AT		597	5474	9.17	-0.29
Embaixada da Rússia no Brasil	BR		242	4834	19.98	-0.14
Embajada de Rusia en el Perú	PE		566	4576	8.08	-0.45
Total			33444	614520	18.37	-2.45

Source: IRI Beacon Project RU & CN Embassy Monitor



Anti-NATO



- The topic of NATO was the most discussed amongst the analysed topics (with 207,996 articles/posts) and had the biggest share of potentially hostile messages (47%). The most significant spike during the monitored period occurred in November 2022. It was related to the missile fired by the Ukrainian anti-air defence system that fell on Polish territory and killed two civilians. President Radev utilized the incident to defend his decision not to support Ukraine’s request for NATO membership, suggesting that his approval would have meant Bulgaria’s active involvement in the war. This occasion also allowed Russophiles and far-right sympathisers to strengthen their criticism against the Alliance, painting it as a weak, fractured organization that would be unable to defend its members if needed.
- The most prominent actors spreading hostile messaging about NATO included Revival party leader Kostadin Kostadinov, who claimed that any support for Ukraine would drag Bulgaria into the war, and journalist Martin Karbovski, who frequently spread false Russian accusations against the Alliance. The overtly pro-Russian website Pogled.info was among the chief spreaders of Russian propaganda masked as “alternative viewpoints”.

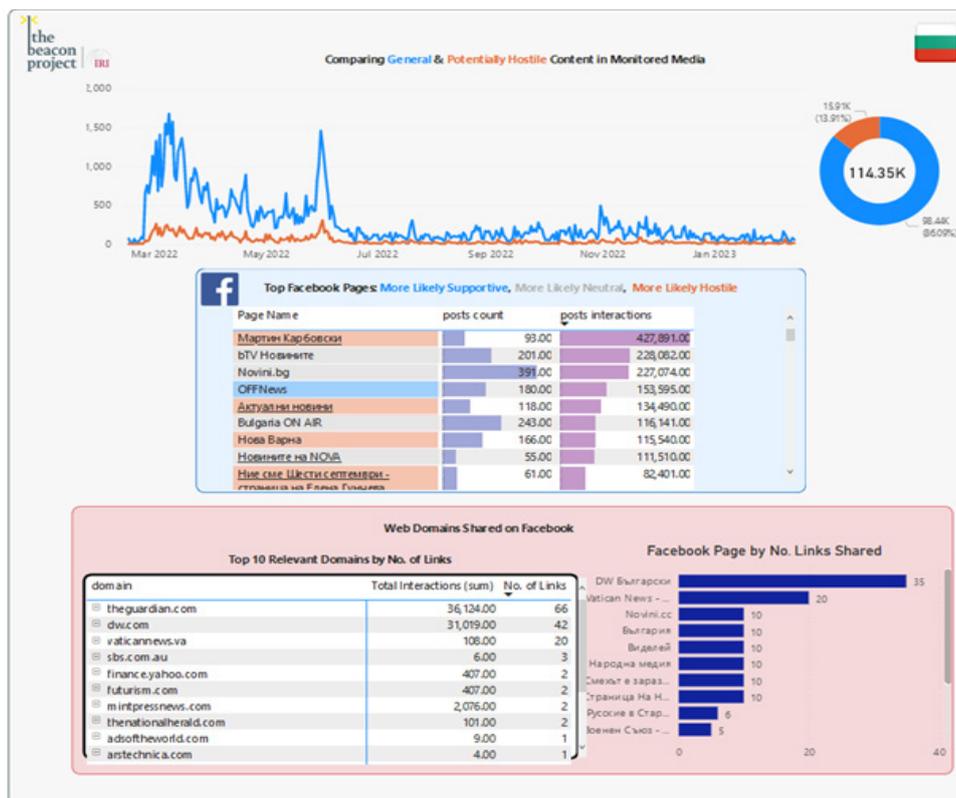


- Hostile narratives about NATO were also spread directly by Russian outlets. Scraping hypertext links from posts on Facebook related to the NATO topic found that 6/10 of the most linked to web domains were Russian website that are known for spreading Russian propaganda. These included the site of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru), Kremlin.ru, as well as State propaganda outlets RIA.ru and Tass.ru. Cross checking all relevant links on the list of “Top 10 Relevant Domains by No. Of links” found that in addition to the 6 Russian websites, one Bulgarian site (dilyana.bg) that our researchers classifies as a spreader of disinformation was also found in the top 10 most shared domains indicating the potential level of propaganda found in the online discussion about NATO. Bulgarian businessman Veni Markovski, was found to have shared 24 links with 20 of these coming from Russian outlets known for spreading disinformation. His aim was to create an archive of misleading and false statements from Russian outlets.

Assessed Audience: The general public

Risk Assessment: High

Anti-Refugee



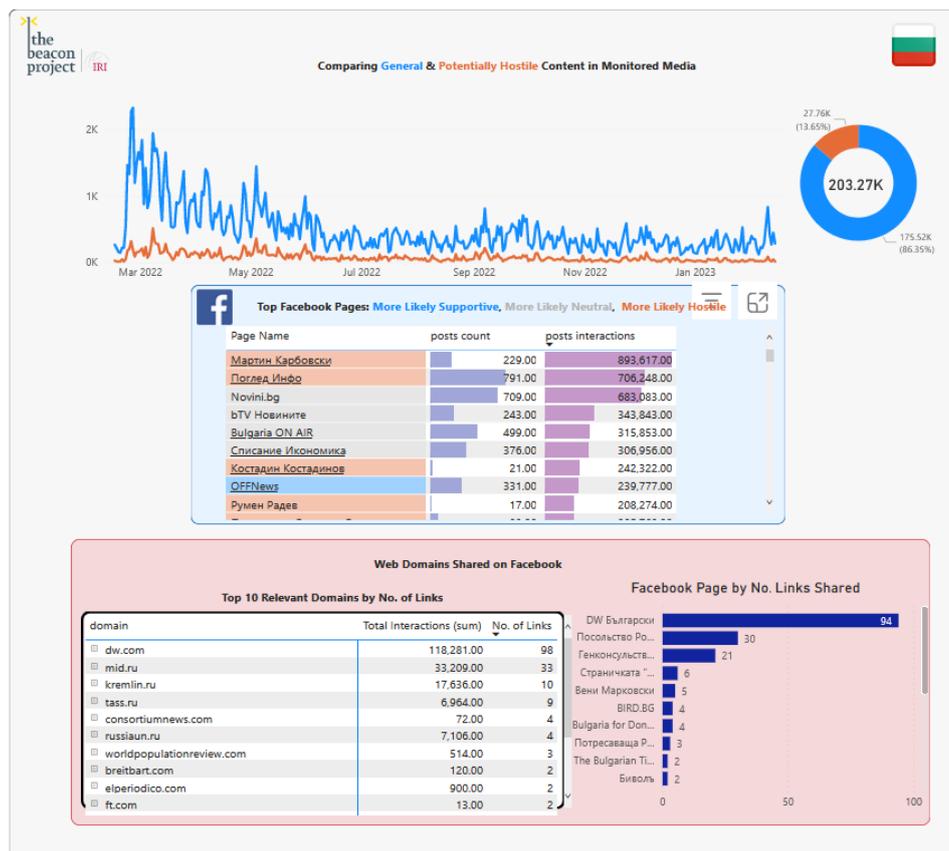
- Most of the content relating to Ukrainian refugees (total of 114,350 articles/posts) was published in the first few months of the war. The initial sympathy for the incoming Ukrainian refugees gradually waned over the course of the year, even though many activists and civil society actors continued to provide much-needed support. Although a relatively low proportion, the 14% of potentially hostile content was assessed to be very impactful. The messaging stereotyped Ukrainians as ungrateful and demanding “tourists”. Natural disasters in Bulgaria, as well as the fast-increasing cost of living coincided with the government-run and EU-supported rehousing scheme for Ukrainians to exacerbate the problem. Thus, a lot of the hostile messaging depicted the situation as one where the EU and the Bulgarian government supposedly prioritized the needs of Ukrainian refugees over those of the poor, vulnerable and marginalized Bulgarians. These strong anti-refugee sentiments and the government’s messy response to the crisis led to the exodus of around two-thirds of the Ukrainians who had entered Bulgaria after the start of the war.
- In terms of the top Facebook pages, most of the actors were more likely to share hostile messaging online. The pages of the far-right Revival party, its local branches, and its leader Kostadin Kostadinov were among the most vocal spreaders of anti-refugee narratives. Fringe media such as Nova Varna and Glasove frequently depicted the fleeing Ukrainians as rich and spoiled or claimed that they were supposedly engaging in criminal activities and mistreating the locals.
- The data of hyperlinks found in Facebook posts on the topic found that the reputable UK media outlets, the Guardian, was the most linked to website on the topic. However, this data is misleading as the posts were often not benign. This research uncovered what appeared to be coordinated activity across multiple public Facebook pages and groups that shared links to the Guardian’s coverage of topics like the Azov Battalion as justification for anti-Ukrainian views. This highlights one of the tactics employed by hostile actors as they seek to launder quality media outlets or statements from Western officials as evidence in their anti-Ukrainian messaging. Often times these posts are amplified through a network of coordinated such as the one discovered in Bulgaria.

Assessed Audience: The general public

Risk Assessment: High



Anti-Sanction



- A total of 203,271 articles/posts were determined, based on keyword matching, to be related to the topic of sanctions. Nearly 14% of the content were identified as containing potentially hostile messaging, of which the primary narrative was that the Western-imposed sanctions have been ineffective. In addition to potentially undermining support for the sanctions, these narratives also fuel the growing Euroatlantic scepticism in Bulgaria as it is seen as further evidence of the failure of Western policy more generally. Bulgarians widely saw the sanctions as a key driver of inflation that set back the economic development of the country. The notion that Bulgaria should place its national interests over its EU duties, and thus oppose the growing list of sanctions, was driven by reports that portray the Russian economy as thriving despite the sanctions. Fear of a harsh winter and the potential for gas shortages across Europe intensified the already existing worries amongst the public about high prices due to the sanctions.
- Anti-sanction messaging in the online space was again championed by the pro-Russian journalist Martin Kar-

bovski and Revival's leader Kostadin Kostadinov. The former often shared alleged eyewitness accounts of Bulgarian tourists who marvelled at Russia's booming economy, while the latter repeatedly argued that Russia shouldn't be sanctioned, a sentiment further echoed by President Rumen Radev. The narrative that Western sanctions had backfired was further amplified by the website Pogled.info which is well known for its pro-Russia bias. Pofled.info's Facebook page had the third highest number of posts on the topic (791) and the second highest number of interactions (706,248) after Karbovski (893,617 interactions from 229 posts).

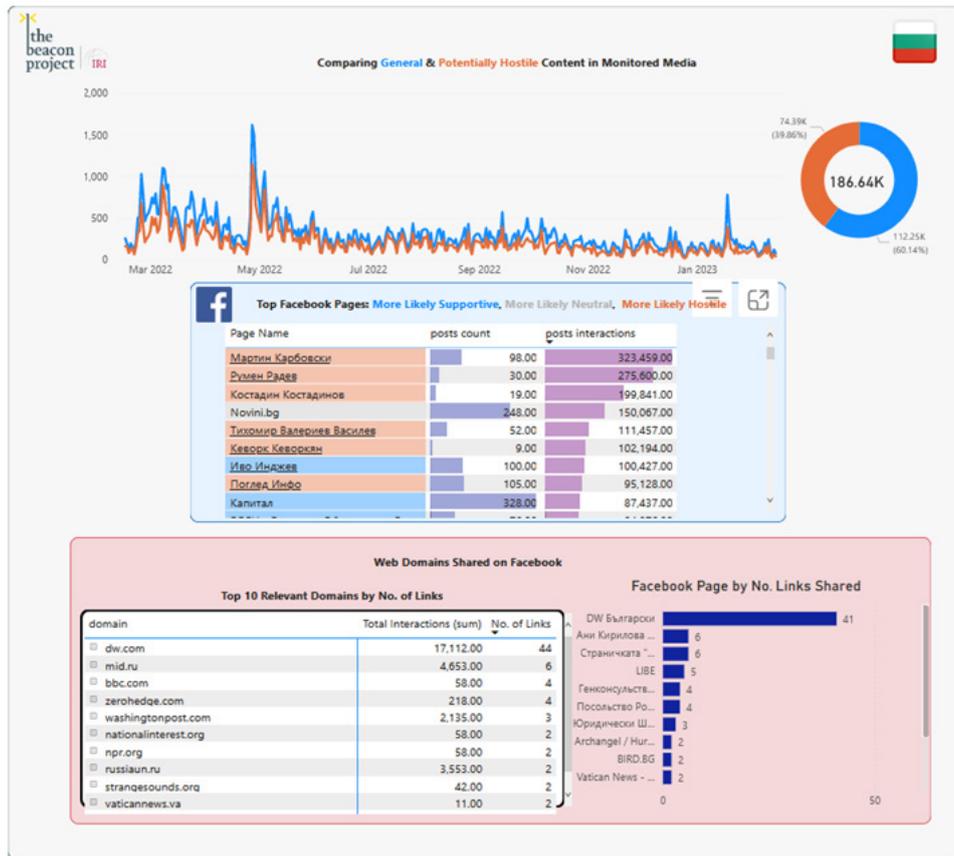
- Examining the most linked to domains found in Facebook posts related to the sanctions topic found that 4/10 of them were Russian website. As with other topics the website of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru) was amongst the most linked to relevant domains. The site was linked to 33 times and attracted 33,209 interactions on the posts it was included in, primarily coming from the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria. Other prominent Russian propaganda sites like Kremlin.ru (10 links, 33,209 interactions) and Tass.ru (9 links, 6,964 interactions) were also amongst the top five domains found in the Facebook conversations.

Assessed Audience: The general public

Risk Assessment: Medium



Energy Security



- The energy security topic (total of 186,640 pieces) was highly prevalent throughout the whole period. This was to be expected as Bulgaria is amongst the countries most dependent on Russian gas and the rising energy prices served the pro-Russian voices rather well in their opposition to the country severing its energy ties to Russia. After Gazprom discontinued its deliveries to Bulgaria in April, Petkov’s government sought alternative energy sources via a potential U.S. LNG gas delivery deal and the Bulgaria-Greece interconnector. In the fall, President Radev’s subsequent caretaker government abandoned those gas diversification efforts in favor of attempts to lead negotiations with Gazprom and renew the export of fuel processed by the local Lukoil refinery. The population upheld the view that Bulgaria should circumvent the sanctions given that some EU member states and companies have been accused of breaching them. Some gave in to conspiracy theories that the energy crisis is fabricated by the USA to render the world dependent on American resources.
- Similar to other topics pro-Russian journalists Karbovski and Kevorkian, Revival’s Kostadinov, and pro-Rus-

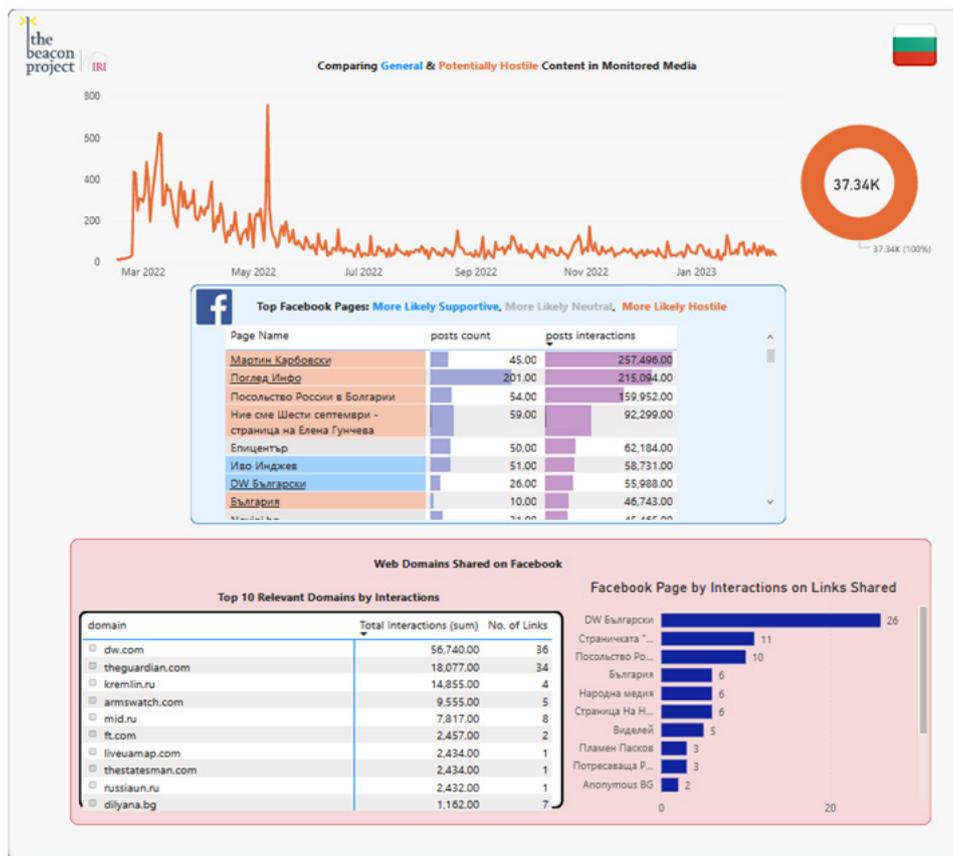


sian media Pogled.info were in the top ten most interacted with pages on the topic. One different page that appeared in the context of the energy security topic was Tihomir Vasilev, a leader of a micro party in favor of leaving the EU and NATO, who attracted the eighth most interactions (95,128) from his 105 posts on the topic. Near the bottom of the top ten pages were those sharing supportive content, such as journalist Ivo Indzhev (100,427 interactions from 100 posts) and the highly respected Capital Newspaper (87,437 interactions from 328 posts).

Assessed Audience: The general public

Risk Assessment: High

Biolabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation



- Two of most prominent Russian disinformation narratives about bio-labs in Ukraine, that President Zelensky is



a fascist combined for only 37,3350 posts making it the least prominent of the topics monitored. These known disinformation narratives were largely posted by well known pro-Russian Facebook accounts such as the previously mentioned Martin Karbovski and Pofled.info as well as the Russian Embassy in Bulgaria's official page.

- Only 6,190 articles/posts in the monitored Bulgarian media space mentioned the narrative of US bio-laboratories in Ukraine. This was primarily pushed by the Russian Embassy and pro-Russian media outlets during the first months of the war. The work of Bulgarian journalist Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, who had spread earlier biolab-related claims, was often referenced at the time. The narrative gradually lost its disruptive potential due to Moscow's inability to substantiate its allegations and the bizarre nature of some of the stories. There was only one other peak, in November 2022, when the UN rejected Russia's claims that the US had built secret labs in Ukraine.
- The "denazification" narrative was highly prevalent in the first couple of months of the war, peaking around Victory Day (May 9). A total of 31,140 pieces of content contained keywords in relation to this narrative and all were categorised as potentially hostile. Facebook pages and pro-Russian parties tried to stoke animosity towards Ukraine by claiming that its government was responsible for hate crimes against Bulgarians, including murders and arson. While the "denazification" topic is rarely present in the Bulgarian media space one year later, it has contributed to the rising resentment that both the pro-Russian and the apolitical part of Bulgarian society feels toward the West and Ukraine.
- One interesting trend, noticed across the narratives, is the use of legitimate Western media to 'justify' pro-Russian leanings and claims. This can be seen by the prominence of links to UK based media outlet the Guardian's content in conversations about the topics. In total there were 34 links to Guardian content found in the Facebook posts determined to be most likely discussing these disinformation narratives. Articles like these and others were often used out of context, or with incorrect translations in an attempt to justify pro-Russian claims from Western outlets.

***Assessed Audience:** far-right, pro-Russian audiences but has the potential to reach the general public*

***Risk Assessment:** Low*



Slovakia



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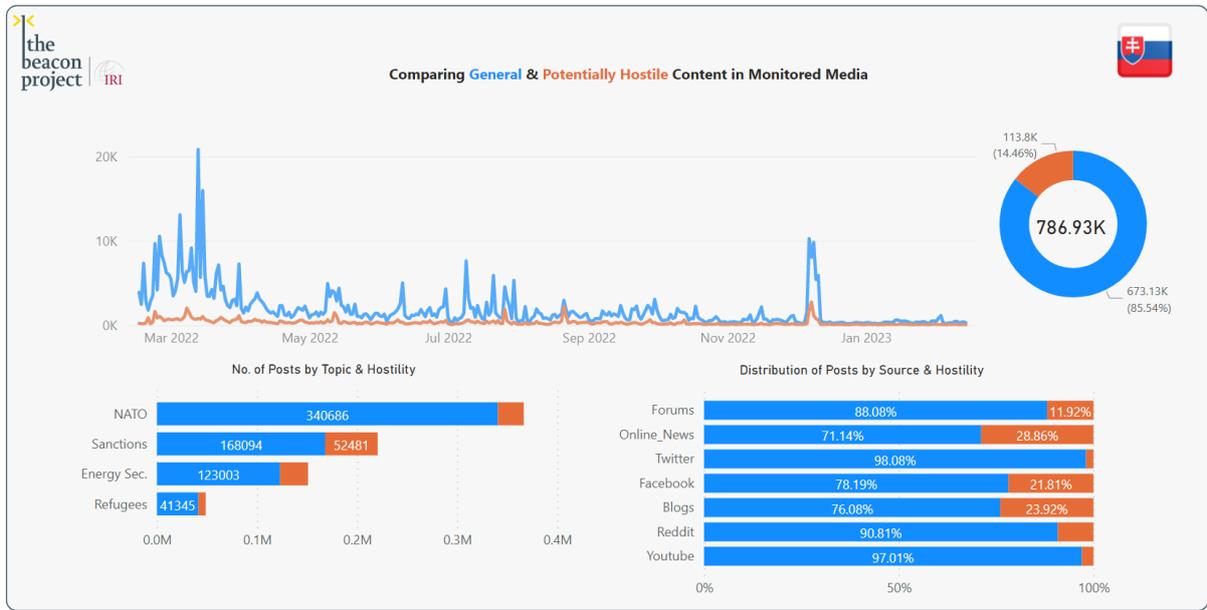
Top Line Summary

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.

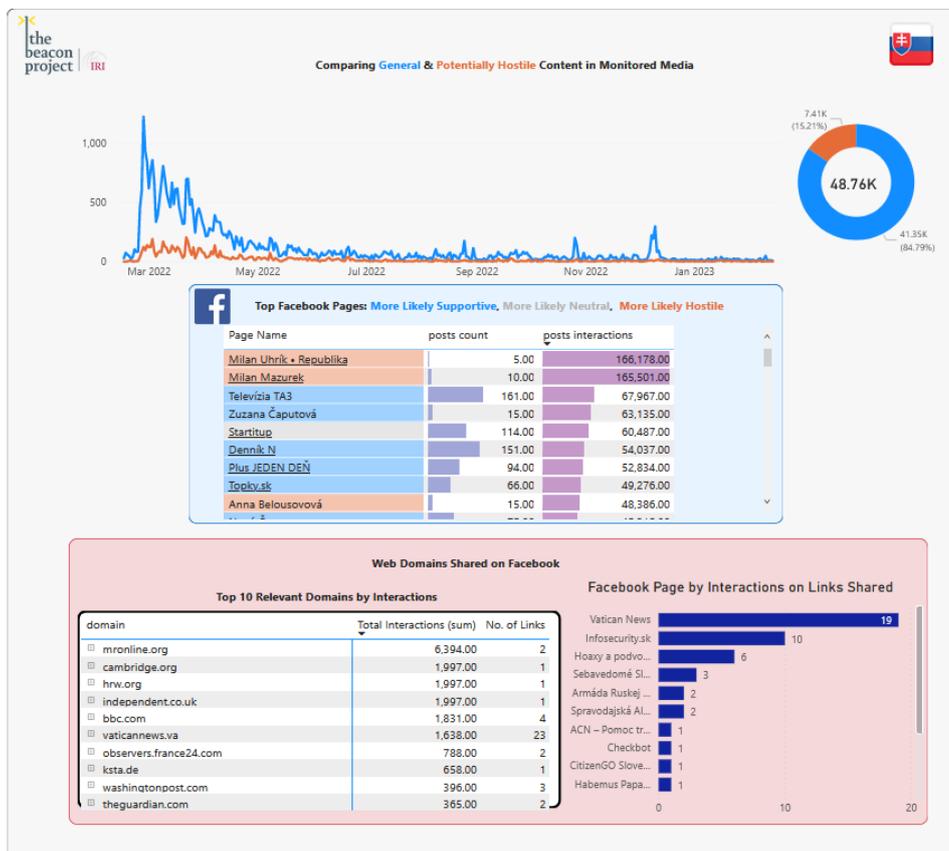
Despite NATO and military support more generally being the topic that received the most overall attention with 366,597 articles/posts, it had the lowest proportion of potentially hostile mentions at only 7%. The topic with the highest percentage of potentially hostile messages was the topic of sanctions 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.

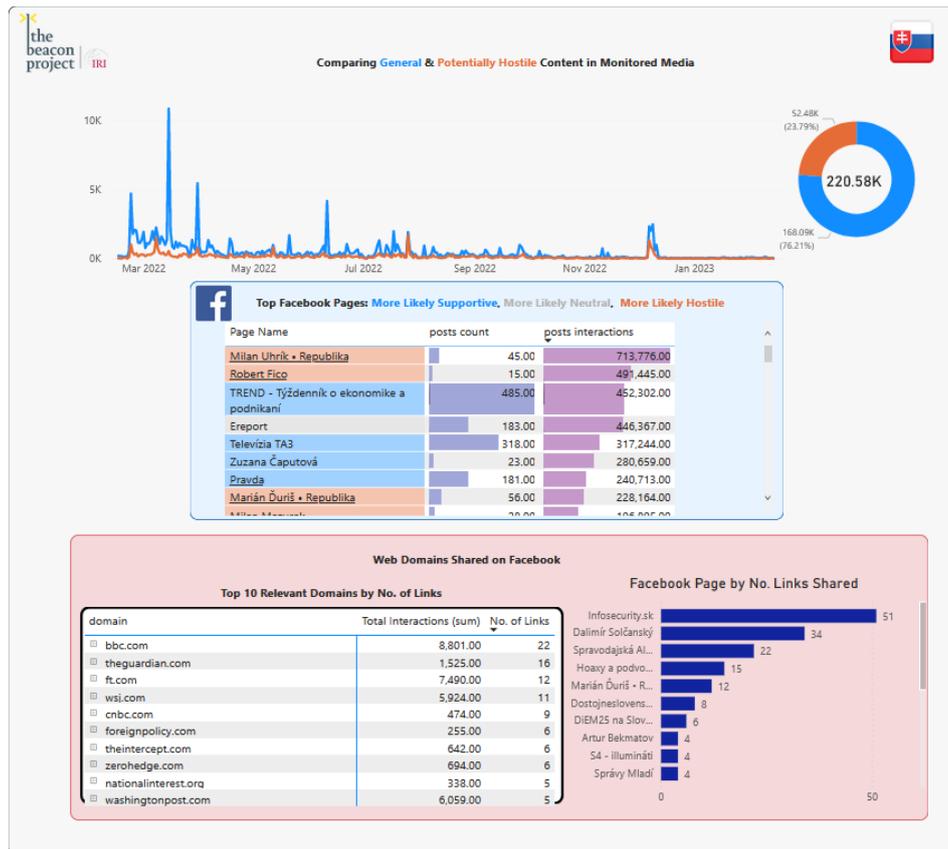
- Analysis of the most prominent Facebook pages mentioning the discussion found that the main interacted with pages belong to members of the far-right Republic party, Milan Uhrík and Milan Mazurek, who routinely post content hostile to the support of Ukraine. Each page received over 160,000 interactions 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.

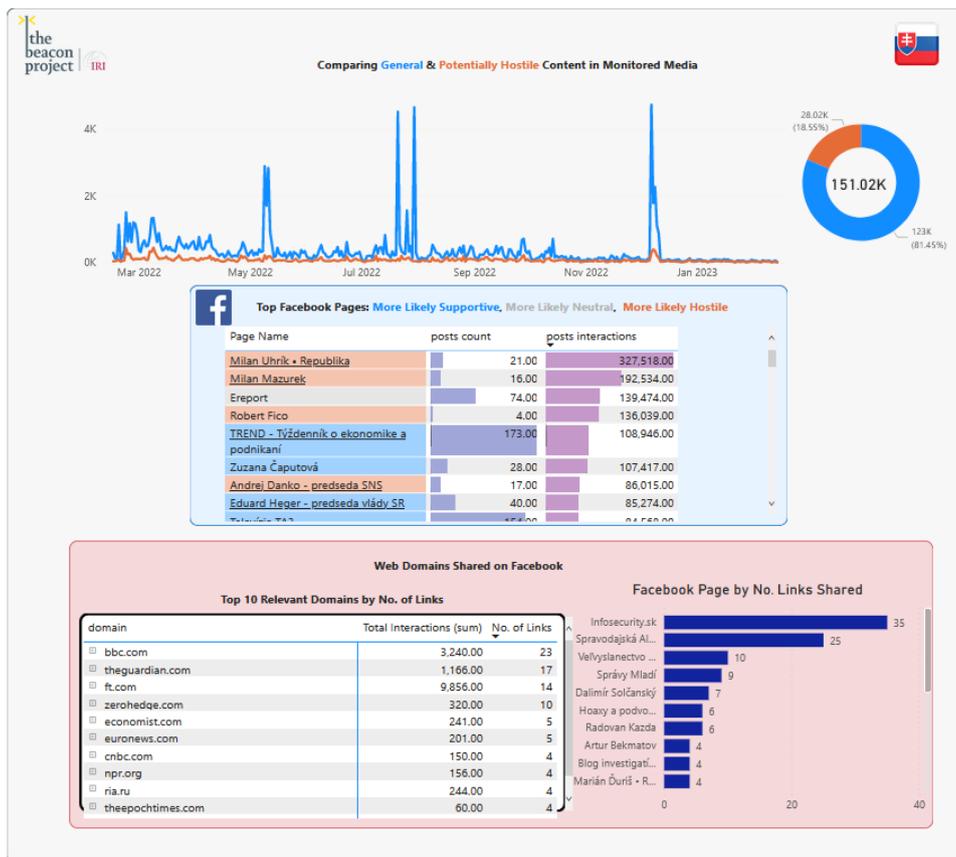


- Messaging that questions the effectiveness of the sanctions were also brought in via foreign far-right website Zero Hedge and the U.S. conservative outlet the National Interest, although they did not attract many interactions. The Zero Hedge article was translated into the Slovak and posted by the 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.

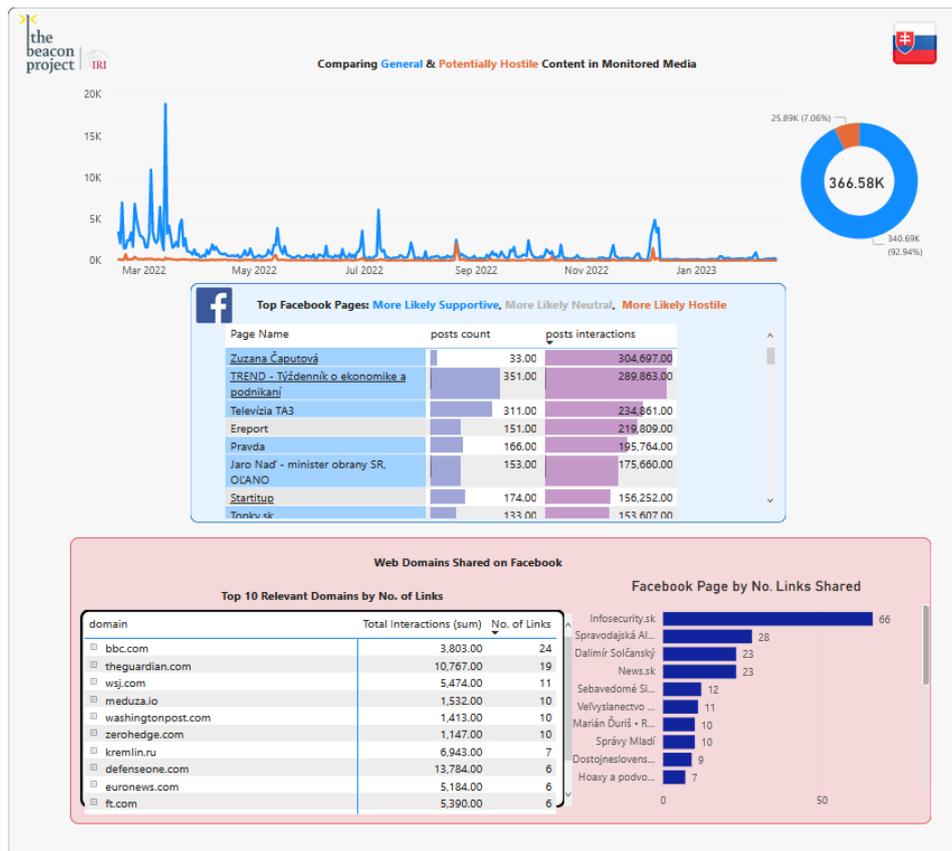
- The most popular posts consisted of hostile content posted by member of the Republic party, especially its leader Milan Uhrík, but SMER-SD's Róbert Fico also appears among top sources. On the other hand, president Čaputová and the Prime Minister Eduard Heger also caught attention with their communication 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



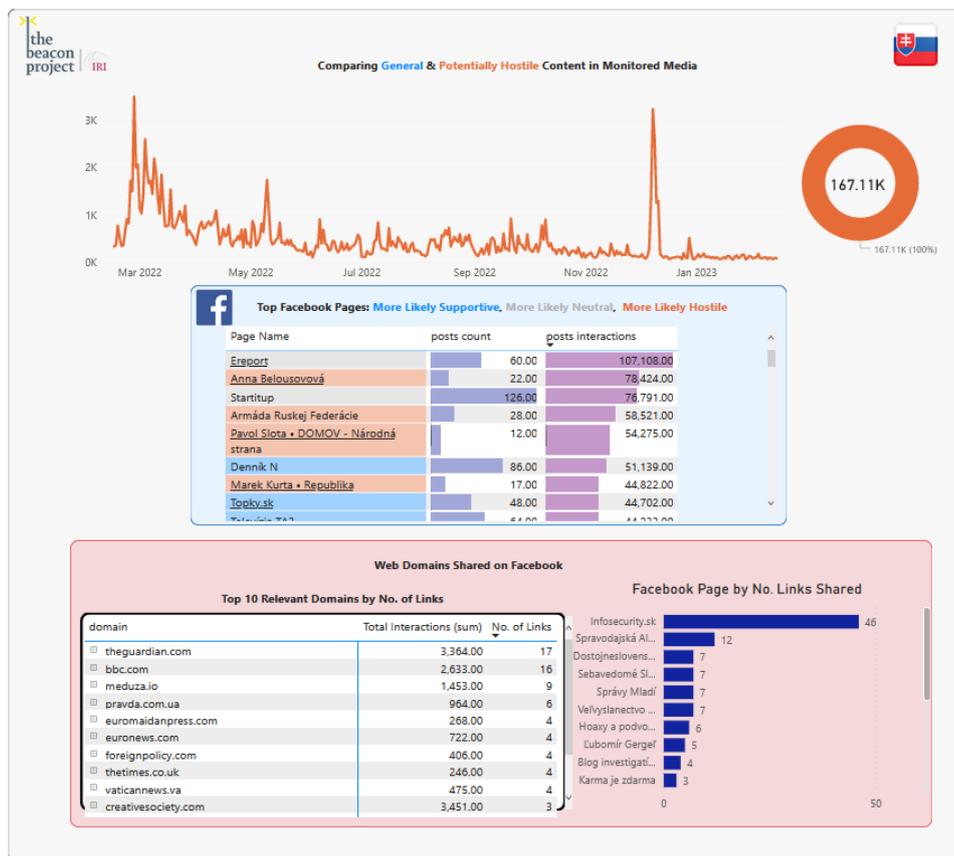
does not actually care about Ukrainians. They claim that Ukraine is allegedly just a pawn for NATO's aggressive ambitions.

- 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



Romania



Author: Madalina Voinea - Expert Forum

Top Line Summary

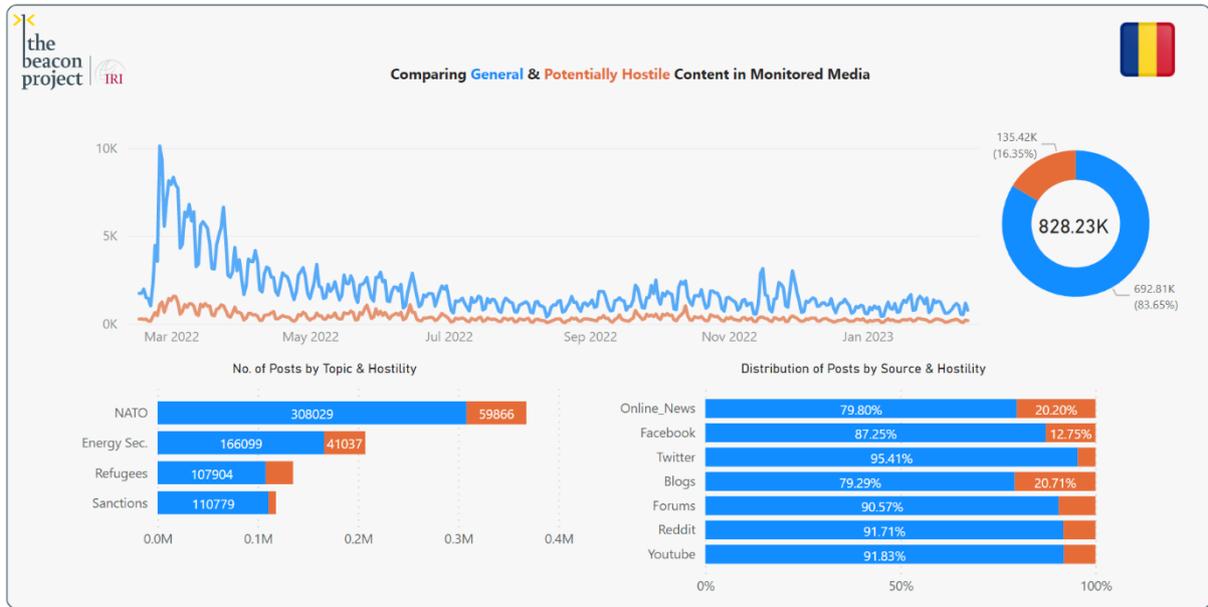
With public support for the European Union's support for Ukraine around 60%, Romania remains in the bottom quarter of EU Member States according to [Eurobarometer](#) of winter 2022. On the other hand, there is a general consensus that Kremlin's propaganda was less effective than initially feared as support for Ukraine was accepted as a given by the main political parties and never under debate by the governing coalition. However, the ruling grand coalition government led by former army general, Prime Minister Nicolae Ciucă, is not without criticism as it has largely failed to effectively communicate its support of Ukraine to the general public. Romania supplies weapons to Ukraine, but its political leaders took little pride in this decision publicly, nor promoted actively the support offered throughout the last year.

Meanwhile opposition to the war in Ukraine has been largely confined to more extremist political actors, such as the far-right nationalist AUR party (currently receiving about 15% popular support according to [Politico's Poll-of-Polls](#)). However, the trajectory of the country has been seen to be shifting toward the East as discontent surrounding current socio-economic issues has eroded trust in Western institutions. This shift can be seen in the 2022 edition of [Globsec Trends](#), with only 27% of Romanians believing their country should be part of the 'West' and 24% believing it should be part of the 'East', accounting for a shift of -16% and +18% shift compared to 2021 figures.

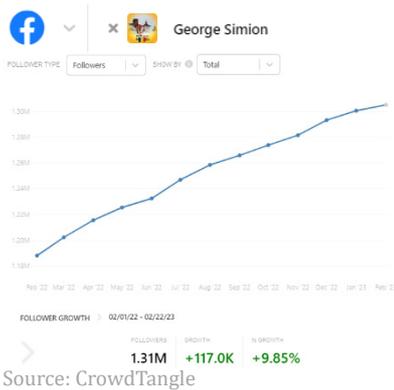
This roughly corresponds to media monitoring data collected over the last year. According to keyword matching for select key topics related to the war in Ukraine, approximately 18% of the content published on websites and Facebook contain references to words that have a higher potential to erode support for Ukraine.



Media Overview



Through keyword matching of monitored media in Romania the International Republican Institute collected 828,227 pieces of online content from the monitored media. Keywords that indicate a higher probability of content containing messaging hostile to support for Ukraine were found in 16.4% (135,416 posts/articles). Beyond the initial peak of coverage during the first two months of the war, there were slight increases in potentially hostile messaging occurred in May-June (approx. 21%) and again in September-October (approx. 20%), but these levels have reverted back to annual average levels by the end of 2022. These increases were largely driven by more messaging around the topics of energy and NATO, respectively.

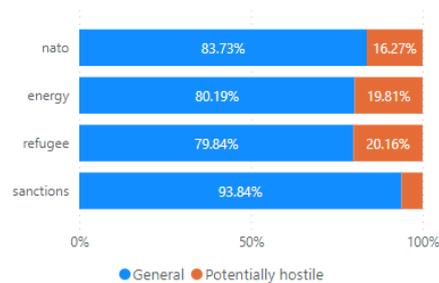


Based on review of the most prominent Facebook pages posting about the monitored topics the vast majority were considered to be more pro-west leaning (74.9%) and more likely to be posting in support of Ukraine (70.9%). Approximately 19.2% of the pages were assessed to be more likely to contain messaging that may undermine support for Ukraine. These were predominately shared by generally anti-Western or nationalist sources that accounted for 12.3%



and 11.4% of analyzed Facebook posts respectively. These included current and former members of the AUR party and well known anti-Western influencers such as Gheorghe Piperea and Cozmin Gușă. While they remain on the fringes of mainstream politics in Romania their messaging often resonates with online audiences which has seen many of their posts being some of the most interacted with across all the topics. Additionally, many of these pages have seen a substantial increase in followers on Facebook since the beginning of the war. For example, leader of the AUR party, George Simion has increased his audience by 9.9% on Facebook in the last 12 months and now has 1.3 million followers. Despite only having 12 posts that match the topical keyword filters those posts were some of the best performing ranking him 10th based on the average interactions per post out of 513 Facebook pages monitored in Romania.

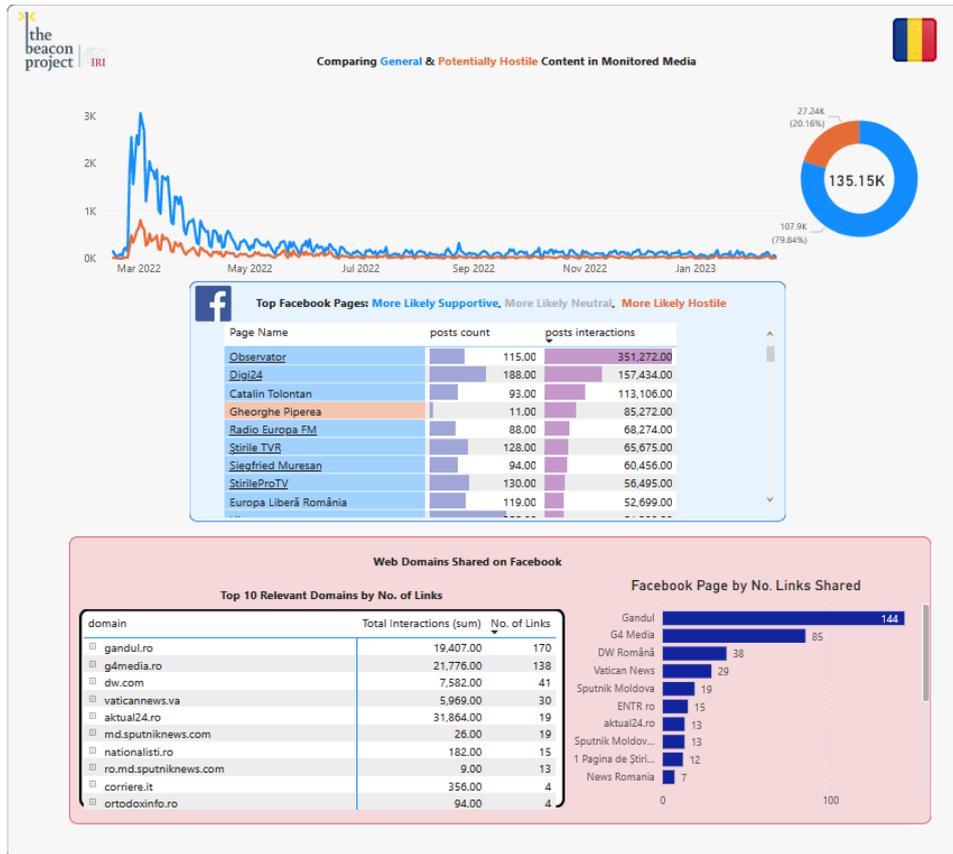
Distribution of posts by topic and hostility



Although their posts are largely hostile toward support for Ukraine the overall monitored media environment reflected the perspective of the major political parties and the general population in that they were neutral or even supportive of Ukraine. The topic that did appear to have the most resonance for hostile messaging was the refugee topic. Keyword matching indicated that 20.2% of the online mentions on the topic had an increased potential to contain messaging hostile toward support for Ukraine. Despite having the most references overall in monitored Romanian media with 367,895 posts/articles and being a frequent target of pro-Russian agitators, the proportion of content reference NATO that had hostile indicators was 16.3%. The only topic to receive less hostile references were sanctions at 6.2%. This is one indicator of the general acceptance of EU and NATO support for Ukraine within the majority of the media space and may counteract some signs of growing discontent amongst the general public. However, as the war continues it is likely the proportion of hostile messaging will also increase.



Anti-Refugee



- Despite containing the largest proportion of potentially hostile content (20.2%), of the topics monitored, the figures could have been much higher as the influx of refugees has little precedence in Romania. There was also a noticeable wave of support and empathy towards the refugees in the media and reflected broadly in society as state institutions, NGOs, and citizens largely united in their support for them. Although initial fears that disinformation about refugees contributing to antisocial behavior were largely unrealized, narratives focusing on perceptions of beneficial treatment to Ukrainians over the local citizens have been significant and have been shown to resonate online.
- The most prominent Facebook pages discussing the topic reflect the assessment of the general public’s attitude with 9 out of the top 10 pages by post interactions being pages that were assessed to be more likely supportive of Ukraine. The most prominent source that had an increased likelihood to promote hostile content received the 4th most interactions (85,272) from only 11 posts was the commercial law professor and known anti-Western, nationalist theorist, [Gheorghe Piperea](#). Piperea’s posts often resonate on Facebook with very high interaction rates. One post where he claims that the war was staged and refugees are merely tools in a plan to overburden Europe, received over 12,000 interactions as well as getting picked up and spread by [other sources](#).
- Checking the links that were shared on Facebook with domains that were assessed to have an increased

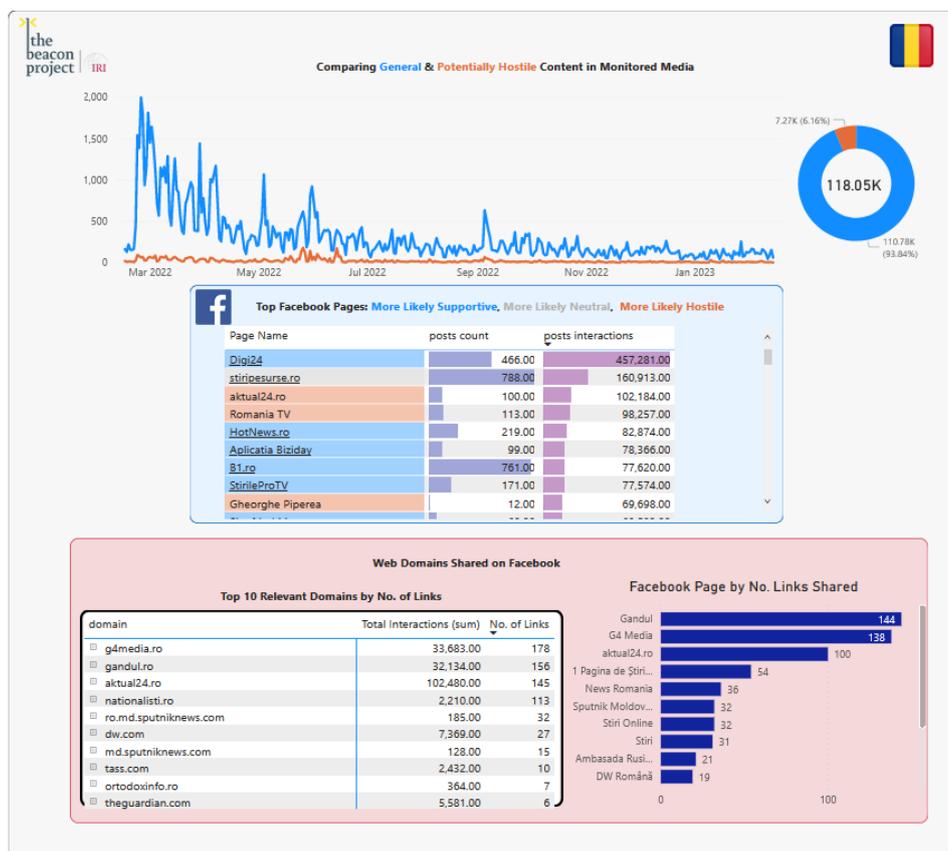


- likelihood of containing hostile content identified 2 from the top 10 linked to domains. These were pseudo-health and general interest site, eviemagazine.com, and sensationalist disinformation outlet nationalisti.ro. However, these sites have limited reach and are not likely to have significant influence on the general public.

Assessed Audience: *Mainly far-right and nationalist supporters which are a small, but not insignificant proportion of the population.*

Current Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Anti-Sanctions



- Anti-sanction narratives have largely failed to resonate with the general population in Romania. Keyword matching identified more than 118,000 pieces of content in the monitored media, of which 6.2% (7,269) were likely to have an increased potential to be hostile toward the sanctions. The discussion around sanctions was mostly forced by nationalist groups and influencers but failed to gain attention or traction. Although specific moments like the proposal and adoption of the 6th EU sanction package in May and June saw the proportion of hostile mentions more than double to approx. 13% in the monitored media, the levels returned to normal by mid-June.

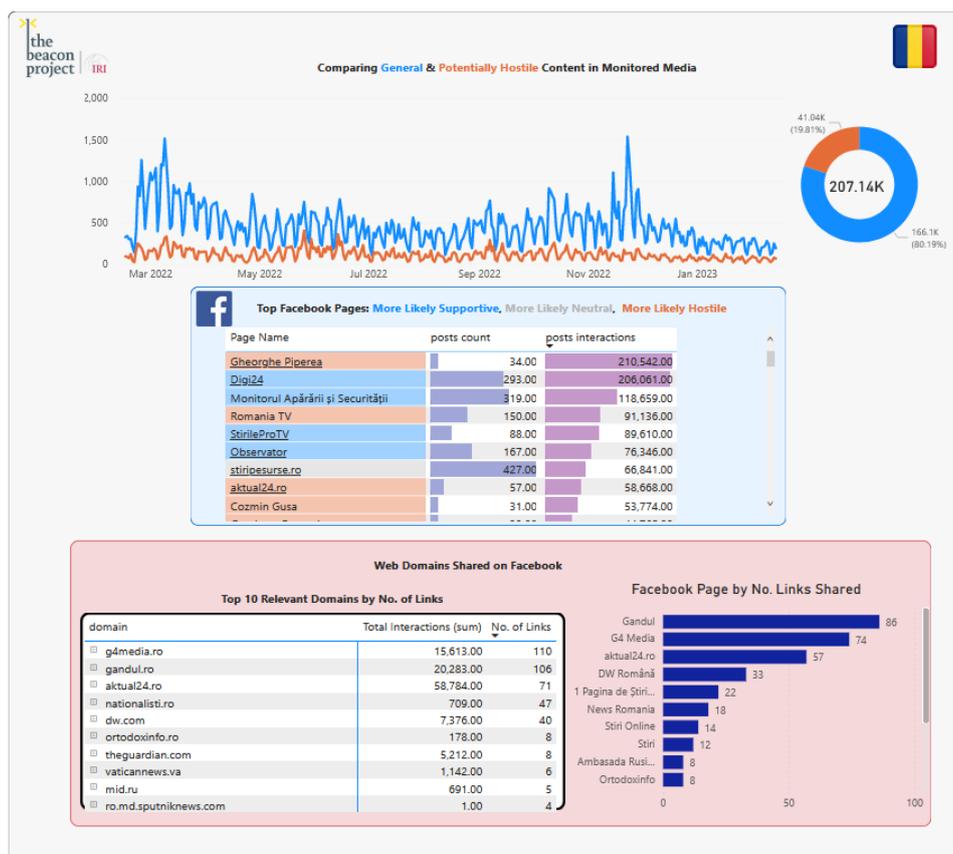


- 3 out of 10 Facebook pages with the most interactions on the topic were assessed to have an increased likelihood to present content hostile toward support for Ukraine. In addition to Pages ‘aktual24.ro’ and ‘Romania TV’, controversial influencer Gheorghe Piperea received the 9th most interactions based on only 12 posts identified by keyword matching.
- According to data showing the ten most linked to relevant sources, three were identified as having an increase potential to contain hostile messaging. These sites included nationalisti.ro (113 links), and the Moldovan based version of Sputniknews (47 links), however, they received relatively low numbers of interactions on Facebook. The two Facebook pages that shared the most relevant links were the Russian Embassy in Romania and ‘Reactiunea’.

Assessed Audience: Ultra-nationalists and controversial online influencers who do not have broad appeal.

Risk Assessment: Low

Energy Security



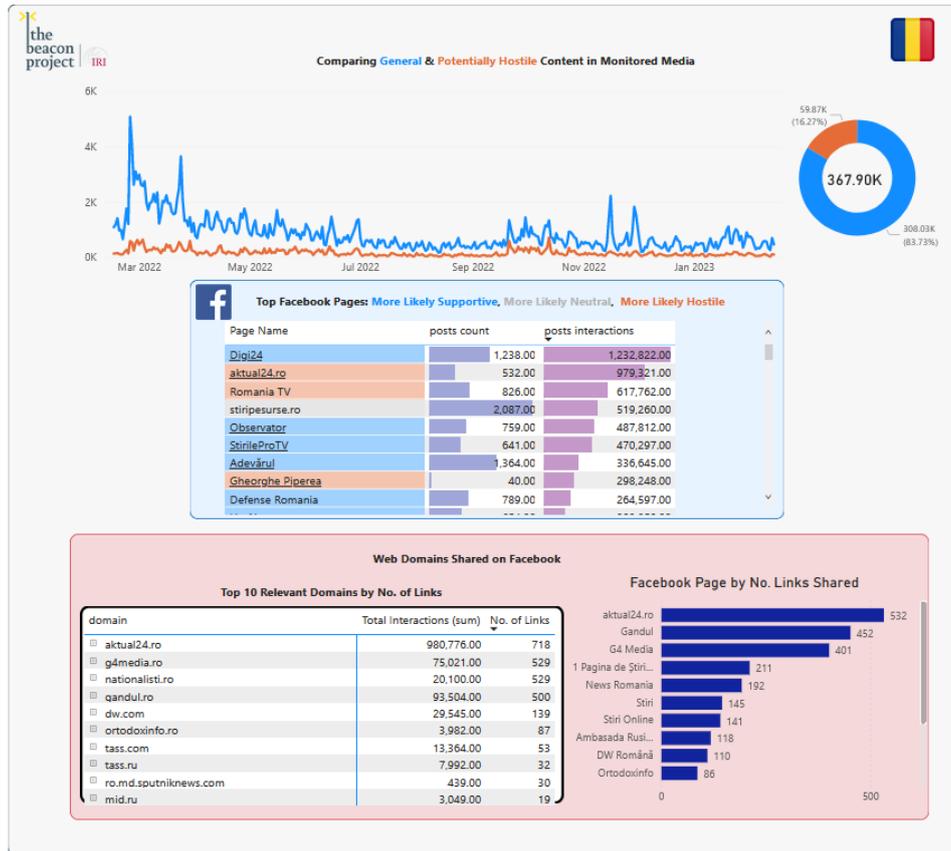
- 828,227 articles/posts were recorded as referencing the topic of energy security, making it the second most popular topic after NATO in the monitored Romanian media space. 19.8% of the content was assessed to have an increase probability of containing potentially hostile messaging tying it with the refugees topic (20.2%) with the highest proportion of hostile content.
- Of the most prominent Facebook pages that were found to reference the topic 5/10 were assessed to have an increased likelihood of posting hostile content. Controversial influencer, Gheorghe Piperea, had the highest interaction rate by a wide margin receiving 210,542 interactions from only 34 posts, while the next highest number of interactions went to the page of media outlet Digi24 which is more likely to be supportive of Ukraine with a similar number of interactions (106,061), but from 293 posts. Other potentially hostile sources in the top ten, like [Romania TV \(Rtv\)](#) spread sensationalistic claims like “Romania will enter bankruptcy”, the energy crisis is unbearable, and such apocalyptic scenarios.
- Nationalisti.ro with an average of 70 000 visits in December and January is one of the top links along with Ortodox.info with an average of 150 000 monthly visits. These websites have a clear anti-Western direction and their frequency in sharing energy narratives that erode support for Ukraine is predictable, yet worrying.

Assessed Audience: General Population

Risk Assessment: Medium



Anti-NATO



- References to NATO accounted for the highest number of articles/posts (367,895) during the 12 months period. With 16.3% of the content referencing NATO and military support more generally being classified as potentially hostile this was less than refugees (20.2%) and energy security (19.8%) in Romania. However, it was the 3rd highest proportion of potentially hostile content for NATO across all countries monitored, after Bulgaria (46.3%) and Germany (19.3%). The primary hostile narratives suggested that military assistance are escalatory actions. This narrative still largely remains amongst ultra-nationalist and so-called pro-peace groups and is assessed to have a low impact on the general public perceptions, especially as the government continues to support military assistance to Ukraine. Further escalation by Russia, particularly with neighboring Moldova could, however, increase the potential for this argument to be discussed in more mainstream circles.
- 6/10 of the Facebook pages with the most interactions referencing the topic were assessed to be more likely supportive of the government’s policy with the Digi24 media outlet receiving 1,232,822 interactions on their 1,238 posts on the topic. Looking at pages more likely to be hostile to NATO or military aide for Ukraine, show similarities to other topics with the same three pages often appearing. However, not present in this data due to



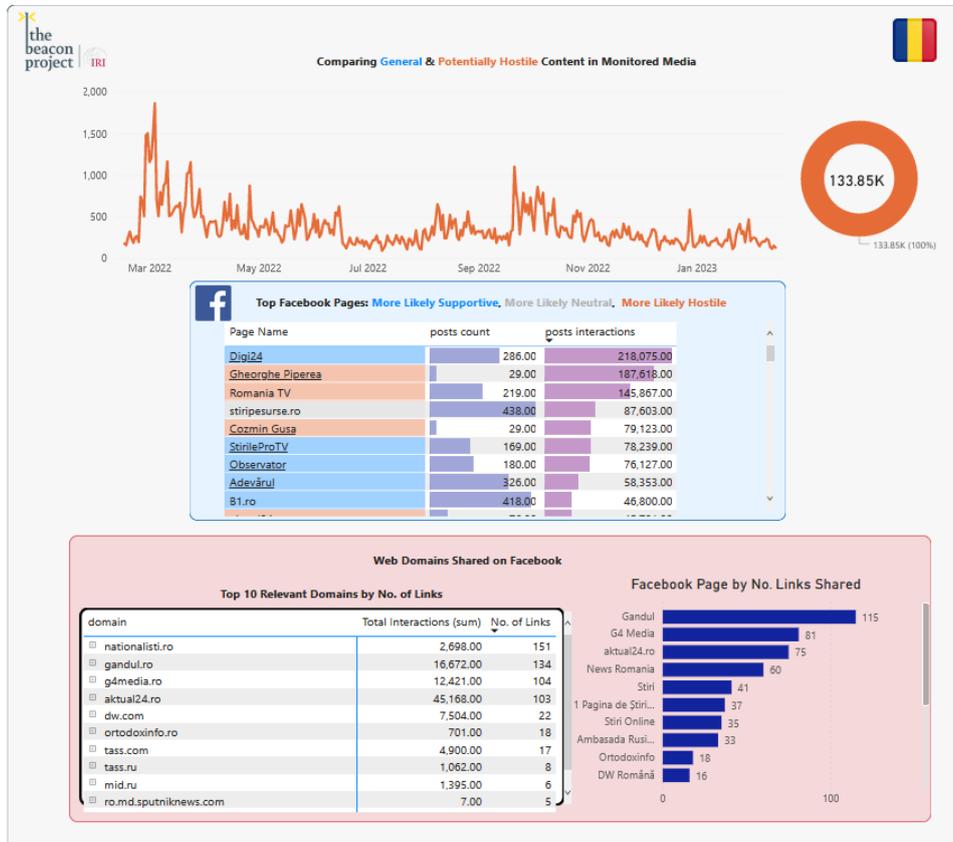
her Facebook page being set up as private was a comment by MP Ana Maria Gavrilă, who was formerly a member of the far-right AUR Party. A speech she gave in Parliament promoting a so-called pro-peace position that ultimately undermines support for Ukraine to win the war had over 1.2 million views and over 42.000 shares on Facebook on March 3.

- The list of the most linked to web domains in the Facebook discussions referencing NATO show some clear signs of Russian propaganda being used as Russian media Tass and Sputniknews as well as the official site of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (mid.ru) were found in the top ten most shared links. However, these links were mainly shared by the Russian Embassy in Romania, so their influence on the general public's debate is questionable.

Assessed Audience: Nationalist, Far-right Groups

Risk Assessment: Medium

Biolabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation



- The well-known Kremlin disinformation narratives claiming Ukraine hosts biological weapons labs, that the government in Kyiv is run by fascists, and that the war will escalate into a nuclear conflict were the three least mentioned topics in this study. The threat of nuclear war was the most by far the most popular of these three disinformation narratives with 73,879 articles/posts and had multiple spikes during the year. However, the impact of these disinformation narratives on the general public is likely limited by the fact they largely remain in fringe websites.
- The Facebook pages that are most active in the debate are typical of the other narratives and include pages that are known to have a higher probability of sharing hostile content, such as controversial influencer Gheorghe Piperea who received the highest number of interactions referencing the biolab topic with 112,135 interactions from 17 posts. The so-called denazification narrative was referenced the most times by aggregator page Faptul Divers (Diverse Facts) followed by the Russian Embassy in Romania's official page. These pages, however, have limited influence on the general public with Gheorghe Piperea being the most influential.
- A similar picture can be seen by examining the most shared links related to these disinformation topics. Beyond the typical large foreign media outlets which are universally found in the top links on Facebook, fringe sites like RadioGoldFm.ro and Informatielibera.ro.

Assessed Audience: Conspiracy theory believers, Far-right supporters

Risk Assessment: Low



Czech Republic



Authors: Kristína Šefčíková – Prague Security Studies Institute

Top Line Summary

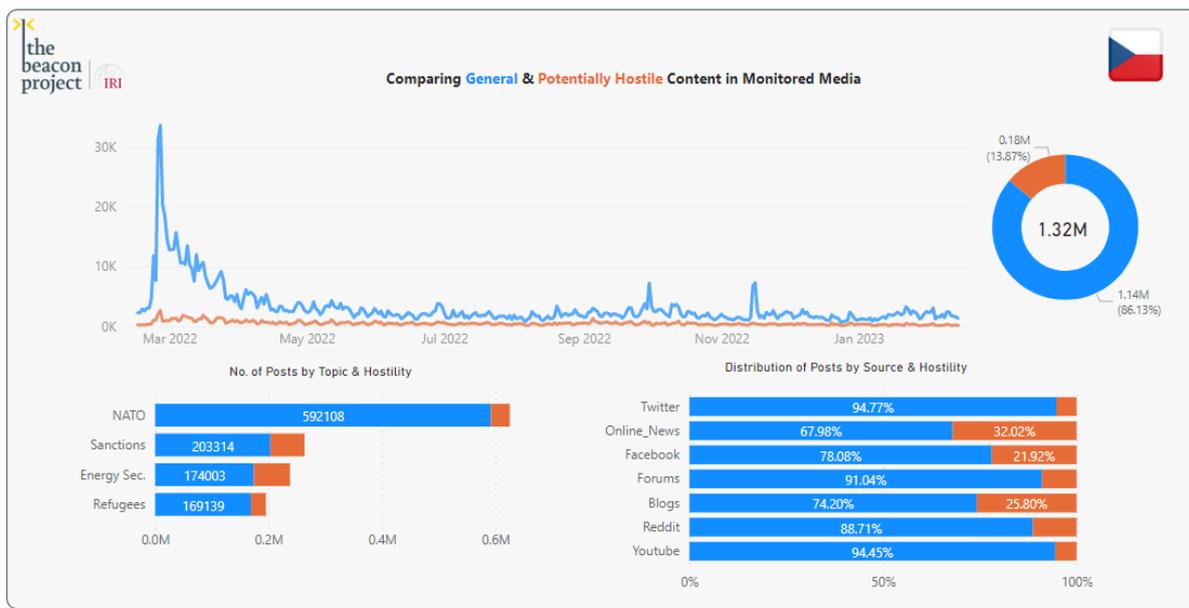
While the public remains largely supportive of Ukraine, it is possible to see signs of war fatigue especially related to the worsening economic situation and uncertain future prospects. The percentage of Czech citizens fully supporting the European Union's (EU) measures, such as sanctions and provision of financial and military support to Ukraine [decreased](#) from 50% in the summer of 2022 to 37% in the [autumn](#) of the same year, but still remains above the EU average. Since the beginning of the war, ruling parties expressed strong support for Ukraine, including a visit to Kyiv by Prime Minister Petr Fiala in March 2022. During the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of the year politicians and diplomats were able to maintain the support towards Ukraine among EU member states. The support for Ukraine shown by the Czech government is not likely to change in 2023. This assessment was further supported by the overwhelming victory of the former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee and staunch supporter of Ukraine Petr Pavel, over former Prime Minister and critic of the government's support for Ukraine, Andrej Babiš.

Pavel's victory, however, did not mean all narratives hostile to support for Ukraine failed to resonate. The Babiš campaign spread disinformation about the risk of the Czech Republic's direct involvement in the war if Pavel was elected, which failed to win Babiš the election but does appear to resonate with the Czech population. Fears of escalation are one of the drivers of public opinion which shows that [58% of Czechs](#) are against further increasing military aid to Ukraine. This argument and other fearmongering narratives will likely continue to be used by far-right parties – namely the SPD party led by Tomio Okamura – and pro-Kremlin activists in an attempt to erode support for Ukraine and gain a perceived political advantage. However, despite their effective use of social media messaging resulting in posts going viral on Facebook, their real social impact will likely remain limited.

These developments roughly correspond to media monitoring data collected over the last year. As seen on the graph below, the influx of refugees in May and increase of energy prices at the start of the winter were likely the cause of temporary increases in the number of potentially hostile messages tracked in the online space. Nevertheless, despite efforts of anti-systemic political actors like SPD, Jindřich Rajchl in the lead of the conservative PRO party or Kateřina Konečná, MEP and the leader of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), whose posts stirred Facebook discussion about Ukraine, spikes of hostile messaging turned to have only short life. However as the war continues it is expected war fatigue will continue to grow as shown by [polling](#) which indicated a 25% decrease, to 60%, in the population's interest in the situation in Ukraine when compared to spring 2022. This trend is visible as the decrease of general messaging about Ukraine has ceded more space to potentially hostile messaging which has increased from 11.6% in the first three months of the war to 13.9% in the most recent three months (see the graph below).



Media Overview



Of the four primary topics analyzed, the topic of NATO received by far the most coverage, accounting for 47% of all content (625,303 articles/posts) but the lowest proportion of potentially hostile content at only 5.3% when compared to general references to the topic. The energy security topic had the highest levels of potentially hostile content with 26.9% of the topic was assessed to have an increased probability of containing hostile messaging based on keyword matching. In general, more than 1,321,900 articles/posts were collected in the monitored Czech media space using keywords related to each topic with 13.9% of this content being identified as potentially hostile.

One of the primary hostile narratives observed in the Czech Republic during the last 12 months attempted to exacerbate the fear of the Czech Republic becoming directly involved in the war. Topics such as the potential for a mobilization of Czech citizens or the conflict requiring Czech involvement through a potential NATO action featured prominently in the hostile messaging campaigns. Additionally, more general anti-Western narratives also featured equally prominently amongst sources deemed to be generally hostile. Chief among these narratives were those targeting raising prices and accessibility of state services in a time of economic struggle. Exploitation of concerns regarding the above mentioned issues was present in all topic sections below. Undermining the governmental position was one of the most common intentions of the hostile narratives reviewed.

While [basic help](#) for refugees largely retained its support, any actions seen to potentially compromise the standards of living of Czech citizens elicited negative reactions. This narrative was promoted by the far-right in particular through messaging that no more Ukrainian refugees should be accepted while Czechs are “struggling to meet basic needs”. This messaging intensified especially among far-right sources in response to the announcement of [trainings](#) for Ukrainian soldiers in the Czech military training area in Libavá. Both [far-right](#) and [far-left](#) sources also exploited the pressure



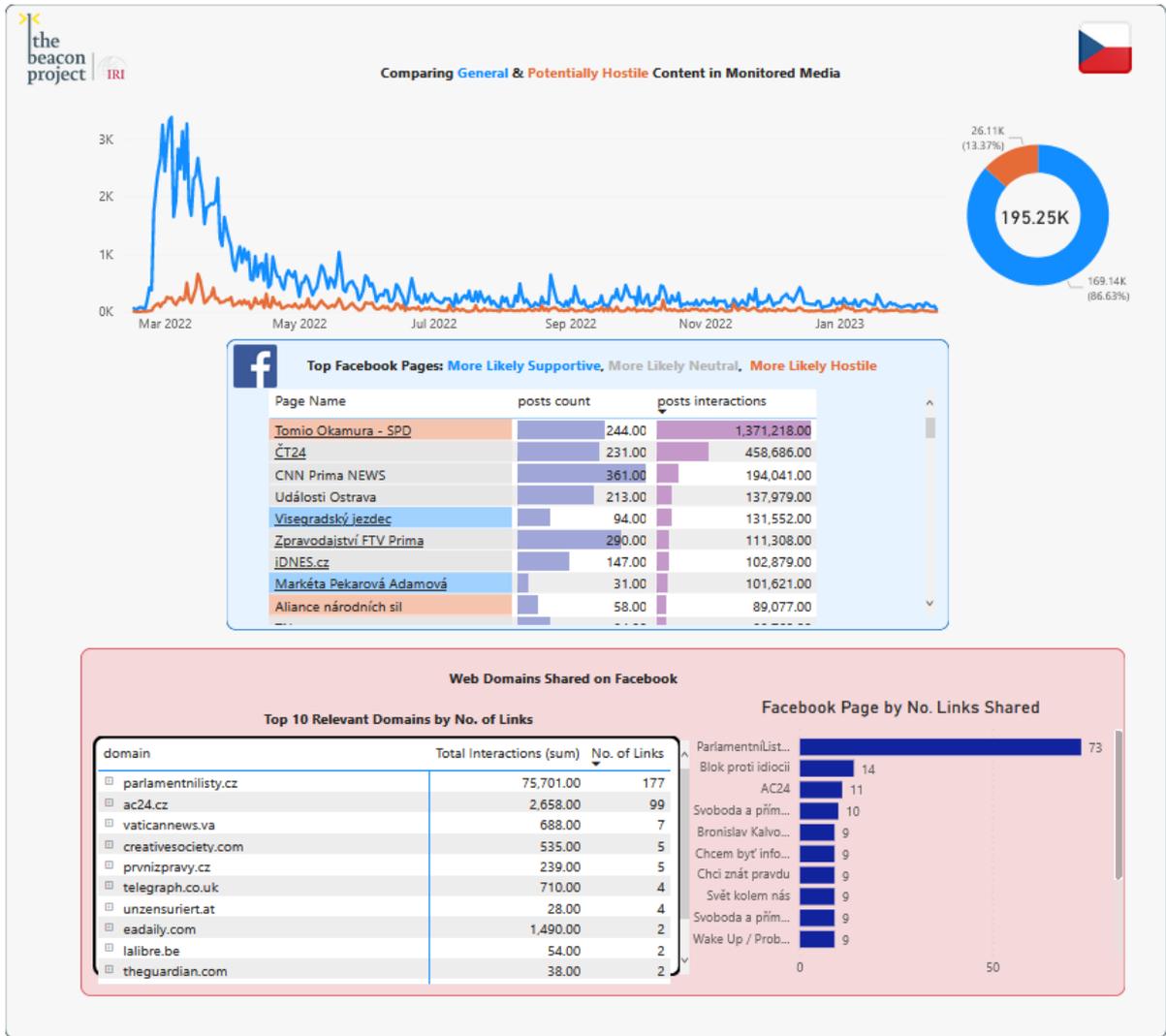
of raising energy prices on the Czech economy and blamed the Czech government for following the EU's policies on sanctions and sustainable energy over national interests. SPD party members openly accused the government of scapegoating Russia for the price increases for which the party blamed on misguided government policies.

The Facebook pages that received the most interactions related to the monitored topics in the last year were fairly even with 3/10 being considered to largely support Ukraine, 4/10 having a higher likelihood to be hostile to this support, and 3/10 likely to be more neutral in its coverage of the topics.

The monitoring showed potentially hostile narratives are largely disseminated by a very small circle of actors and do not represent the opinion of the majority. However, the number of posts and reach of most prominent potentially hostile sources like SPD party leader Tomio Okamura and SPD member and MEP Ivan David or, the leader of anti-government protests Jindřich Rajchl was comparable with major public media and therefore their influence should not be dismissed. Tomio Okamura constitutes the most interacted with hostile source across all monitored countries. Recent [polls](#) have recorded a decrease in support for the governing SPOLU coalition from 28% to 21% since February 2022 and above-named actors may have contributed to this trend. Similarly, while in June 2022, 7% of Czechs [considered](#) NATO to be responsible for the start of the war, in October 2022 this number [rose](#) to 17% which is a worrying shift in a traditionally pro-NATO oriented country.



Anti-Refugee



- The prevailing sentiment suggests that [basic help](#) for refugees is supported but not if it is at the expense of Czech citizens. Using a widely seen narrative across Europe, Tomio Okamura and his allies exploited this sentiment to criticize the government for not doing enough to support their own citizens. While data across all media sources show 13.4% of the content references refugees contained possibly hostile messaging, this proportion increases to 16.9% when looking at just posts from Facebook, with Okamura’s page receiving by far the most interactions with 1,371,218 from 244 posts. However, towards the end of 2022, refugees became used more as a proxy topic to criticize the government and potentially gain some advantages in the January presidential elections being contested by former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš whose populist ANO movement heavily engaged in this criticism.



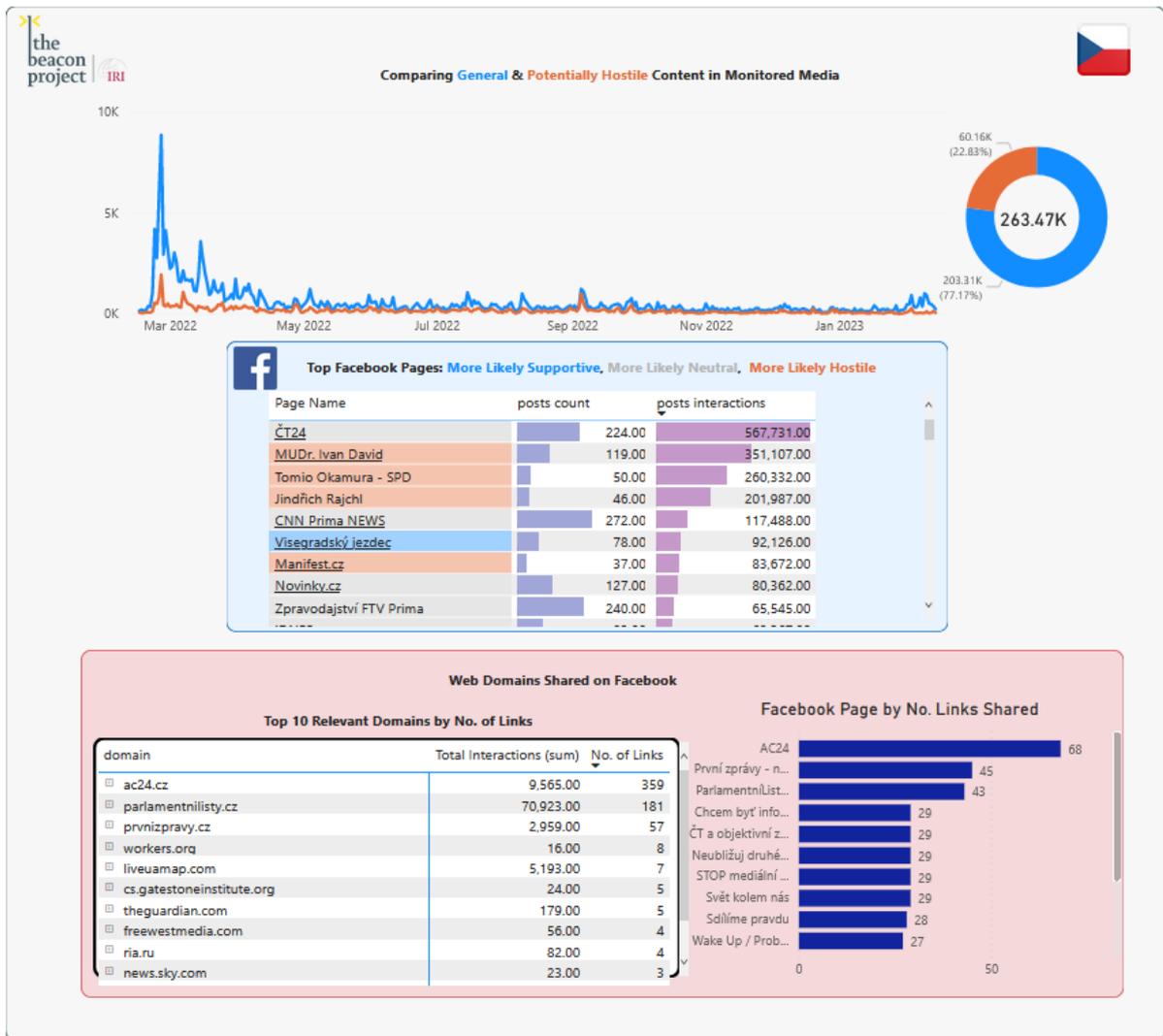
- Highlighting the potential reach of the hostile messaging on Facebook, the 1.4 million interactions from Tomio Okamura's page was more than three times that of the next highest page, the Czech public broadcaster (ČT24) which received 458,686 interactions on their posts referencing refugees. The high visibility of Okamura's openly anti-governmental, anti-NATO and anti-EU messaging provides a substantial risk to the spreading of hostile messaging in the Czech media space that could undermine broader support for Ukraine. However, sources supportive of Ukraine also appeared among the most prominent Facebook pages, including an activist who calls himself [The Visegrad Rider](#), who was the 5th most interacted with Facebook page putting him above two of the biggest political actors, Prime Minister Petr Fiala (45,271 interactions) and former PM Andrej Babiš (81,951 interactions) combined.
- According to scraped hypertext links found in Facebook posts, Parlamentnilisty.cz was the domain most linked to. It is widely known in the Czech Republic as an amplifier of populist anti-government voices (such as those from ANO and SPD) as well as pro-Kremlin and conspiratorial content. Although it does not fit in to a category of disinformation, it is well-known for a lack of analytical or investigative forms of journalism and resharing opinion pieces and social media posts without further edits or context. However, based on researchers' expertise, only 5/10 of the most linked domains could be identified as potential spreaders of disinformation. This included ac24.cz which was linked to 99 times.

Assessed Audience: far-right supporters, opposition supporters

Current Risk Assessment: Low-Medium



Anti-Sanctions



- Out of the 14,388 Facebook posts on sanctions, we identified 22.5% of potentially hostile content. Sanctions, and EU politics more generally, were blamed for increasing price levels while the context of the Russian aggression and Russian weaponization of energy was continuously underplayed or ignored. Anti-sanctions narratives which called for peace negotiations instead of “destructive” sanctions also relied on a strong anti-government rhetoric: SPD party members accused the government of scapegoating Russia for the price increases for which they blamed misguided government policies. An alleged lack of support for big businesses in comparison to the neighboring countries was another frequent line of messaging from extremist politicians.



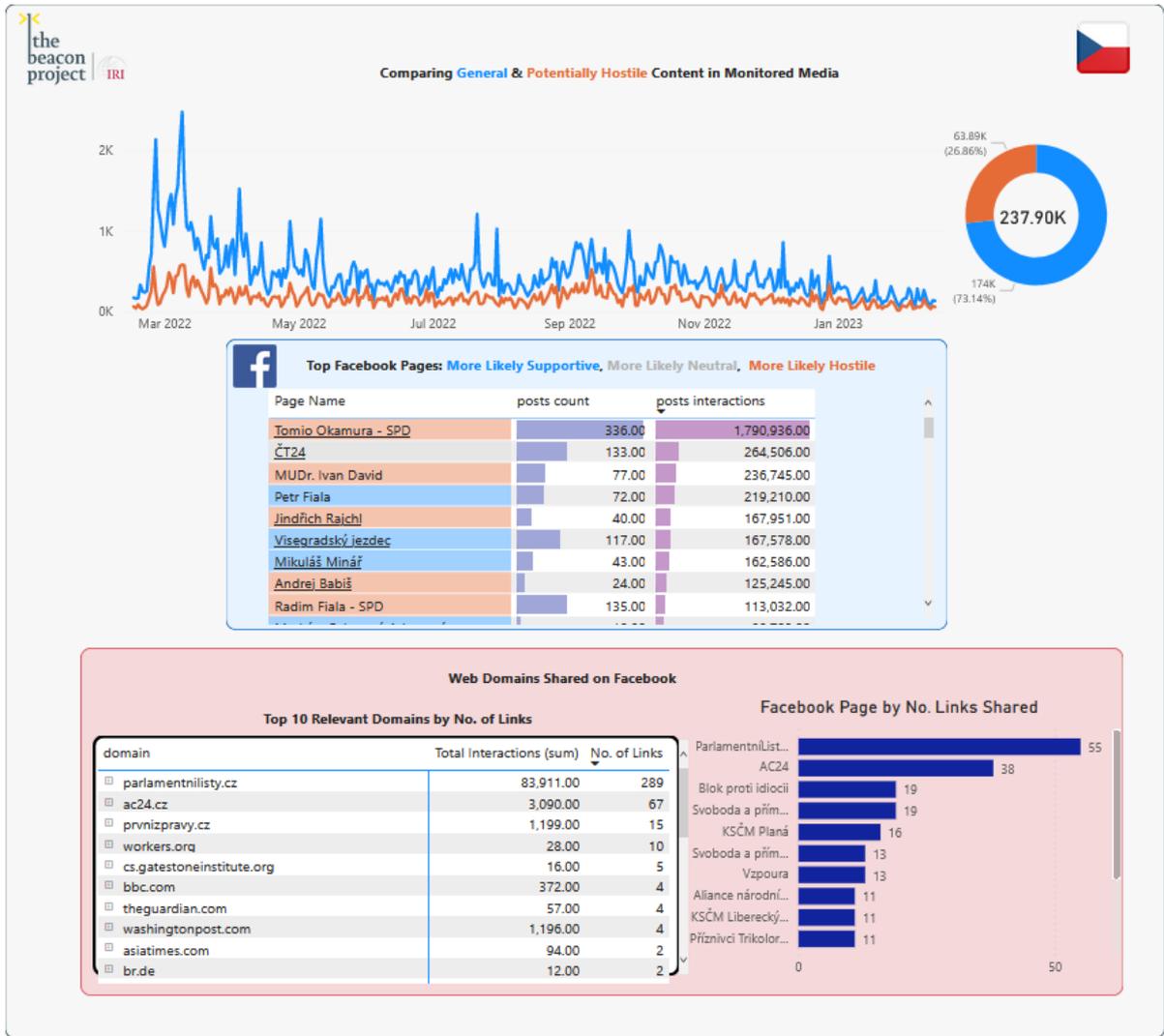
- Although the most prominent Facebook page belonged to the public broadcaster Czech TV and its objective coverage of the topic of sanctions, 4 out of the top 10 pages belong to antisystem actors such as SPD's Ivan David and Tomio Okamura, the new aspiring face of the antisystem scene Jindřich Rajchl and the Manifest.cz movement created in opposition to COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination. By not effectively communicating their policies, the government has ceded ground in the media space to these voices. Directly or indirectly, these narratives have led critics of the government to labelling Fiala's cabinet as a proxy Ukrainian government interested in looking after Ukrainian interests over those of the Czech citizens, which increases the risk for political instability and erosion of support for Ukraine.
- The aforementioned Parlamentnilisty.cz attracted the most interactions among frequently shared domains but the information portal AC24.cz was shared twice as much as Parlamentnilisty.cz. AC24.cz is a popular portal run by the entrepreneur Ondřej Geršl who is open about [making a business](#) out of running a conspiracy outlet. This outlet was among those blocked by the Czech national domain operator after the start of the invasion based on the argument of its threat to national security, and also among the few [who retained](#) their higher volume of visits despite the ban and having to move to a different domain. Their articles were shared by alternative news pages which supported the credibility of their hostile messaging with referencing the popular websites.

Assessed Audience: opposition supporters, possibly extended to general public due to general economic concerns

Risk Assessment: Medium



Energy Security



- The topic of energy security is where we identified the largest share of potentially hostile content, almost 30% out of the total of 15,872 Facebook posts. A majority of the political messaging on the topic involved a strong anti-government narrative that blames the current energy crisis on the alleged incompetence of the current government of Petr Fiala, their neglect of their own citizens, slow and [insufficient crisis measures](#) compared to neighboring countries, and [using the budget](#) required for solving the crisis for Ukrainians instead. The blame of domestic actors often overlapped with blame of the West, due to the current Czech government’s support for European policies such as the [European Green Deal](#), although the Emissions Trading System and Czech participation in the European Energy Exchange were also frequently named as causes of the energy crisis,



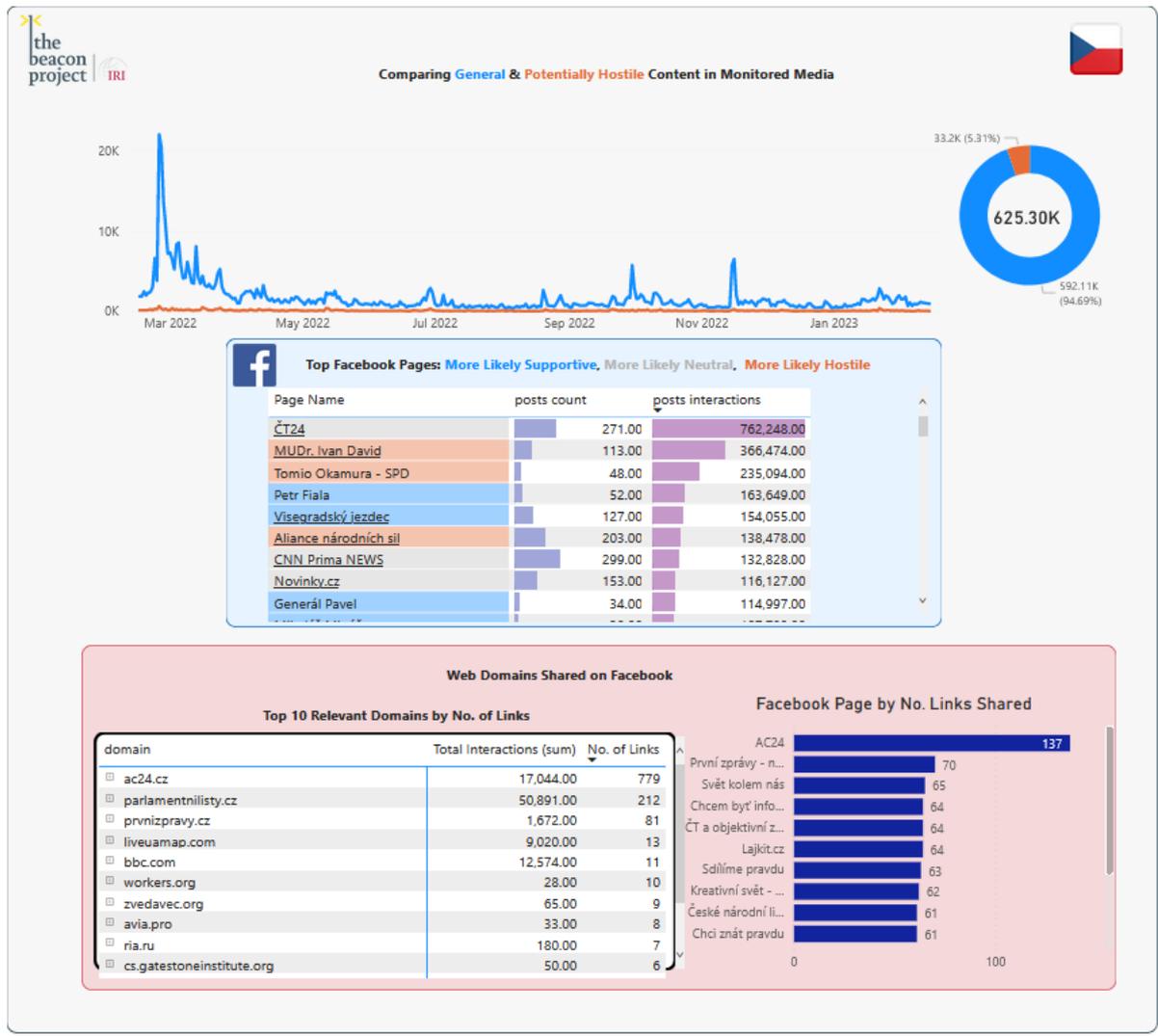
- Once again, SPD's leader Tomio Okamura attracted over 1,5 million more interactions than the second most prominent page belonging to the Czech Television (public broadcaster). Other SPD members, aforementioned antisystem politician Rajchl and also the former PM Andrej Babiš, leader of the strongest opposition party ANO which is currently leading [the polls](#) 11% ahead of the governing coalition, were among the most prominent pages with potentially hostile content. The issue of energy receives a lot of attention since the energy crisis is impacting every household and business. Therefore, the opposition's use of the energy crisis for rallying against the government can have broad reach, especially since [70% of Czechs](#) perceive the state's assistance in managing the impact of the energy crisis as insufficient.
- Both Parlamentnilisty.cz, amplifier of populist anti-government actors including SPD and ANO, as well as the popular AC24.cz portal spreading conspiracies and pro-Kremlin interpretations of the situation in Ukraine, were the most interacted with and shared web domains, hijacking the online discussion on energy security with hostile narratives and anti-government rallying.

Assessed Audience: opposition supporters

Risk Assessment: Medium



Anti-NATO



- Among the total 16,173 posts mentioning the topic, we identified almost 22% of potentially hostile content. The underlying message was that the most direct [threat](#) to the Czech Republic is not Russia, but the Russophobic and terrorist NATO and the government due to supposedly aggressive international politics, dragging the Czech Republic into a war that is not theirs and [prolonging](#) it through military support of Ukraine. This topic also entered domestic politics before the January [presidential elections](#) through claims that electing any candidate considered “democratic” and publicly supported by the pro-Western government coalition will mean dragging the Czech Republic into the war in Ukraine, but especially in the case of the retired general and former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Petr Pavel (now the president elect).



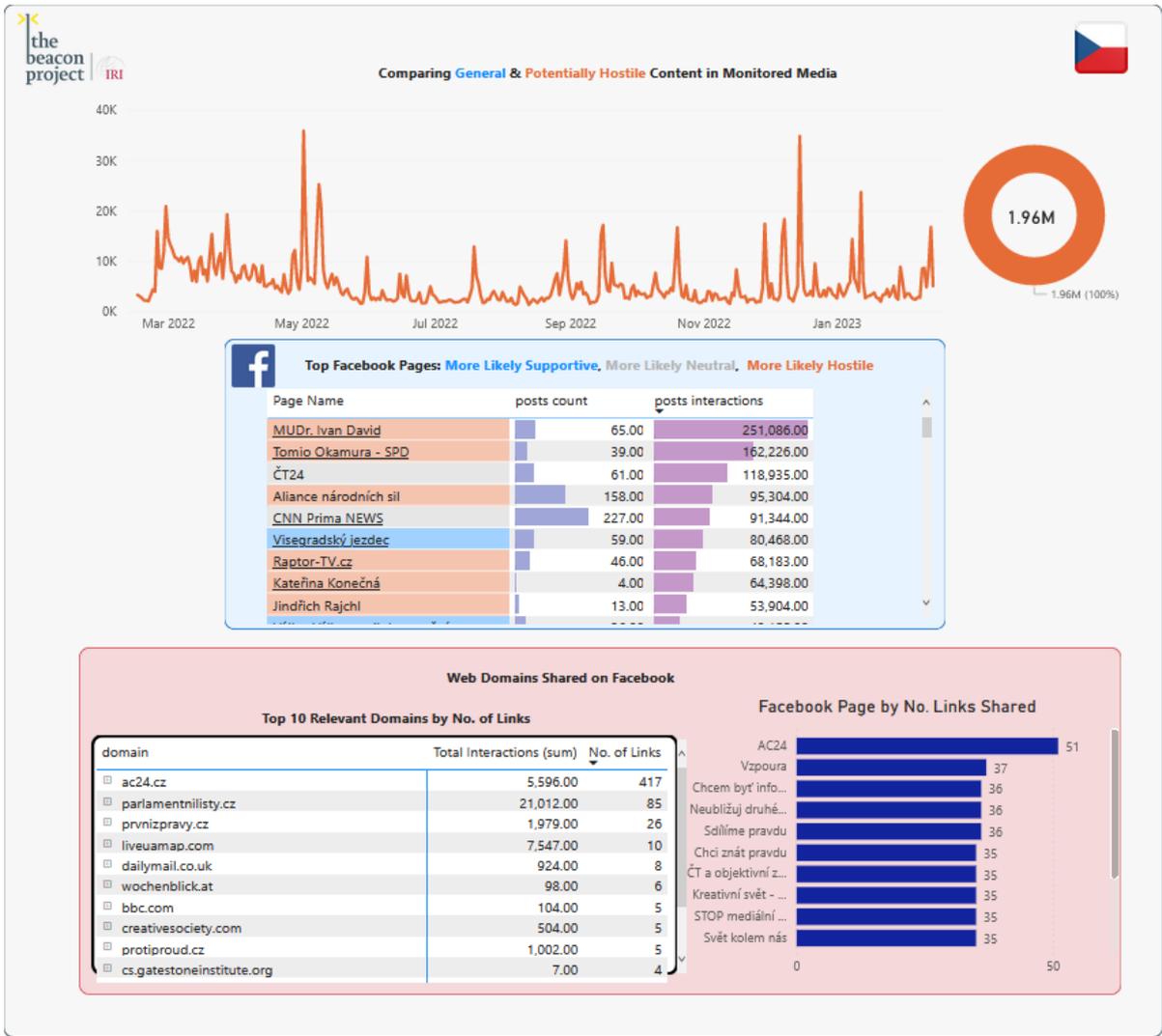
- The top10 Facebook pages are dominated by supportive politicians and activists (PM Fiala, president elect Petr Pavel, the Visegrad Rider) and neutral mainstream media outlets such as the Czech TV (the most prominent page), major commercial CNN Prima News or the most visited internet server novinky.cz. The second and third place are taken by SPD's Tomio Okamura and Ivan David based on interactions, however, it is not likely that hostile sources will become the dominant voices.
- The populist Parlamentnílisty.cz and the popular AC24.cz portal spreading conspiracies and pro-Kremlin interpretations of the situation in Ukraine were once again the most interacted with and shared web domains. However, the majority of the shared domains consisted of foreign generic news outlets such as the BBC, which further supports the observation that the hostile debate about NATO and military support for Ukraine is limited to the fringes.

Assessed Audience: far-right and far-left supporters

Risk Assessment: Low



Biolabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation



- Established Kremlin disinformation narratives about secret biolabs in Ukraine, a fascist Ukrainian regime, and a looming nuclear war did not attract significant attention on Facebook, with spikes of interest only right after the start of the invasion. These narratives were mostly part of more general messaging trends: [anti-government narratives](#) included warnings that the government will lead the Czech Republic into a nuclear war and the topic was also connected to [criticism of provided aid](#) in the sense that a nuclear escalation scenario needs to be considered before any type of aid is provided. Anti-West narratives were supported by claims that US and NATO are [supporting](#) the alleged [openly fascist](#) leadership of Ukraine and the designation of Russia as the aggressor is just a ridiculous “story” people are being fed about a black and white situation



between a “peaceful” Ukraine and the West versus a “bloodthirsty” Russia who is the actual [victim](#). The topic of biolabs only attracted attention with reposts of the conservative American Fox News channel which [allegedly confirmed](#) that secret biolabs are being run in Ukraine, based on taking the words of Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, out of context, a manipulation [debunked](#) by multiple independent fact-checkers.

- Since these disinformation narratives were used to support more general hostile trends, they were mainly spread by the usual suspects headed by the SPD MEP Ivan David, followed by the party leader Tomio Okamura, but also pro-Russian sources such as the fringe movement Alliance of National Forces and the alternative TV channel Raptor TV. However, the risk of their potential impact is rather carried by the general and popular anti-government, anti-aid narratives rather than conspiracies about fascists or secret biolabs.
- Most shared and interacted with domains spreading hostile narratives were Czech, such as Parlamentnilisty.cz, AC24.cz or prvnizpravy.cz, foreign outlets attracted minimal attention. This shows there is a tight circle of websites with an established audience whose business model is built on making the spread of disinformation and polarizing topics into a profitable business. These outlets are consistently used as references by antisystemic actors and alternative news pages.

Assessed Audience: far-right and far-left supporters

Risk Assessment: Low



Germany



Author: Global Disinformation Index Local Analyst

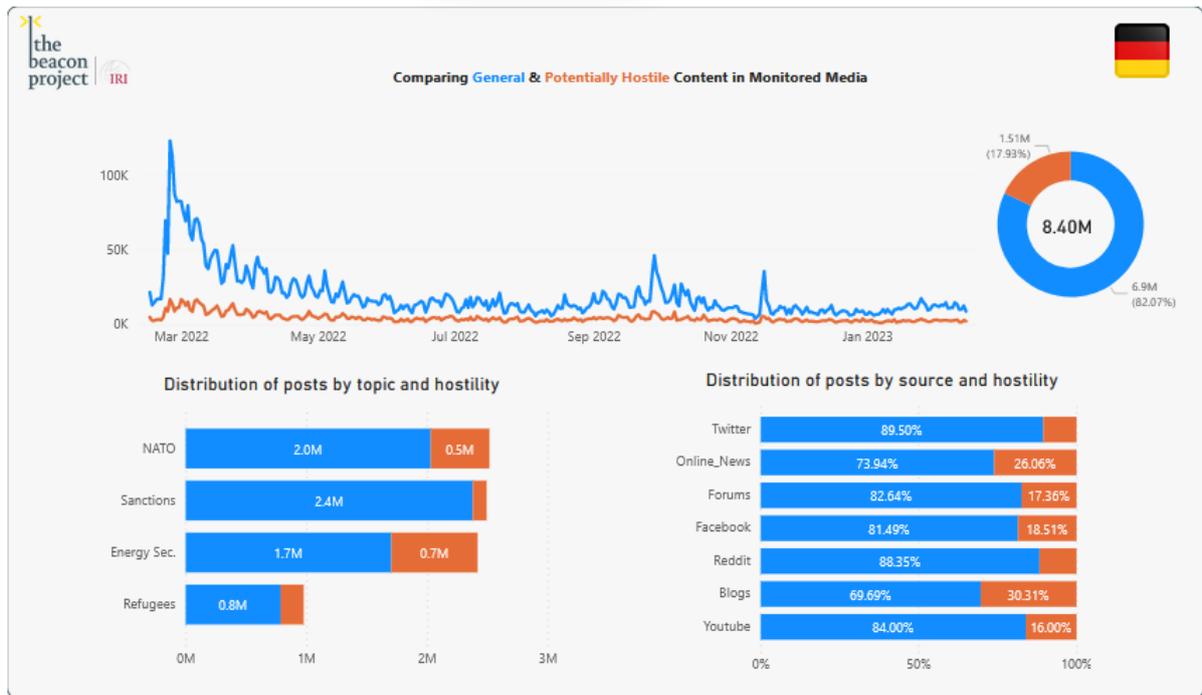
Top Line Summary

Germany's historic ties to Russia, manifested by notable Russian-speaking minorities living in the country or remorse about World War II, played a significant role in the popular response to the invasion of Ukraine. According to a [Eurobarometer poll](#) from Fall 2022, 73% of Germans agreed with EU support for Ukraine. However, the specific nature of this support was a matter of public discussion as, according to an opinion poll by [DeutschlandTrend](#) from January 2023, only 46% of Germans supported sending Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine. A similar divide was possible to [observe](#) between the Western and Eastern parts of the country, with the latter having a more reserved stance towards the support of Ukraine.

Strong economic ties between Russia and Germany hampered the political response to the invasion. However, in the course of the year, the government of Chancellor Olaf Scholz significantly reshaped the country's foreign policy, started decoupling from Russian energy dependence and bolstered national and regional support for Ukraine. According to the [Kiel Institute](#), Germany has pledged €2.4 billion in military funding, €2.5 billion in humanitarian aid, and €1.3 billion in general financial aid to Ukraine over the past year. The reconfiguration of German foreign policy led to internal debates about this topic in political parties. This process might be particularly [interesting](#) in traditionally Russian sympathetic Die Linke (The Left) due to differences of opinions among various generations of party officials. Pro-Russian positions were the most often expressed by the political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), but even its members undertake debates about possible reactions to the changing geopolitical situation, which might influence its foreign policy priorities in the future.



Media Overview

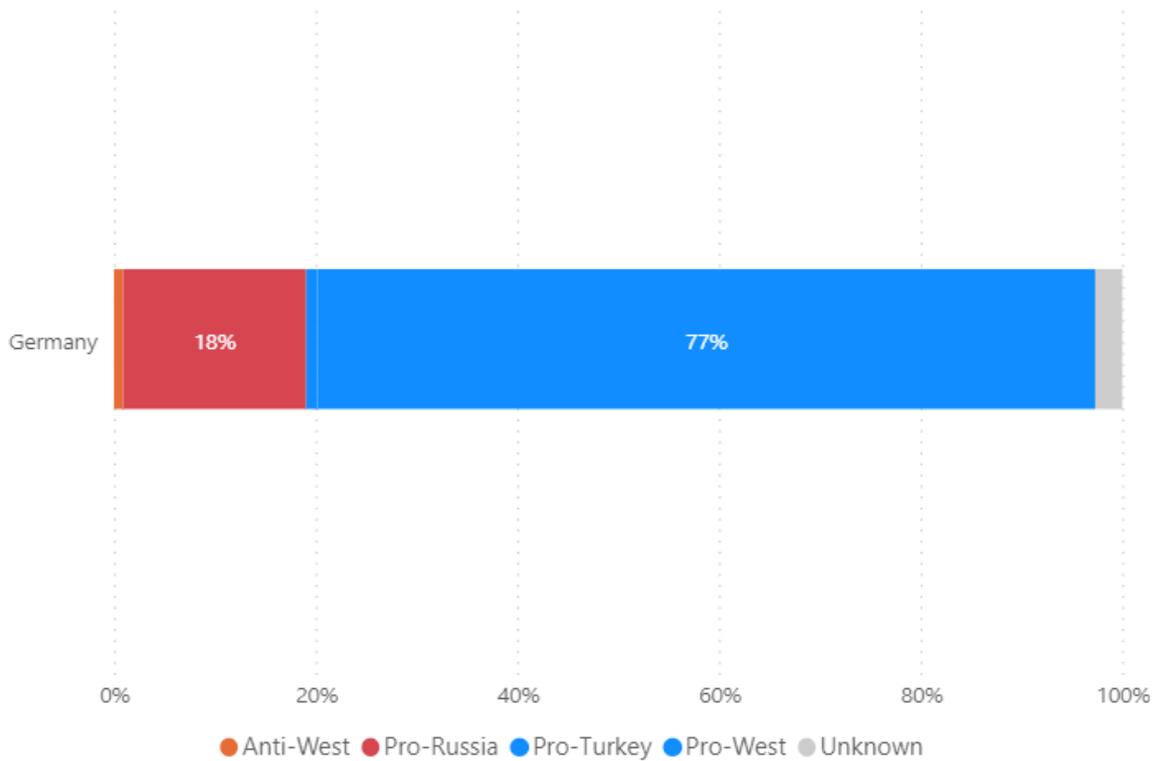


In general, over 8,400,000 pieces of online content were collected based on keyword matching of monitored media in Germany. The debate about Ukraine resurfaced several times during the year, with one notable spike by the end of September in relation to the incident that disrupted the Nord Stream pipeline and the other in November when the Ukrainian missile from the air-defense system fell on Polish territory.

The potentially hostile narrative accounted for 18 % of texts (1,506,825 pieces) related to the key topics followed in our research. Topics of NATO, sanctions and energy received roughly similar attention in the German information space (each accounting for approximately 2,500,000 notes). The topic of refugees was discussed significantly less. The topic of energy accounted for the highest number of potentially hostile mentions (almost 30 % of analyzed content). This result is hardly surprising due to the significant dependency of Germany on Russian gas supplies and the government’s attempts to revise the energy policy. In some of its extreme reiterations, this hostile narrative [blamed](#) the U.S. for escalating the situation and deliberate disruption of European industry.



Geo-political views of sources marked by IRI



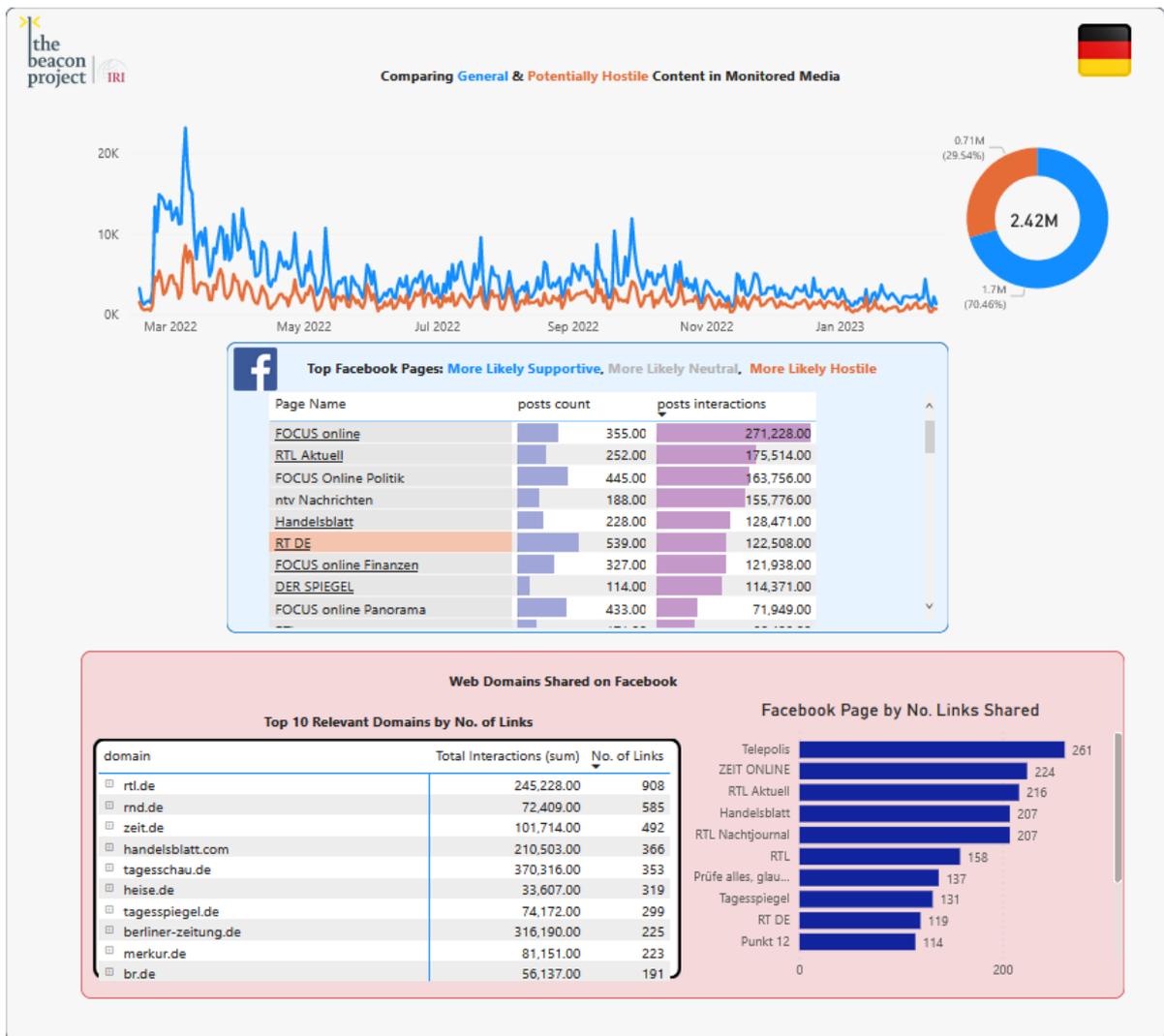
Name	posts count	interactions median	posts interactions
DER SPIEGEL	589,00	11 380,50	855 762,00
FOCUS online	1 235,00	4 962,00	854 418,00
RT DE	3 620,00	264,00	795 803,00
ntv Nachrichten	957,00	5 913,50	782 547,00
RTL Aktuell	918,00	4 279,00	598 724,00
FOCUS Online Politik	1 660,00	1 709,50	574 368,00
Handelsblatt	996,00	1 539,00	445 079,00
FAZ.NET - Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung	609,00	3 791,00	357 817,00
FOCUS online Finanzen	815,00	1 527,50	274 222,00
exxpress.at	1 159,00	889,00	252 488,00
ZEIT ONLINE	894,00	1 587,00	252 273,00

As visible in the chart above, most German information sources (77 %) have a pro-West geopolitical leaning. However, the situation in the Facebook environment differed since Russian state mouthpiece RT DE ranked among the most interacted of the analyzed sources. That being said, given the lower median of interactions (263 interactions per post)



that was the case for other outlets, it is possible to assume that its overall influence on the public debate was limited. Regardless, it is notable that despite the [ban on Russian-state-aligned media](#) in the EU, RT still managed to retain a notable footprint in the German information space.

Energy Security

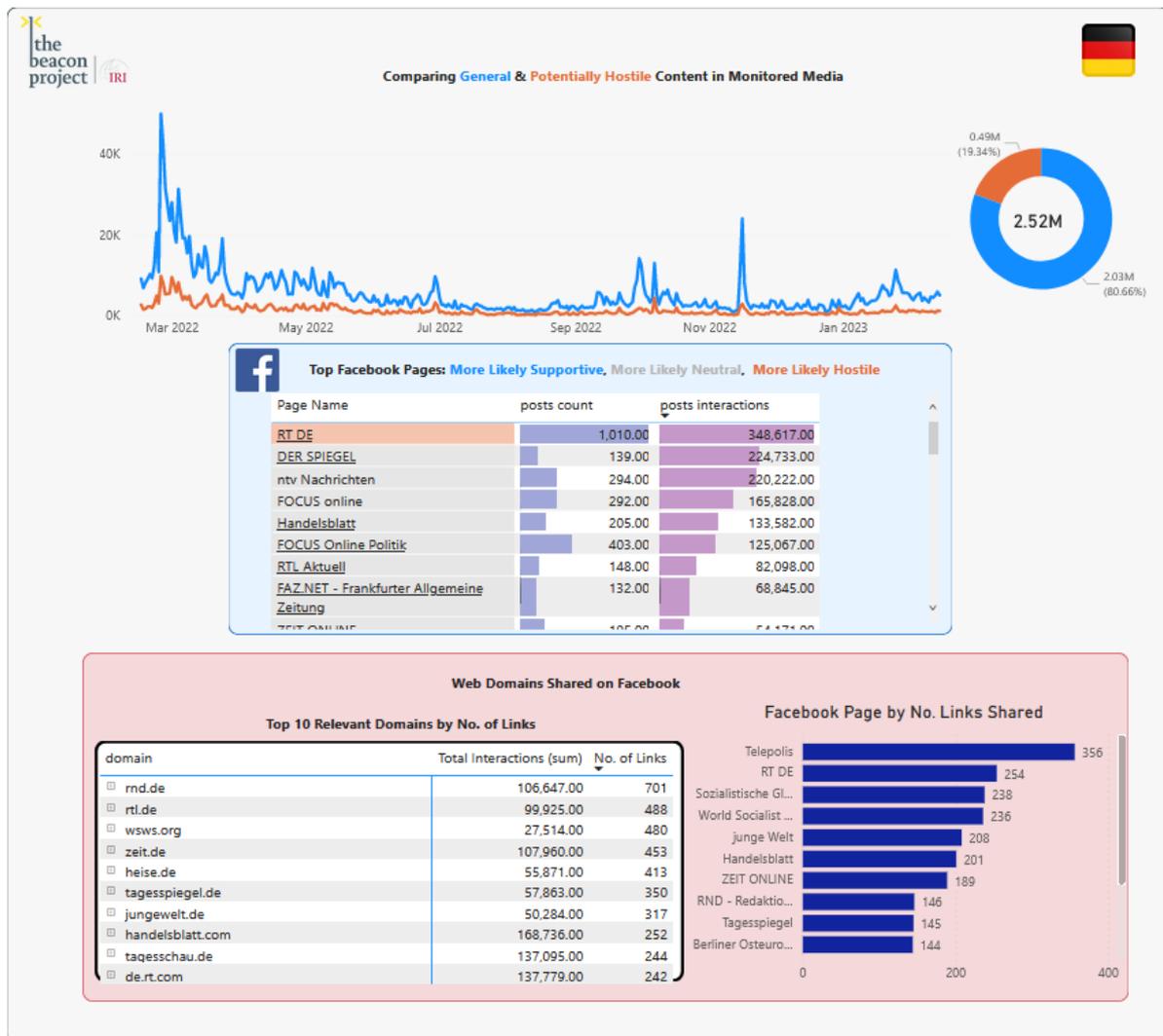


- The widely discussed topic of energy received the highest share – 30 % – of hostile messages. The significant spike occurred at the end of September 2022 in relation to the disruption of Nord Stream pipeline. AfD tried to leverage this topic by creating a website to collect reports on alleged blackouts in Germany.



- However, user submissions were not [checked for veracity](#), leading to unproven cases being added to the website.
- While most of the actors shaping the debate on the topic of energy on Facebook were regular media, RT DE also played a role in the conversation which opened the Kremlin to manipulating the debate to its advantage.
- The majority of the content for this topic was mainly created by the generic websites of quality media outlets, and no hostile actors were identified among the most prominent Facebook pages to reference the energy security issue.

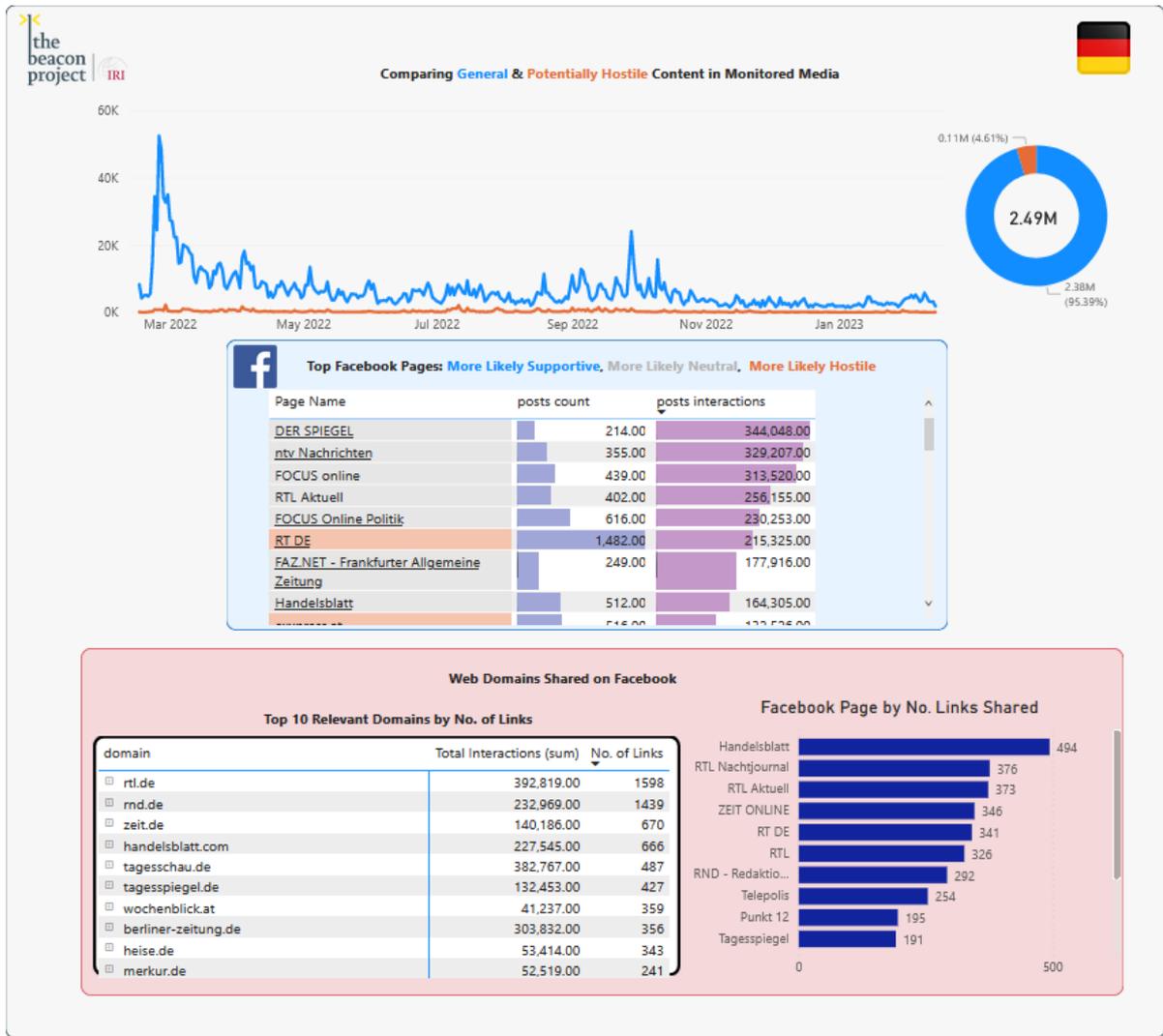
Anti-NATO



- The topic of NATO consisted of 19% of potentially hostile content. The significant spike in the topic occurred in November 2022 when the Ukrainian missile from the air-defense system fell on Polish territory. The topic of NATO was closely entangled with the significant increase in the defense spending which was supported by all political parties except from AfD, but still became the target of criticism from certain segments of the German public.
- The notable number of Facebook interactions related to this topic were generated by left leaning organizations such as news far-left outlet Junge Welt or World Socialist Web Site which tend to be critical to the Alliance.
- Russian state mouthpiece RT DE dedicated significant attention to the topic of NATO and for instance [tried to depict](#) its actions as an obstacle to achieving peace in Ukraine; German RT 1010 posts generated 348,617 interactions (which in total was more than the second on the list Der Spiegel -139 posts with 223,733 interactions).



Anti-Sanctions



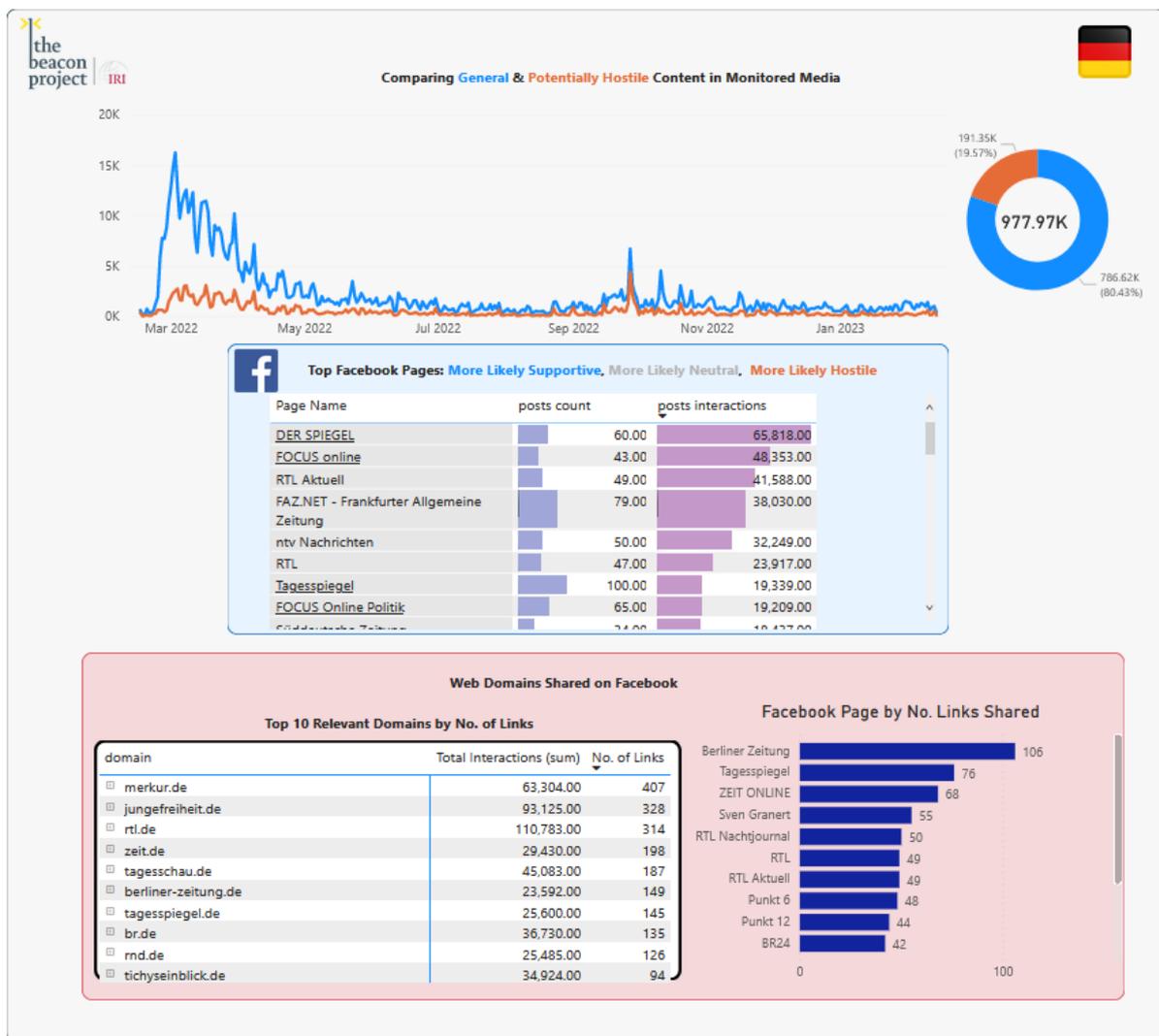
- The topic of sanctions against Russia had 4,61% of potentially hostile content. The increase of interest in this topic occurred regularly in relation to new sanctions packages introduced by the EU. Overall low resonance of the anti-sanction narratives in the information space corresponded with the fact that according to the [Eurobarometer opinion poll](#) from Fall 2022, 71% Germans supported sanctions.
- Russian-state mouthpiece RT DE tried to be active in the debate on sanctions, however based on previous findings it does not seem that it would be too successful in swaying the public opinion. However, still in some corners of the public debate appeared arguments that sanctions are an American tool to [harm the German economy](#) or that they are [preventing Russia from exporting its grain](#) which might result in the food



crisis in the global South.

- According to data showing the ten most linked to relevant sources, 1 of the top 10 linked to domains was labelled as spreader of disinformation. With 359 links that gave 41,237 interactions the Austrian far-right website Wochenblick.at (vastly disseminating for instance anti-vax content) was ranked on the 7th place.

Anti-Refugee



- Around 20 % of messages related to the topic of refugees contained potentially hostile content. While according to the Eurobarometer data from Fall 2022, 81% of Germans were supportive of the acceptance



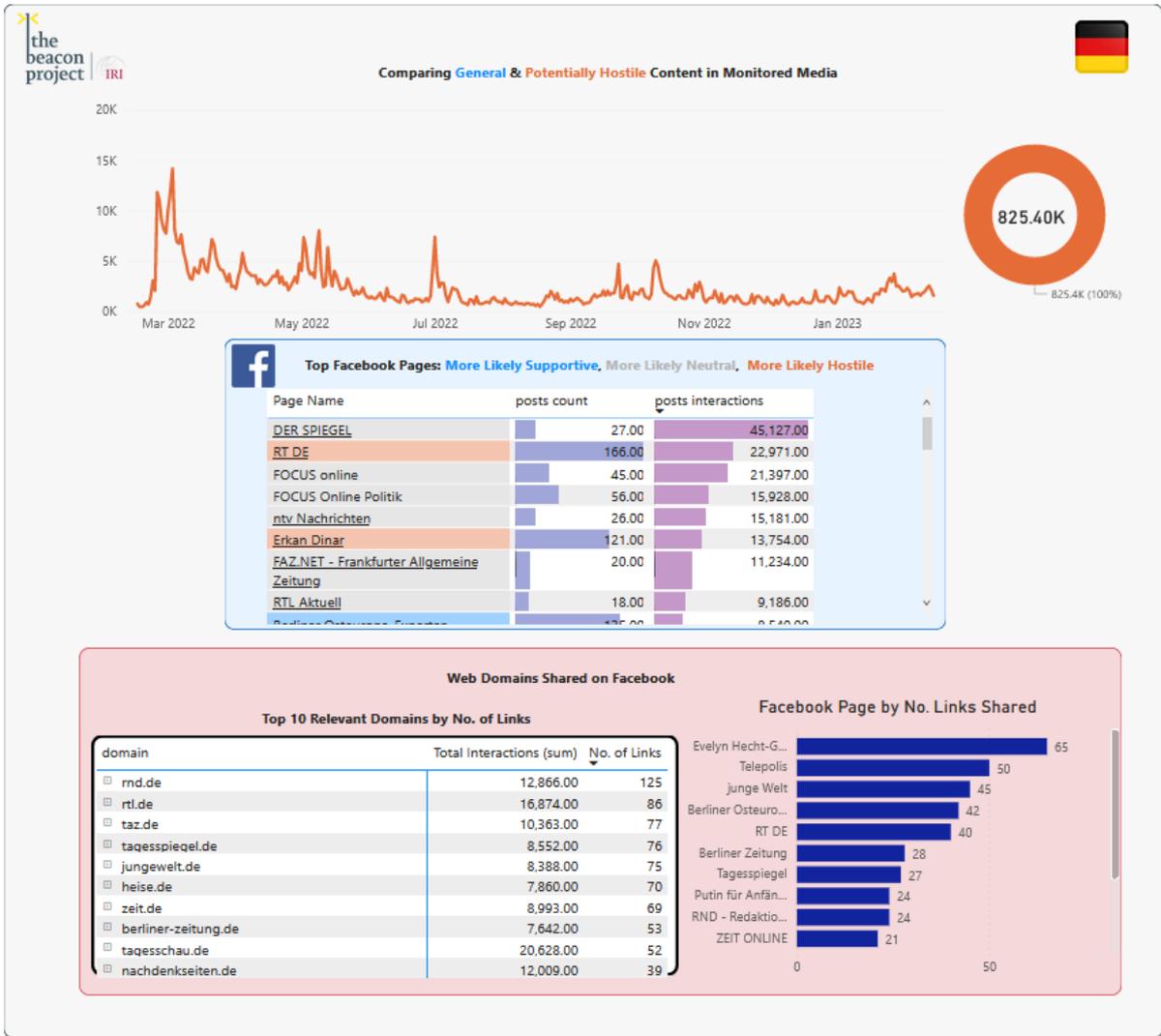
of Ukrainians fleeing war, negative sentiments also appeared. For instance, the spike in our data with predominantly hostile content from the end of September seems to be associated with [statements of CDU/CSU leader Friedrich Merz](#) who claimed that Ukrainian refugees are taking advantage of the social welfare system. Comments like these likely contributed to the several acts of violence against refugees such as [calling Ukrainian refugees “Nazis”](#) during the demonstration in Leipzig or an arson [attack at a hotel housing Ukrainian refugees](#).

- Negative sentiments against refugees were stimulated also by manipulative videos that appeared in the German information space throughout the year. One of them for instance being the compilation of stories about ungrateful Ukrainian refugees. While [the video was later on attributed to the Belorussian Telegram account](#) it was amplified on social media platforms in Germany by predominantly pro-Russian and right-wing accounts. This occurred regularly in relation to new sanctions packages introduced by the EU. Overall low resonance of the anti-sanction narratives in the information space corresponded with the fact that according to the Eurobarometer opinion poll from Fall 2022, 71% Germans supported sanctions.
- Presence of the links from problematic sources was of little significance for the general public, with limited number of interactions, however far-left outlet Junge Welt was once again present, as one of the most active actors, both for the refugees and the NATO topic.



Biolabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation

Denazification



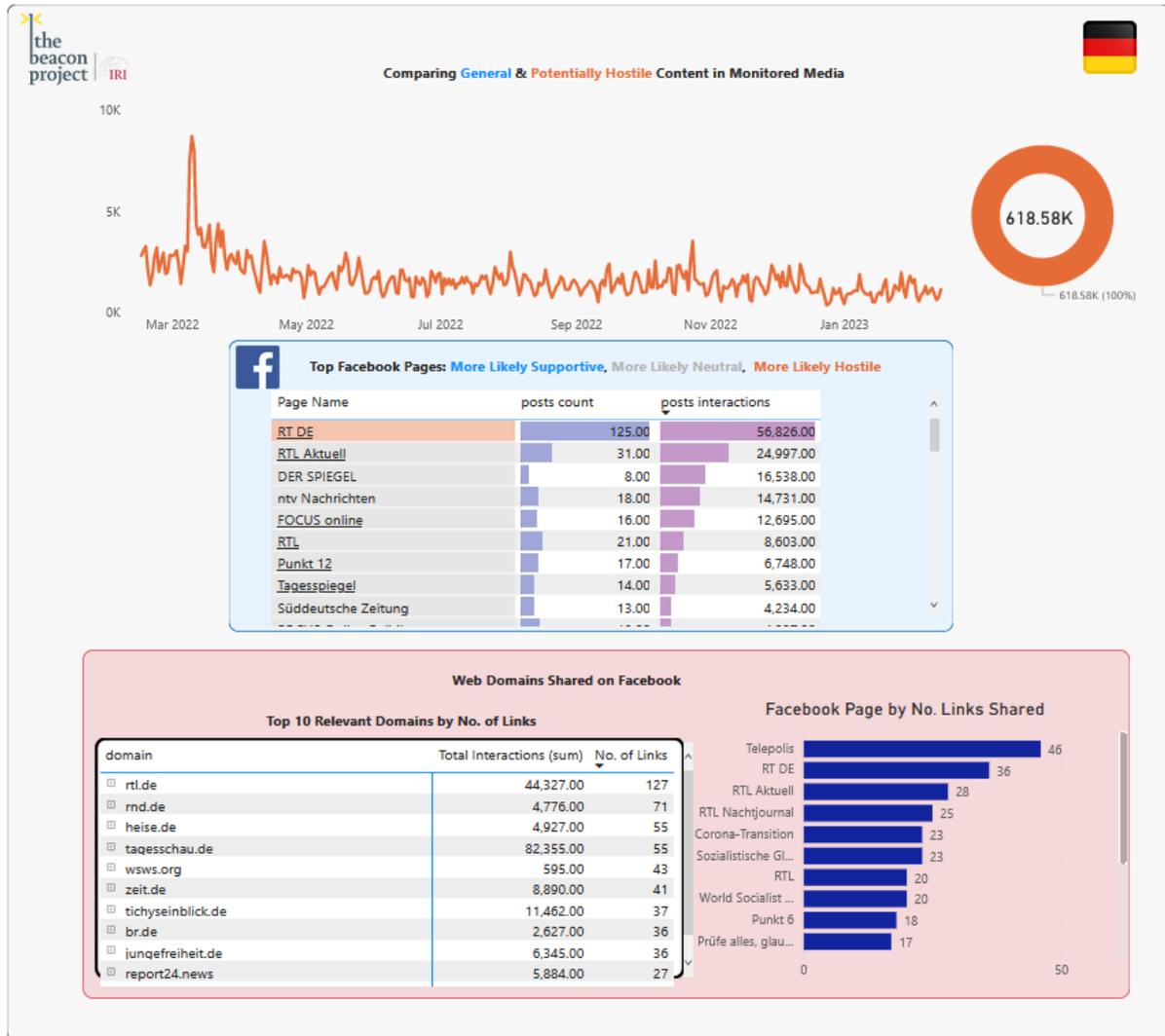
- The topic of denazification was discussed quite significantly in the German media space (825,404 notes). Russian state mouthpiece RT DE were mostly responsible for its spread while raising typical Kremlin propaganda talking points about [Ukraine being a state ruled by Nazi](#).
- Another relevant actor promoting this topic was anti-Israeli activist Evelyn Hecht-Galinski who in her online commentaries called Ukraine “fascist and corrupt”. She was also advocating to stop the military support for Ukraine. As it was mentioned above these narratives also appeared in demonstrations against accepting refugees



from Ukraine.

- Once again, among the most active commentators of this topic, the far-left outlet Junge Welt was present.

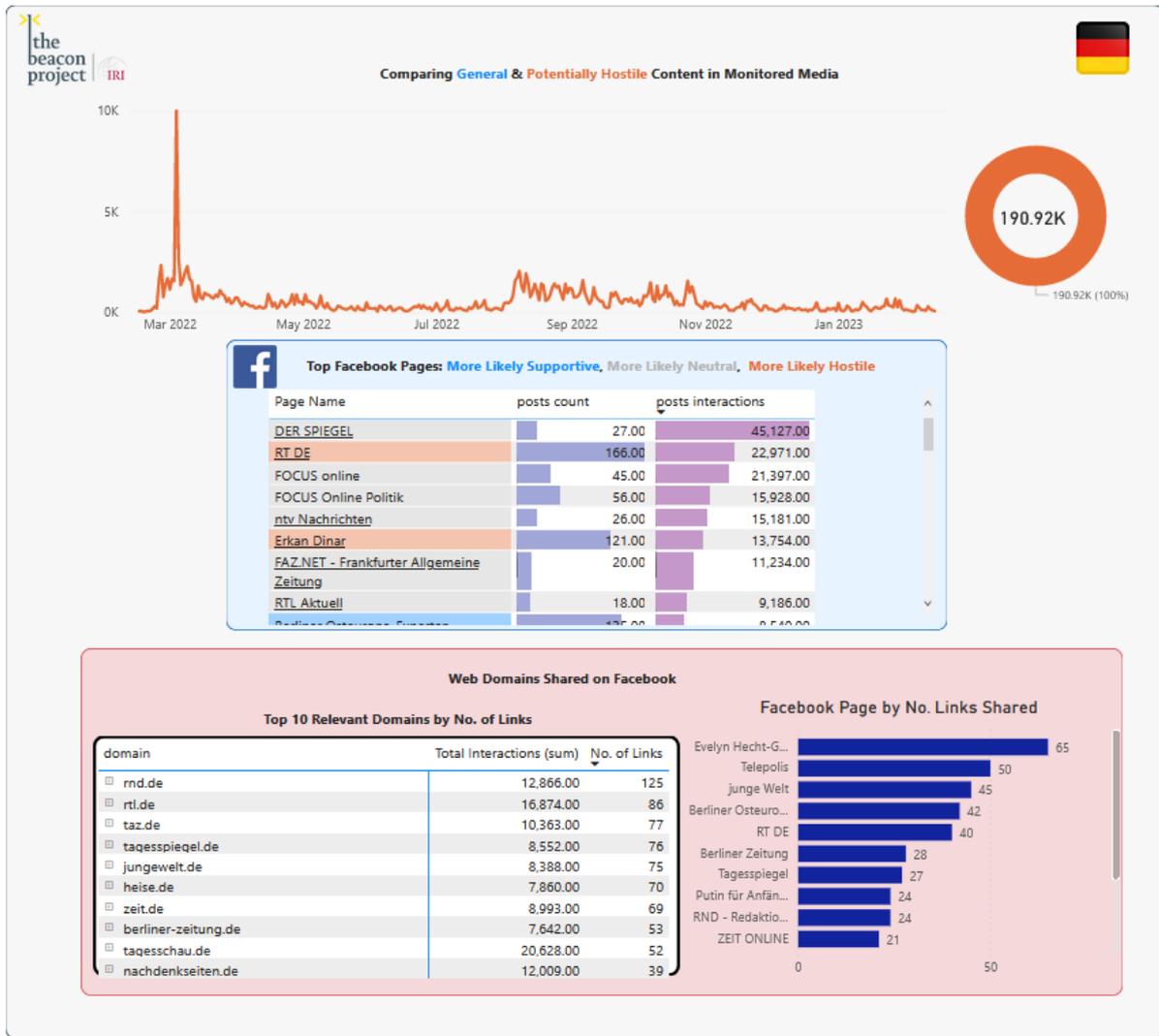
Biolabs



- The topic of alleged biolabs in Ukraine received 618,580 notes in the previous year. The most prominent spreader of this narrative was Russian state affiliate outlet RT DE publishing 125 posts mentioning it. While this topic did not get significant traction among the German population, several AfD politicians [repeated this narrative in the parliament](#). Occasionally, the topic of biolabs in Ukraine intersected with already established [conspiracy theories about planned depopulation of the Earth](#).



Nuclear Escalation



- The topic of the potential escalation into the nuclear conflict did not resonate significantly in the German information space as the mentions about it sharply declined after the first few weeks of the invasion.



Lithuania



Author: Urte Andriukaiytė – Civic Resilience Initiative

Top Line Summary

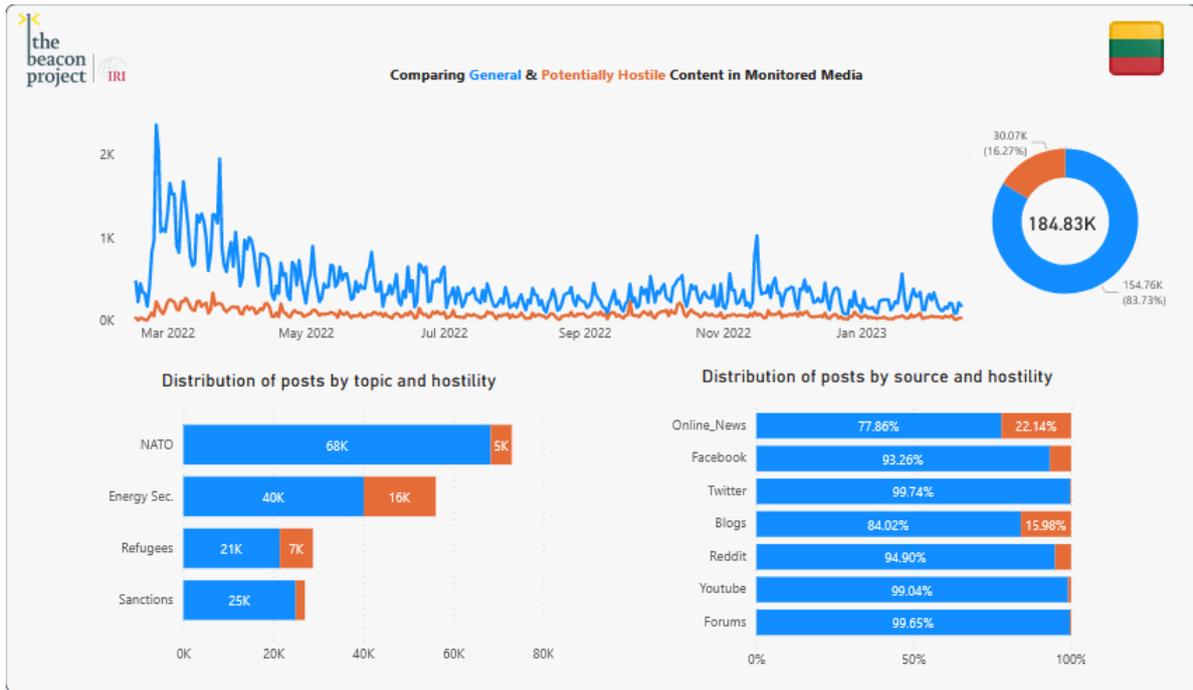
According to the [Eurobarometer](#) poll from Fall 2022, the overwhelming majority of Lithuanians (87%) approves of EU support for Ukraine, while more than [two-thirds](#) of people in Lithuania are satisfied with the government's response to Russia's war in Ukraine. Lithuanians [perceive](#) Russia unfavorably since 90% express negative opinion about the country and perceive it as an indisputable aggressor in the context of the war in Ukraine, according to the poll conducted by Lithuanian public broadcaster in January 2023. The most [recent polls](#) reveal that 75% of Lithuanians admit being, one way or another, affected by the war. At the same time, even 44 percent of respondents said they had donated money or things to Ukraine.

The country's government was one of the main supporters of assertive EU policy vis-à-vis Russia when for instance, President Gitanas Nausėda [advocated](#) for sending military jets to Ukraine before the meeting of European Council in January 2023 or the Prime minister Ingrida Šimonytė [suggested](#) that frozen Russian financial assets could be used to rebuild Ukraine after the war. The country also [made a significant](#) decision to free itself from dependency on energy imports when they were terminated in April 2022, becoming the first European country to stop [Russian gas imports](#). Even though some pro-Russian actors/politicians/public figures were constantly trying to diminish the support for Ukraine, the efforts were mainly scattered and did not affect the absolute majority of the population.

Lithuania, among Europe's most supportive countries, has organized noteworthy fundraisers. Among the biggest ones: Lithuanians raising almost 6 million euros for the Bayraktar combat drone largely in small donations back in May, ['Legion Of Boom'](#) campaign collecting funds for kamikaze drones for Ukraine, ['RADAROM'](#) organized by NGOs and national broadcaster that has collected 14 million euros to purchase multi-purpose tactical surveillance radars to monitor Ukraine's airspace. Country's help for Ukraine has also been acknowledged internationally and by Ukraine's President Zelenskij himself, as he claimed that Lithuania was "among the first to come to help in Ukraine and you remain the most concerned about peace and security in Europe" or sending greetings to all Lithuanians in their native [language](#).



Media Overview

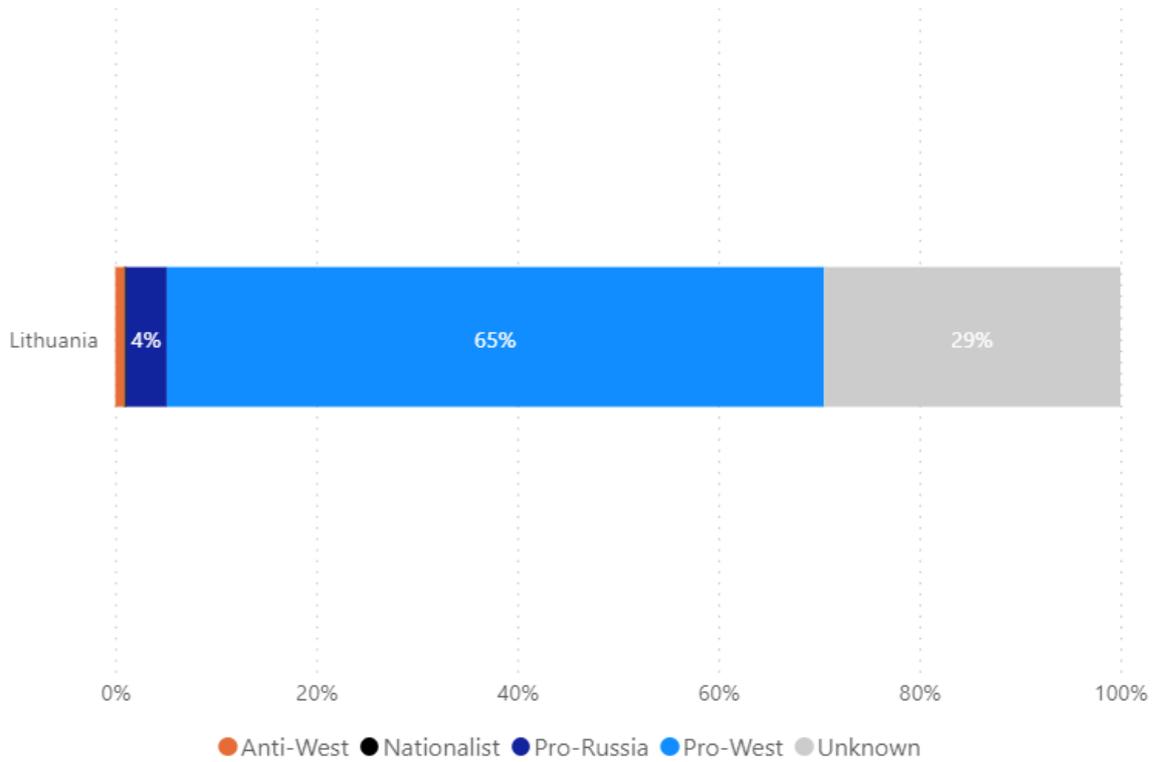


In general, around 184,000 pieces of online content were collected based on keyword matching of monitored media in Lithuania. The debate about Ukraine intensified several times during the year, with one of the notable spikes in November 2022 in relation to the missile from Ukraine air-defense system falling on Polish territory.

The potentially hostile narratives content accounted for over 16% of texts (30,071 pieces) related to the key topics followed in our research. Overall, the topic that received the most attention was NATO (72,989 notes), which were discussed predominantly in the positive light as the security guarantee against possible Russian aggressive actions. The topic generating potentially hostile messages the most was rising energy prices (29% of the references). The negative tone of this debate is understandable since, according to a Eurobarometer poll from Fall 2022, 87% Lithuanians [believed](#) that rising energy prices had affected their purchasing power. At the same time, the research showed that this hardship does not undermine the support for Ukraine since most respondents (70%) were convinced that the Russian aggression is to blame for this problem and continued to support cut for the emergency supplies from Russia.



Geo-political views of sources marked by IRI



Name	posts count	interactions median	posts	interactions	sh
LRT	953,00	1 717,50	414	774,00	
TV3 televizija	904,00	1 337,00	357	979,00	
15min	858,00	1 914,50	273	949,00	
Irytas.lt	758,00	2 111,50	273	390,00	
DELFI.lt	595,00	1 179,50	229	944,00	
Mokslo ir technologijų pasaulis - Technologijos.lt	666,00	943,00	194	708,00	
Dalia Grybauskaitė	2,00	158 010,00	158	010,00	
Gitanas Nausėda	59,00	22 798,00	128	568,00	
Locked N' Loaded	88,00	8 876,50	103	765,00	
Respublika.lt	182,00	2 346,50	97	788,00	
Lietuvos valstiečių ir žaliųjų sąjunga	33,00	16 773,50	95	847,00	
Mindaugas Puidokas	21,00	20 753,50	91	699,00	

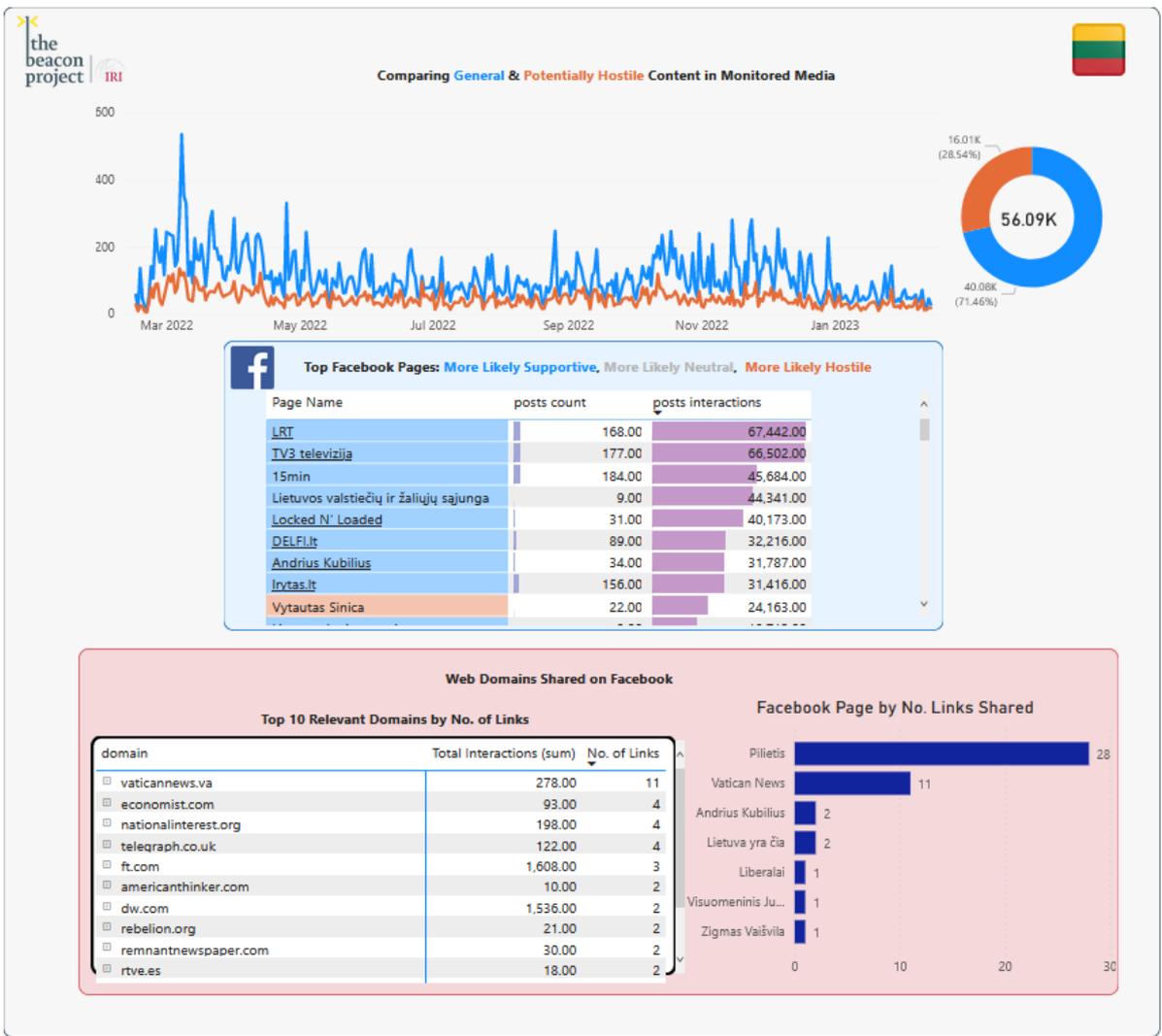
Lithuanian information space consisted of only a negligible number of platforms expressing pro-Russian positions. The majority of influential Facebook pages were mostly supportive to Ukraine. The consistent support was for instance



pronounced by [Oleg Surajev](#) or [Laisvès TV](#). Surajev, a Russian speaker himself, and previously known as a stand-up comedian, just in a few months since the war broke out became one of the harshest pro-Ukrainian activists in the country, initiating many movements to support country in war, as well as opening volunteer-driven Lithuanian organization [1K fund](#). At the same time, the whole team behind Laisvès TV has been tirelessly working on the same pro-Ukrainian basis, widely spreading the message about the war, being part of most of the fundraisers, etc. The potentially hostile narratives were spread by websites Respublika and politician MP Mindaugas Puidokas. Outlet [Respublika.lt](#) has been known as Kremlin-sympathetic portal for years now, and the start of the war has only confirmed the previous notion. It kept publishing biased information, using clickbait headlines, causing panic among the population or trying to divide them based on very sensitive topics. As Respublika's [page on Facebook](#) is followed by more than 76K social media users, it is one of the most influential pages of a highly questionable quality and value basis. Meanwhile, politician [Mindaugas Puidokas](#) has been known for spreading pro-Kremlin propaganda in the Parliament and representing the Labour Party (Darbo Partija) which has always been associated with Russia's influence efforts in the country.



Energy Security



- The topic of energy was the second most discussed of analyzed topics (with 56,088 notes) with the share of 29% of potentially hostile messages. Significant spikes in the debate occurring during the spring reflects ongoing debates about cutting of energy supplies from Russia. The intensification of the debate in the fall is possible to interpret as a run-up to the unpredictable situation in the winter. However, as it was already mentioned the presence of potentially hostile narratives did not transform into the undermining of the support for Ukraine.
- The majority of the most influential Facebook pages participating in the debate on this topic were supportive



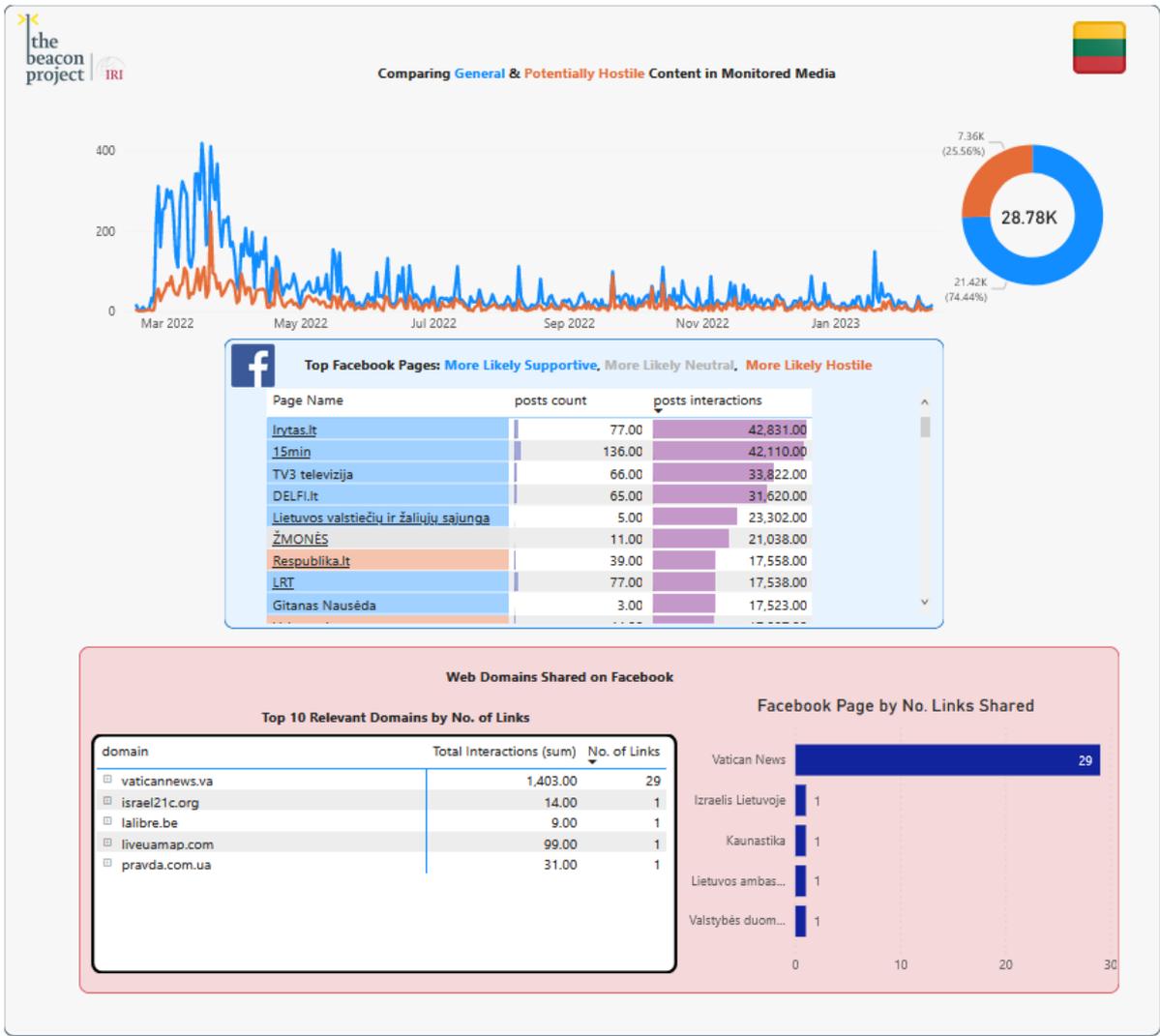
of Ukraine. The exception was Vytautas Sinica, a right-wing party “The National Alliance” representative, who fully followed his nationalist stance and claimed that such a decision ignores the well-being of ordinary citizens of Lithuania.

- Lithuanian debate about energy was also shaped by the messages from problematic sources from the U.S. environment – mainly right-leaning websites American Thinker and National Interest. Their main translator into the Lithuanian debate Facebook [profile Pilietis](#). Even though the page was repeatedly presented as a fake profile, it is still actively spreading disinformation, diminishing support for Ukraine and pushing a strong anti-government narrative for its audience.

Risk Assessment: High



Anti-Refugees



- The anti-refugee topic was found to be among the most utilized ones for the dissemination of potentially hostile narratives among the main narratives analyzed in the study. Throughout the year, all media outlets in Lithuania consistently covered the refugee topic, as it was within the most common ones, closely related both to Ukraine and to Lithuania: refugees fleeing the country in war right after the start of the invasion quite often picked Lithuania as their go-to place.
- As the topic has been widely covered within all types of Lithuanian media, Facebook pages of most influential and biggest outlets (lrytas.lt, 15min.lt or TV3 televizija) mainly held a positive stance on the issue.



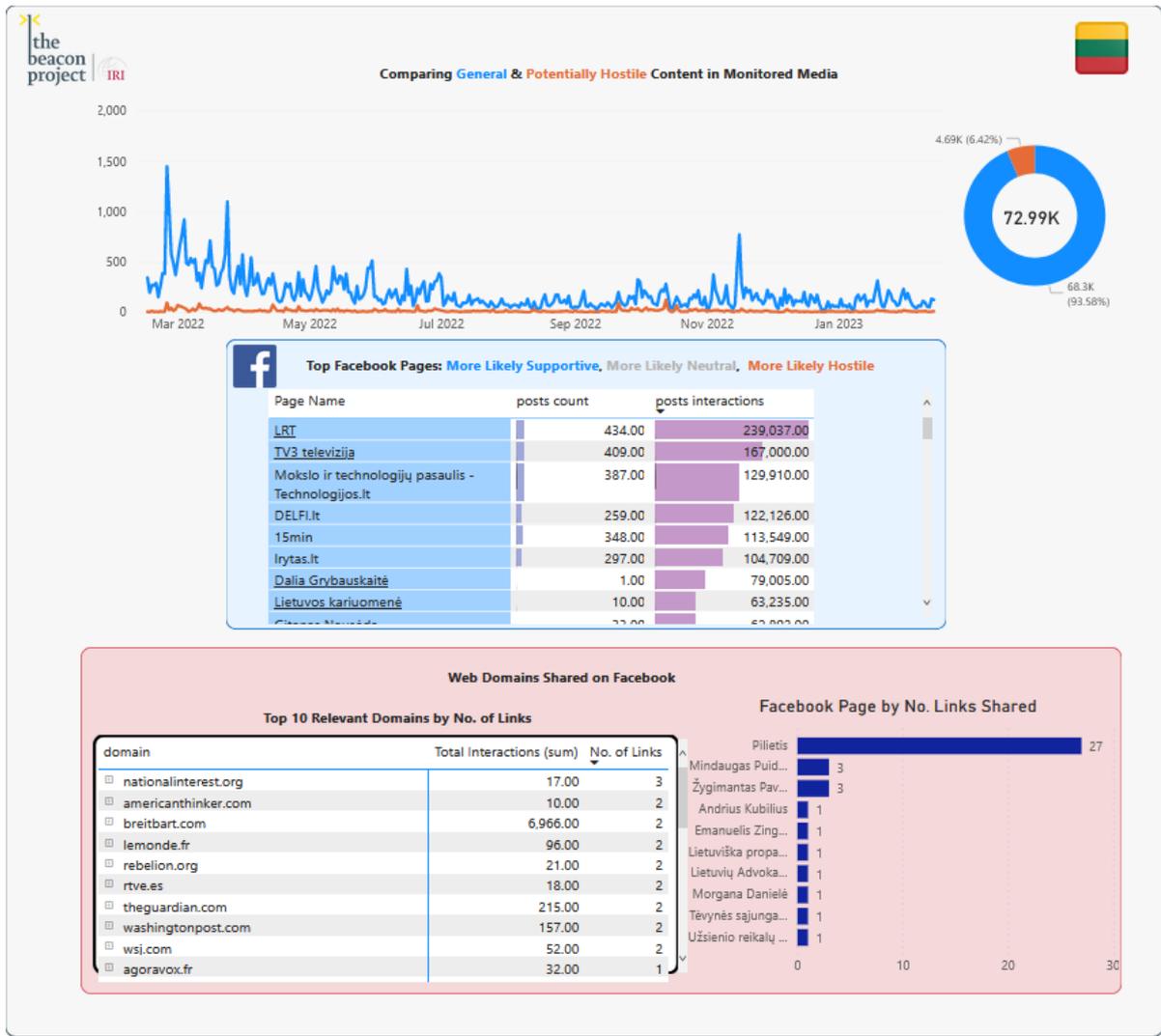
Publications were encouraging to provide help to the new incomers, promoting volunteer centers, praising local companies, who decided to help Ukrainians to integrate in the country. Considering hostile Facebook

- profiles, the page of Respublika. It has been among the leaders in the field of fuelling anti-refugees narrative. It mainly exercised the fears that Ukrainians will take locals' jobs, abuse their children in schools, drain the country's resources, generally misbehave, etc.
- Cross-referencing links shared on Facebook on refugees topic resulted in only five domains in general. All of them were generic, with no information threats identified in the Lithuania's case.

Risk Assessment: High



Anti-NATO



- Messages related to NATO contained the least amount of potentially hostile content from the analyzed topics – around 7%. This reveals the generally positive sentiment of Lithuanian society toward NATO and the country’s membership in the Alliance. Analysis shows that the biggest peak of potentially hostile news in Lithuania considering the role of the NATO alliance was right after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, as people started to doubt the competencies of NATO and wonder whether it would secure Lithuania in case of any kind of militaristic danger.

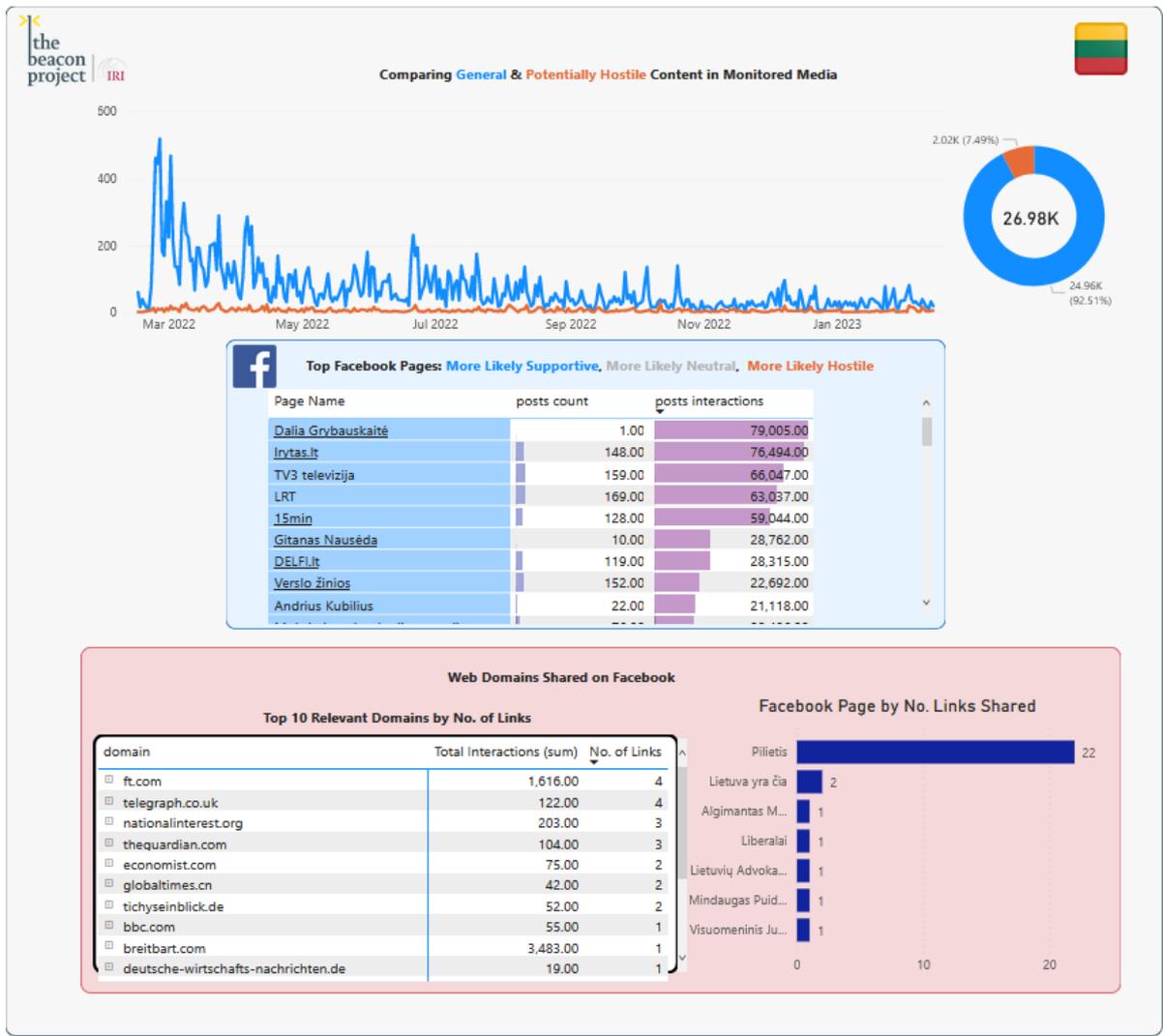


- LRT Facebook page has been the flagman of positive NATO image in the digital media of Lithuania. Page that belongs to the national broadcaster has not doubted the effectiveness of NATO and many times appreciated the fact that Lithuania is a part of the alliance. Even though TOP 10 Facebook pages were generally supportive in this case, the most active hostile actor on Facebook platform has been [Mindaugas Puidokas](#). Public figure with over 57K followers on Facebook alone was actively diminishing the role of NATO, blaming it for fuelling the war in Ukraine and questioning its capabilities.
- Messages from problematic sources from the U.S. environment – mainly right-leaning websites American Thinker and National Interest again tried to shape Lithuanians' perspective, this time - on NATO. Their main translator into the Lithuanian debate was a Facebook [profile Pilietis](#). It alone shared more links on Facebook than all the other top Facebook pages combined.

Risk Assessment: *Low*



Anti-Sanctions



- 7.5% of messages in Lithuania media related to the sanctions imposed on Russia contained potentially hostile messages. The main peaks in activity around the sanctions topic were mostly connected with the [Kalinigrad blockade](#) and the introduction of new sanctions packages by the EU. The level of activity around the topic of sanctions has been slightly declining since the peak at the end of February/beginning of March but has not disappeared completely up until these days.
- Most engaged Facebook profiles within this narrative have been supporting the sanctions applied to Russia.



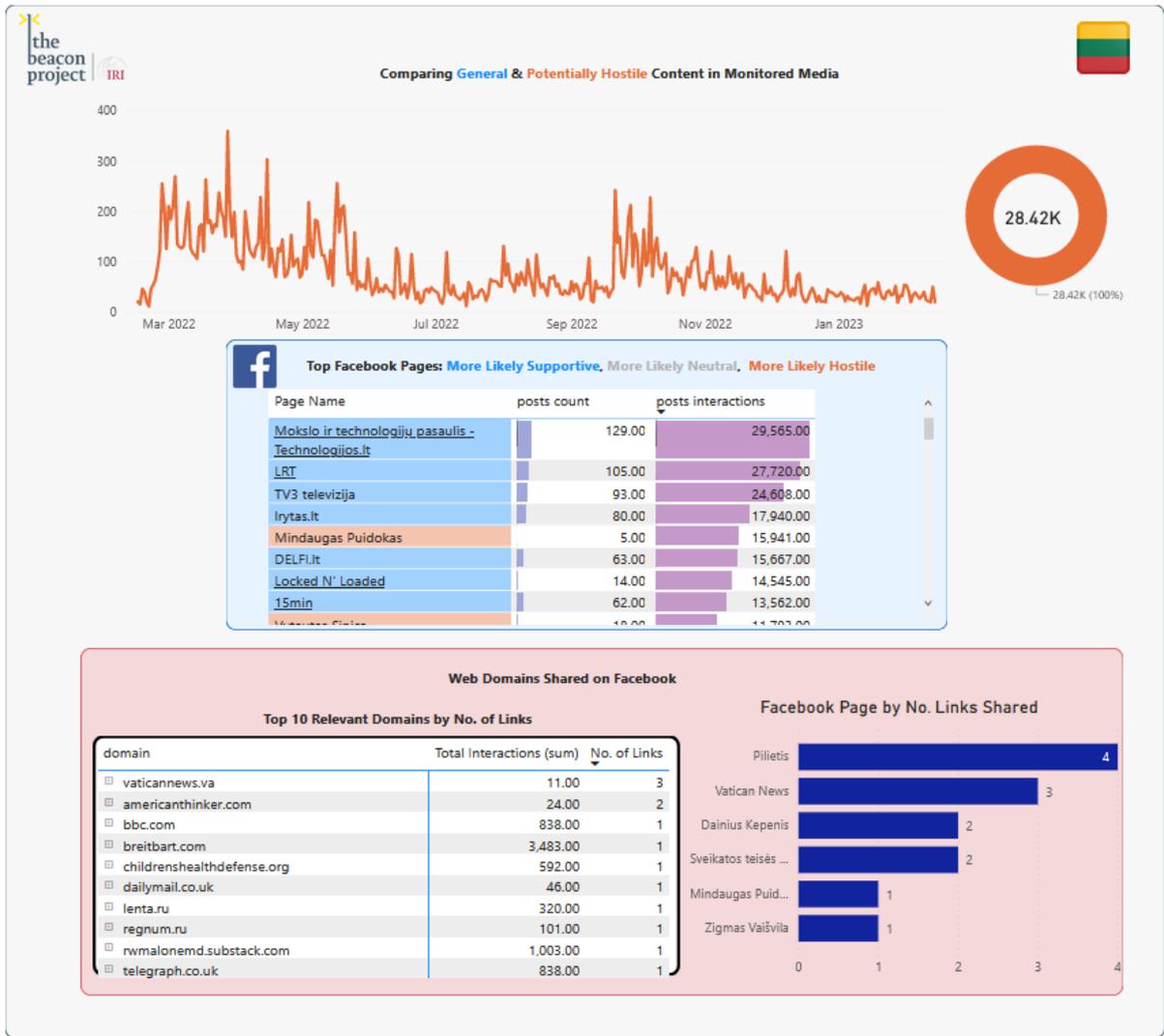
However, efforts to spread hostile messages were still present. Main hostile Facebook accounts (Respublika.lt, Mindaugas Puidokas, Dainius Kепенis) targeted local authorities and blamed them for making “absurd” and “dangerous” decisions that will eventually only harm Lithuania and drag the country into an even more massive financial crisis. Therefore, these profiles together with an anti-sanction stance, were further fuelling the anti-governmental narratives in the country, aiming to destabilize the current political situation.

- Cross-referencing links that were shared on Facebook resulted in 3 of the top 10 linked to domains being identified as spreaders of disinformation. However, only Pilietis Facebook page shared more links, while the rest resulted in two at most and did not get any traction worth mentioning from the audience.

Risk Assessment: Medium



BioLabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation



Neither the Russian narrative about Ukrainian Nazism nor Ukraine’s escalation of nuclear war or the alleged rise of bio-labs in the country has not gained much traction in the Lithuanian information space.

- The number of posts related to bio labs has remained very low since the start of the Russian invasion. Disinformation related to the narrative was mostly prevailing in the messages of manipulated information about alleged U.S. secret biological laboratories in Ukraine and around the country or stating that biolabs are related to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, those attempts gained little success or traction from social media users in Lithuania.

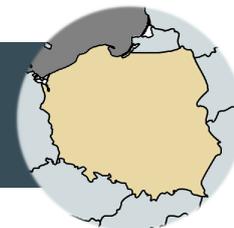


- Regarding the Kremlin narrative about Ukrainian Nazism, it has gained little users' engagement in the Lithuanian information space, being more prominent only at the very beginning of the war. The initial spikes might have occurred while justifying the start of the invasion. Later on, hostile messages within this narrative focused on biased information about the Azov Regiment. Despite these attempts, news holding Nazism narrative has steadily declined since its primary peaks.
- Considering content related to the nuclear threat, efforts were visible to promote the further Russian shelling of the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant and to accuse the 'western world' (primarily - U.S. and NATO) of provoking Putin to use nuclear weapons. Some Kremlin-aligned actors used the fear of a potential nuclear attack to promote the urgent need for peace talks. Despite the prominent efforts, this narrative has not gathered lots of traction in the Lithuanian information space.
- Overviewing all three topics, among the top 10 Facebook pages with the most interactions were mainly sources debunking and denying the disinformation about them. These statistics confirm the shallow impact of such narratives in the Lithuanian information space and their minimal reach. Only the profile of Kremlin-aligned politician Mindaugas Puidokas made it among the top pages, spreading disinformation on his profile on any topic possible.
- The number of references in these topics to sites known for spreading disinformation was highly limited, usually reaching at most two references per person/outlet. Among those who shared the problematic pages once again there were already mentioned Kremlin-sympathetic politicians Mindaugas Puidokas and Dainius Kėpenis, as well as the fake Facebook profile spreading propaganda online - Pilietis. Notably, the page of Pilietis has been recognized in almost all categories of narratives, meaning that page is pure propaganda, promoting biased information on any topic that would be favorable for the Kremlin.

Risk Assessment: *Low*



Poland



Authors: Michał Krawczyk - Kosciuszko Institute

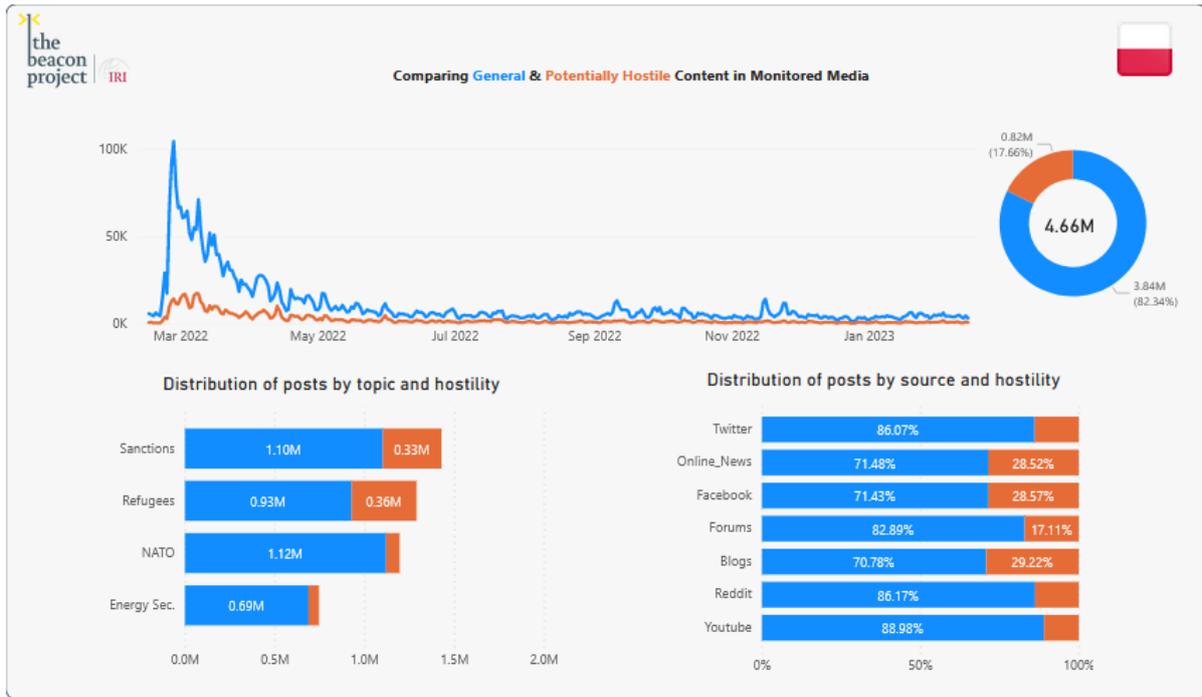
Top Line Summary

One year after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Poland remains a staunch supporter of Ukraine, providing significant financial and military aid. [Recent surveys indicate that 90% of Poles believe that Poland should continue to provide assistance to Ukraine.](#) However, the ongoing conflict has had a significant impact on Polish society and attitudes towards the war and refugees are changing.

The deepening economic crisis and rising inflation are the most important factors in changing attitudes towards the war and refugees. Many Poles fear a war-induced decline in living standards and a potential war on Polish territory. As a result, support for financial support of Ukrainian refugees by the Polish state is declining slightly. [Recent polls indicate that almost 14% of respondents changed their stance towards Ukrainian refugees to more negative.](#) The influence of Russian disinformation is also growing, [with an increasing number of Poles agreeing with the theses presented by Russian propaganda.](#) Far-right politicians and pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian activists are trying to take advantage of this trend by building their support on anti-refugee and anti-Western narratives. Outside of these circles, the Polish political scene seems to be united by a consensus on viewing aid to Ukraine as Poland's *raison d'état*.



Media Overview



In general, more than 4,661,579 pieces of online content were collected based on keyword matching of monitored media in Poland. Keywords that indicate a higher probability of potentially containing messaging hostile to support for Ukraine were found in 17.66% (823,417 pieces). Considering the number of Ukrainian refugees currently in the country, it is not surprising that of the four primary topics analyzed the refugees topic received the highest proportion of potentially hostile content. This figure is based on matching keywords that have an increased likelihood to be associated with a more negative context around the refugees. The NATO topic, on the other hand, received the lowest proportion of potentially hostile references.

The most utilized theme containing potentially hostile narratives was the anti-refugee narrative, which comprised 28,07% of the analyzed potentially hostile content. Anti-refugee content resulted in the most hostile and negative responses on social media, according to the study. Although the Polish language messages are mostly positive on the topic of Ukrainian refugees, there is a consistent level of the negative content throughout the year. It may pose a particular information threat in combination with other topics related to war, especially sanctions, rising inflation, the so called “war fatigue”, and it may result in decline in the willingness of Poles to economically support refugees from Ukraine, and even to reduce the level of aid to Ukraine. This issue can play an important part and be used in the upcoming parliamentary elections in Poland in autumn this year.

The anti-Russian sanctions topic was the second most used in Poland, with 22,88% of messages potentially hostile. It was largely taken over by the political discussion in Poland. In the context of potentially hostile narratives, while there is little risk of reducing support for sanctions and the economic fallout on Russia, the deepening economic and energy



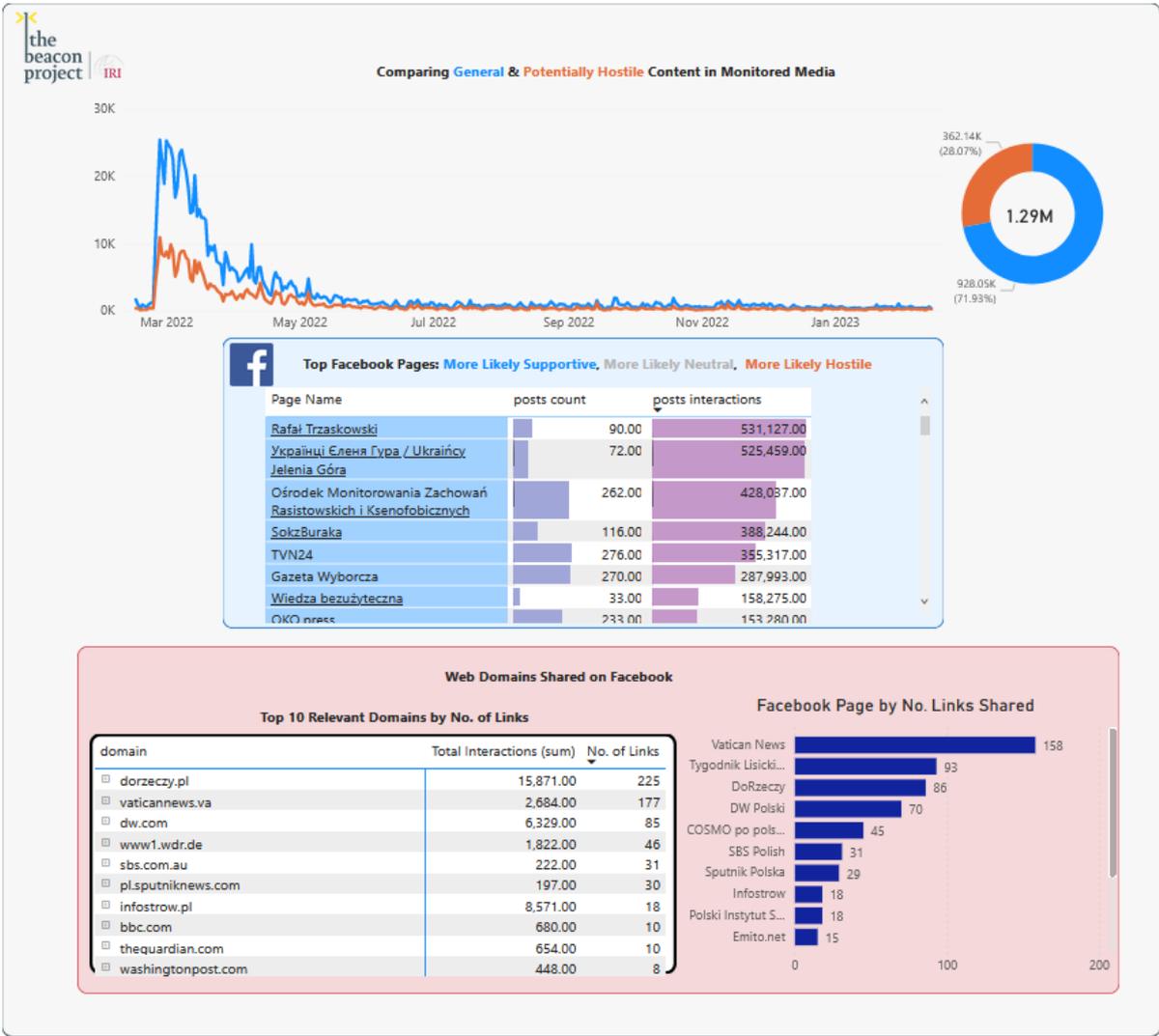
crisis is leading to more voices calling for a reduction in economic aid for refugees from Ukraine. This may increase susceptibility to the anti-refugee narratives propagated by far-right parties, which may be an important development in the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Narratives connected with undermining Polish energy security and those anti-NATO ones did not receive too much traction in Poland (energy security – 7,84%, and anti-NATO – 6,33%). This can be considered as an example of resilience of the Polish society towards most pro-Russian/anti-Western content. Although support for providing military aid to Ukraine and increasing the NATO presence in Poland remains very high, attention should be drawn to the growing consolidation of pro-Russian circles and their attempt to create an anti-war movement. This must be watched particularly closely, especially in the context of the upcoming Polish parliamentary elections.

In the Polish case, the most vocal and active actors on all of those major narratives are far-right actors and far-right biased media outlets, which often use anti-Ukrainian, anti-Western and conspiracy messaging, combined with content coinciding with Russian state propaganda and disinformation. Based on review of the most prominent Facebook pages posting about the monitored topics the vast majority were considered to be more pro-west leaning (87%) and more likely to be posting in support of Ukraine (86%). In total 3.34% of the pages were assessed to be more likely to contain messaging that may undermine support for Ukraine which were predominately being posted by nationalist (10%) and anti-West (1.6%) sources. The Facebook pages that received the most interactions related to the monitored topics in the last year were considered to largely support Ukraine - 10 out of top 10 of them.



Anti-Refugee



- The issue of refugees was found to be the most commonly utilized topic for the dissemination of potentially hostile narratives. It was determined that approximately 28,07% of the over 1.2 million messages identified were potentially hostile in nature. Extensive use of the refugee theme to try to divide Polish society, often by highlighting the cost of maintaining refugees or using historical narratives to fuel conflict between Poles and Ukrainians, however, these have largely failed to resonate with the general public as the majority of media and organic content posted by individuals has been supportive of the refugees.
- The most prominent Facebook pages discussing the topic reflect the assessment of the general public's



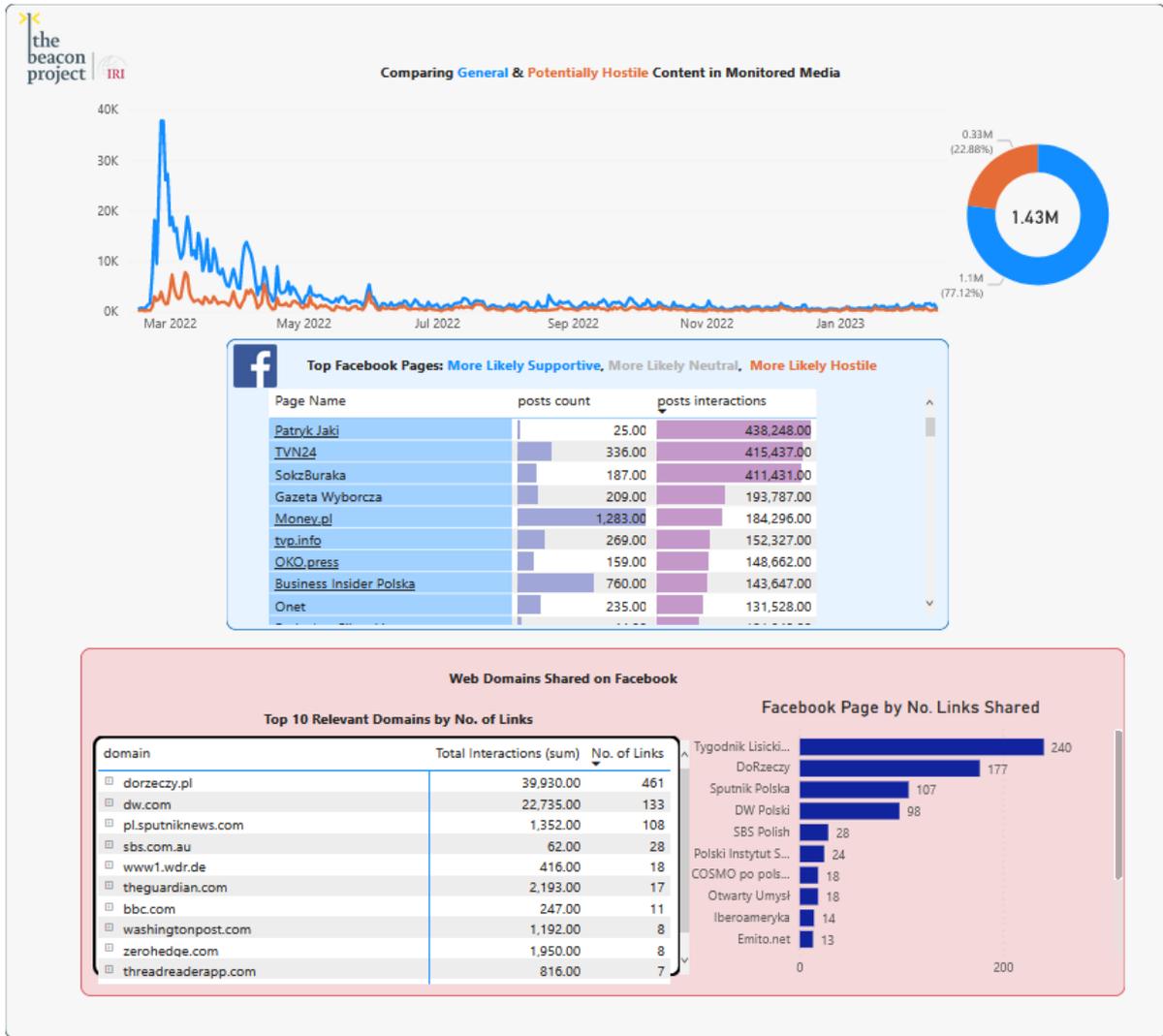
- attitude with 10 out of the top 10 pages by post interactions were from pages that were assessed to be more likely supportive of Ukraine. The most popular among potentially hostile was a page of Ruch Narodowy – a far-right and nationalistic party, known for its anti-Ukrainian stance. We could observe Ruch Narodowy's active role in creating anti-refugees sentiment, used later to gain Political profits.
- Cross-referencing links that were shared on Facebook resulted in 2 of the top 10 that linked to domains being identified as spreaders of disinformation. These were: dorzeczy.pl and Polish version of Sputnik. Whereas Sputnik has limited reach and no significant influence on the general public, dorzeczy.pl is a website of a Polish conservative-liberal weekly, with around 30 thousand copies sold every week across the country.

Assessed Audience: *Mainly far-right and nationalist supporters which are a small, but not insignificant proportion of the population.*

Current Risk Assessment: *Medium*



Anti-Sanctions



- Around 23% of messages related to the sanctions topic contained potentially hostile messages, the second-highest score among the topics analyzed. These messages focused on proving the alleged ineffectiveness of sanctions and blaming the government for imposing them without considering the impact on citizens. Hostile attempts also tried to tie the topic with other EU policies, promoting a “rational policy” that prioritizes Polish interests and bashing Germany for its hesitant actions.
- The top 10 most active Facebook pages on the topic of sanctions were composed of sources rated as generally supportive of Ukraine. The most interactions among them were the posts of Sok z Buraka - a satirical page commenting on political life in Poland and TVN24 - a service of the largest Polish private television.



Among the most popular, there was a place for politicians from the ruling coalition and the opposition – Patryk Jaki and Rafał Trzaskowski. This demonstrates the general support for sanctions hitting Russia and indicates a cross-political consensus on the issue among the major parties and media.

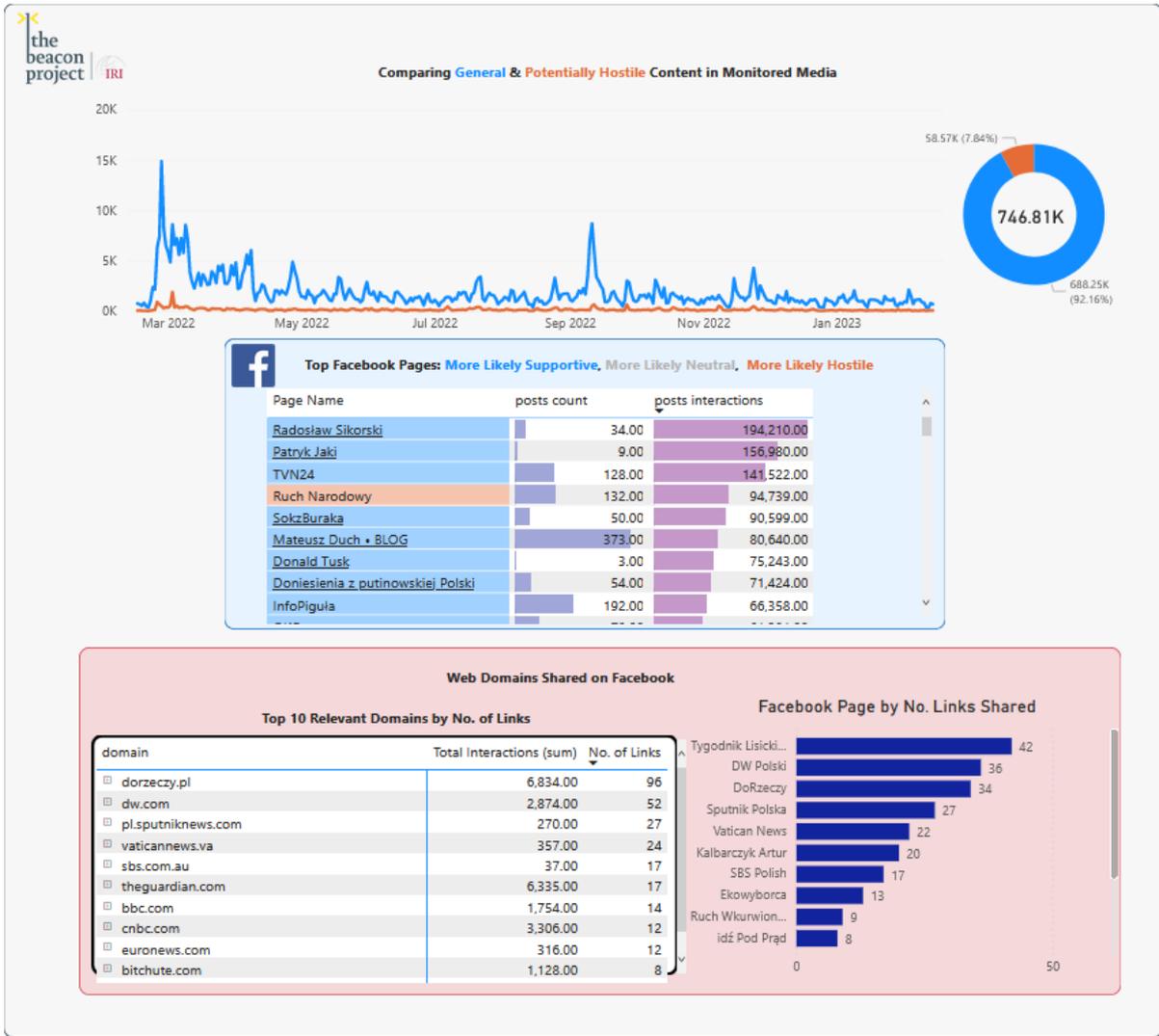
- Among the most shared sites spreading disinformation regarding sanctions were dorzeczy.pl, Sputnik Poland and zerohedge.com. While Sputnik was used to spread direct Russian disinformation mainly by Facebook pages linked to the site itself, content from dorzeczy.pl was often used by anti-Ukrainian and anti-refugee circles profiting off the website's anti-western messages. Zerohedge.com is a far-right libertarian financial blog and news aggregator, known for spreading conspiracy and anti-establishment content. It was used mostly by Polish financial bloggers who mixed economic and cryptocurrency content with pro-Russian narratives.

Assessed Audience: Supporters of Konfederacja party, general public

Risk Assessment: Low



Energy Security



- Energy-related content on Facebook in Poland has been found to generate 8% of messages categorized as potentially hostile, with the third-highest score among the topics analyzed. The discussion around energy issues in Poland has been highly politicized, with three main groups participating in the conversation and blaming each other for the energy crisis. Pro-Russian sources have also been actively using the energy crisis to undermine countermeasures against Moscow and portray the West, including Poland and Ukraine, as responsible for the crisis.
- Among the Facebook pages generating the most interactions on the topic of energy, those categorized as



strongly positive for Ukraine had a decided advantage. The only exception to the top 10 list was the page of Ruch Narodowy (en. National Movement), a far-right and nationalist political group. The content they generated on this topic focused on criticizing the “too broad and too fast” sanctions imposed on Russia, particularly regarding the ban on coal imports from Russia to Poland.

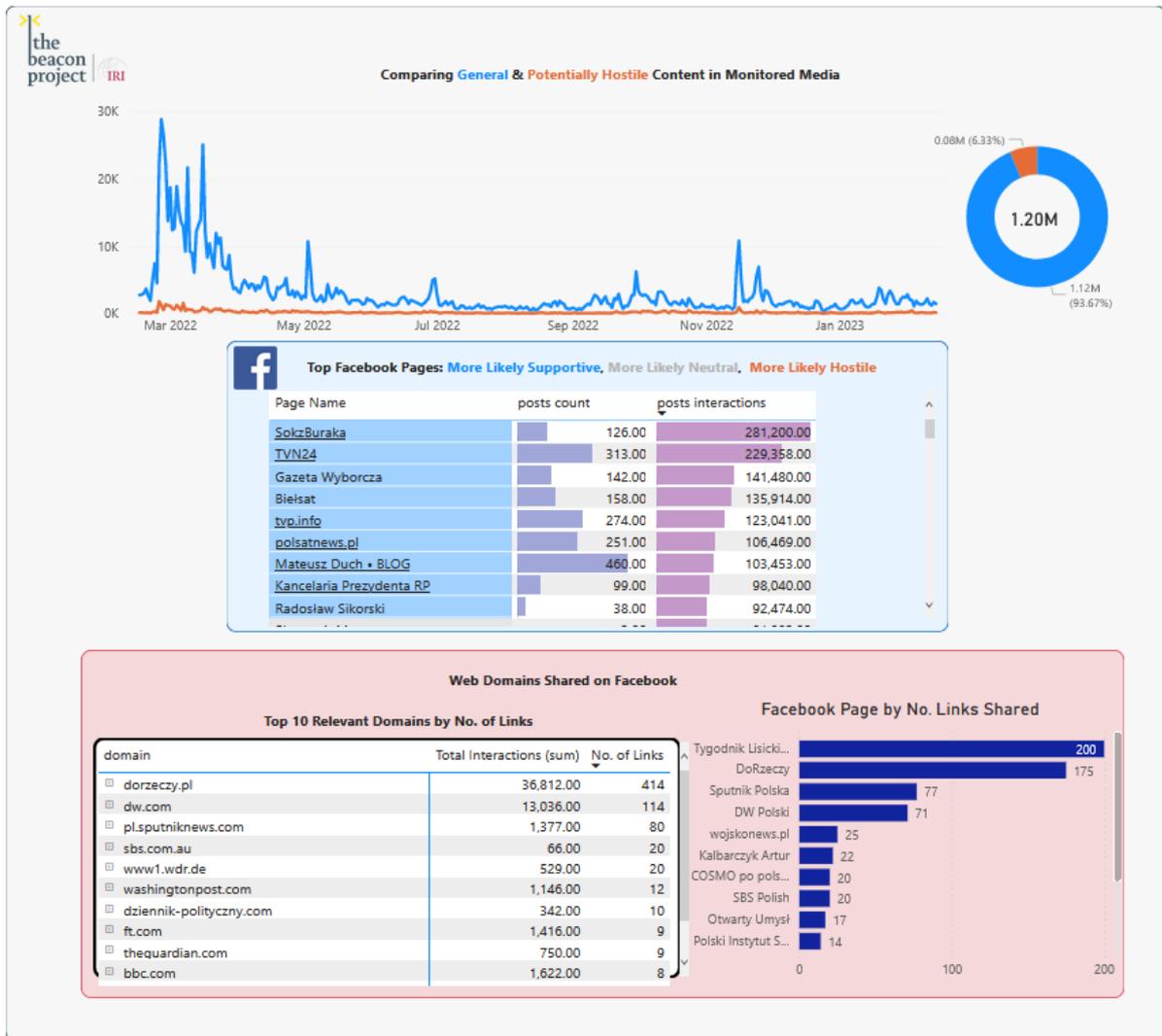
- The main ‘problematic’ websites listed on the source list for the Energy topic were again dorzeczy.pl, and Sputnik Poland. Both of them were utilized to spread potentially hostile narratives towards Ukraine and refugees, using the context of energy crisis. Links to these media sites, in addition to their Facebook pages themselves, were shared mainly by fringe media and bloggers known for spreading conspiracy theories and Russian propaganda.

Assessed Audience: General public

Risk Assessment: Low



Anti-NATO



- A study of online content related to NATO and military assistance to Ukraine found that only 6% contained potentially hostile content, indicating positive sentiment towards these topics among Polish society. However, the study also identified three main groups spreading potentially hostile content, including columnists and geopoliticians who question the benefits of aiding Ukraine, far-right politicians building resentment towards Ukraine, and conspiracy theorists spreading unfounded ideas about the conflict. The study also notes the growing consolidation of pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian milieus, which are rallying around the slogan “it’s not our war” and pushing for the normalization of relations with Russia.



- The top 10 pages generating the most interactions on Facebook were dominated by those categorized as generally supportive of Ukraine. Among them were pages of major media outlets - both public and private - as well as pages of political figures from different political camps. This indicates strong public support for the NATO issue and military aid to Ukraine.
- Among the media identified as disinformation spreaders, Russian propaganda sources, such as Sputnik Poland and Dziennik Polityczny, were most popular on the Polish-language Facebook around the NATO topic. These sources were introduced into the Polish information space through alternative blogs like Otwarty Umysł (en. Open Mind), which blended conspiracy theories and alternative content with direct Kremlin propaganda narratives. These observations provide further evidence of the expanding reach of Russian propaganda in the Polish information environment.

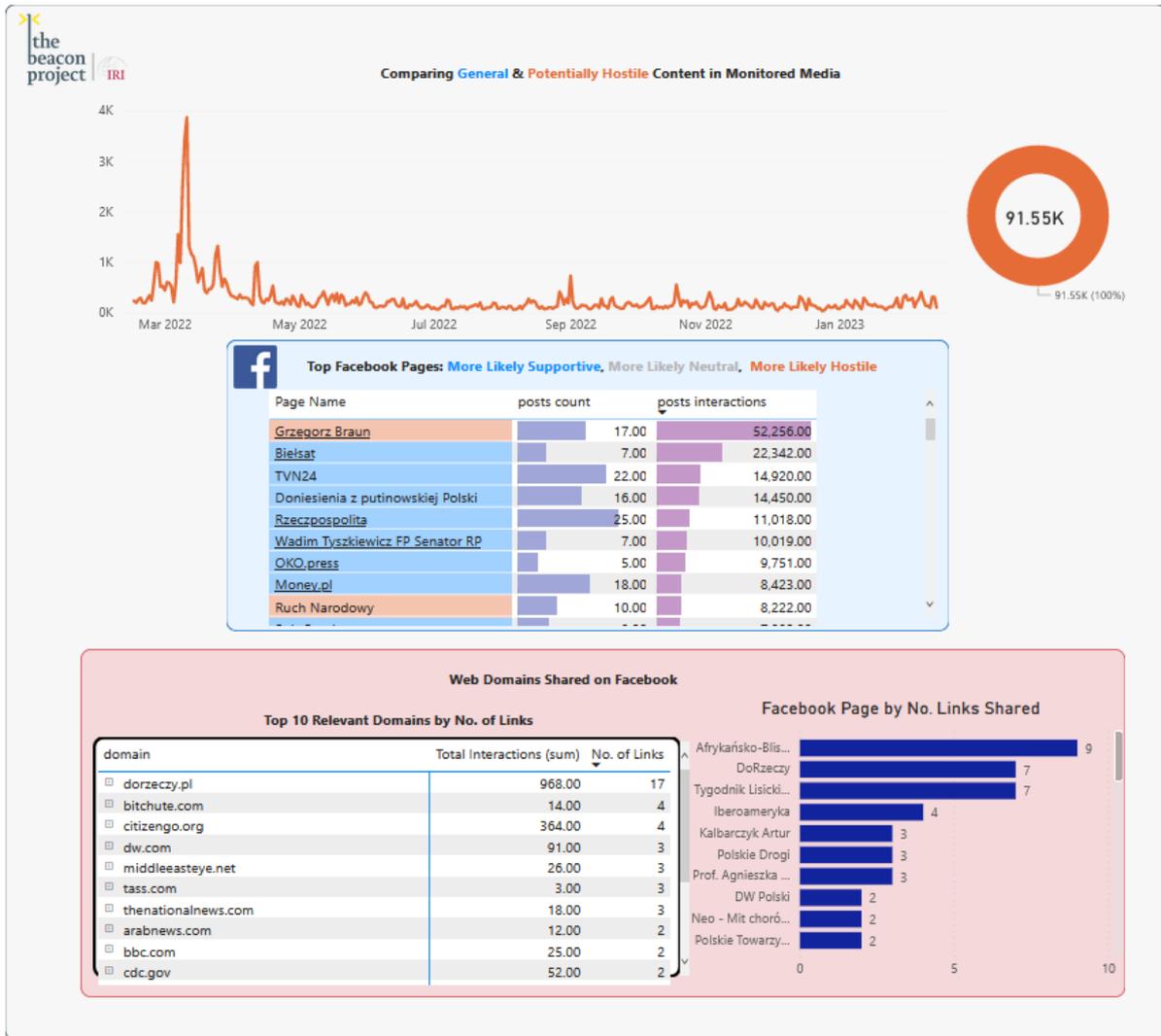
Assessed Audience: Pro-Russian Groups, Conspiracy Followers, Far-right sympathizers and voters

Risk Assessment: Medium



BioLabs, Denazification & Nuclear Escalation

BioLabs:



- After the initial high level of posts related to biolabs at the start of the Russian invasion, the number of posts on this topic remained low, with only a few peaks related to emerging information about the threat of Russian chemical attacks and pro-Russian media propoganda news about US biological laboratories in Ukraine. Disinformation was prevalent in the messages, with false and manipulated information being propagated about alleged US secret biological laboratories in Ukraine. Other thematic areas included linking biolabs to the COVID-19 pandemic and attempts to promote Chinese disinformation narratives accusing the US of carrying out biological terrorism in Ukraine.



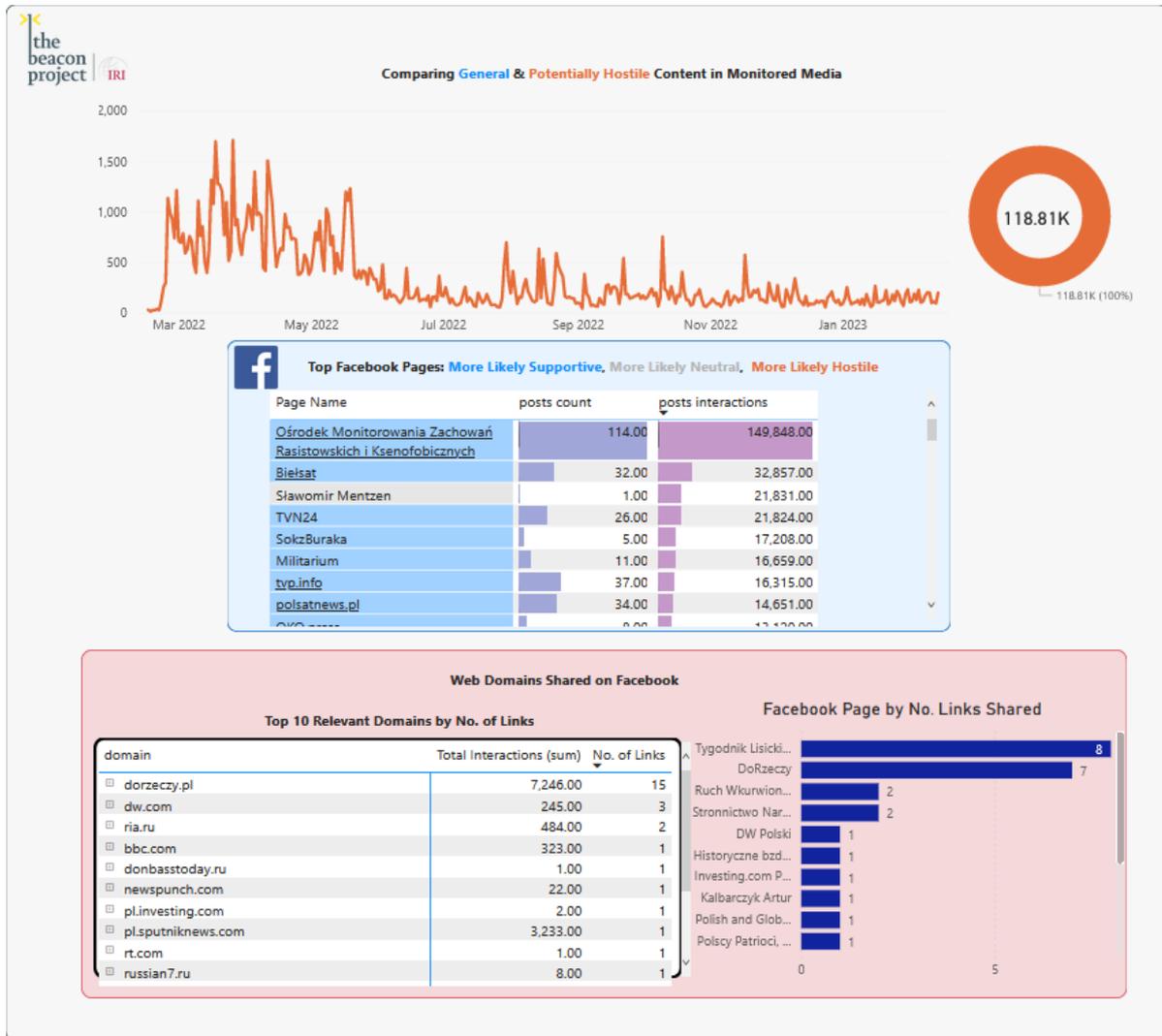
- Among the Facebook sources gathering the most interactions around this topic were two categorized as potentially threatening to Ukraine. These are the page of Gregory Braun, the far-right MP cited earlier, and the National Movement, a far-right nationalist party. They were particularly active on the topic in the period immediately following the full-scale invasion - often using narratives flowing from alternative American sources like Tucker Carlson, losing interest in the months that followed.
- The number of references in the biolabs topic to sites known for spreading disinformation was very low. The top 10 list was dominated by alternative and fringe Western media, as well as Arab News, a pan-Arab site that was used to promote pro-Russian narratives.

Assessed Audience: Conspiracy followers

Risk Assessment: Low



Denazification:



- The Russian narrative about Ukrainian Nazism has not gained much traction in the Polish information space, with only extreme pro-Russian groups and Telegram channels attempting to directly accuse Ukrainians of fascism and Nazism. Hostile messages in this context focused on promoting manipulated narratives about the Azov Regiment and using historical narratives to portray Ukrainians as descendants of Nazis. However, activity in this context has been steadily declining and has barely been discernible in the last few months and was very limited on the Facebook platform analyzed.
- Among the top 10 Facebook pages with the most interactions were mainly sources debunking and denying the denazification narrative. This confirms the very low impact of this narrative in the Polish information space.
- The number of references in denazification topic to sites known for spreading disinformation was very

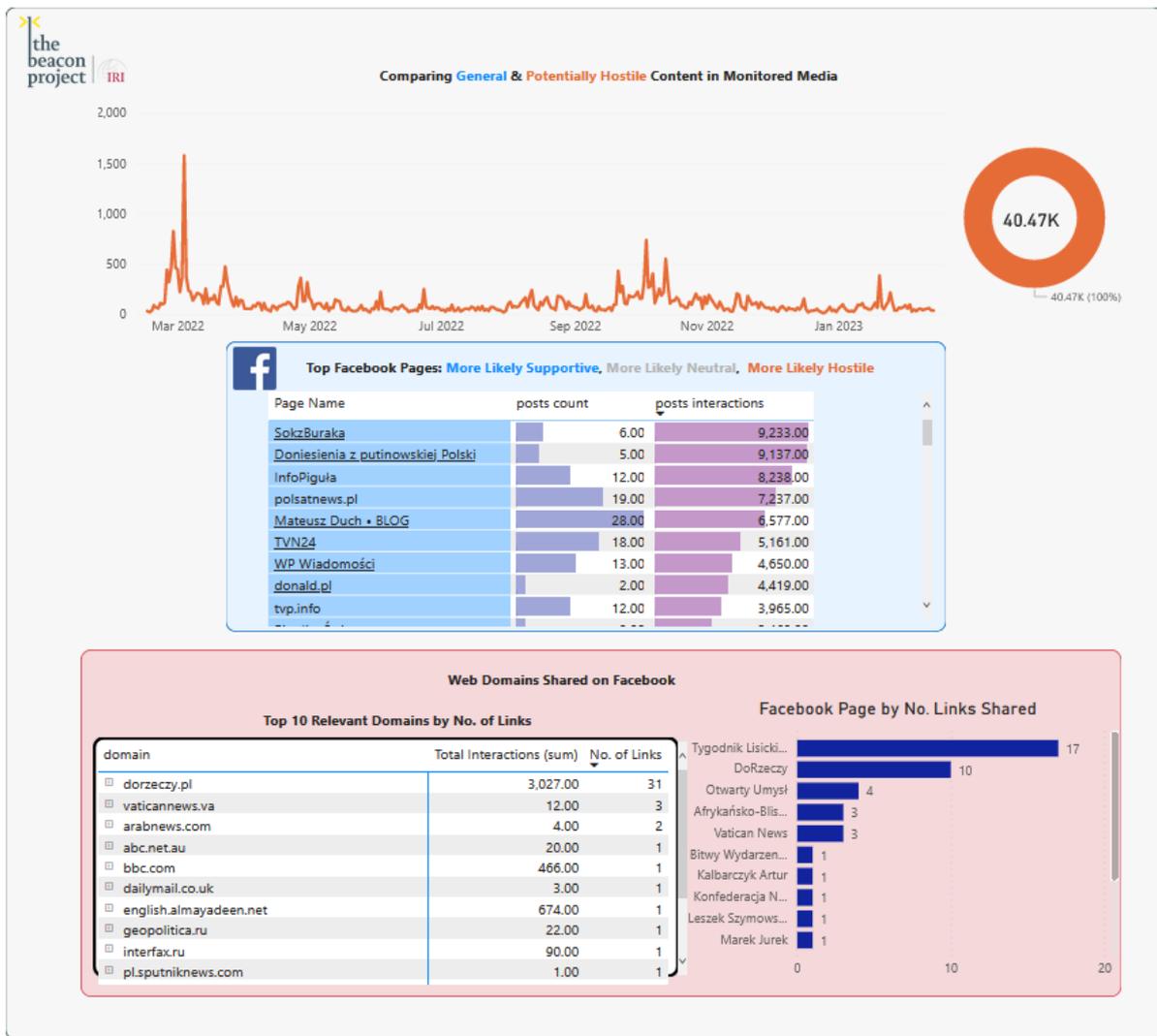


limited. Prominent among them are Russian propaganda sources, such as RT and RIA, used by alternative and extreme pages, but which were quoted in a very limited way.

Assessed Audience: Conspiracy followers

Risk Assessment: Low

Nuclear Escalation:



- Content related to the nuclear threat has been present in the Polish information space since the start of the Russian invasion, with activity increasing mainly in the context of further Russian shelling of the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant and outspoken threats by the Russian Federation suggesting the possibility of



using nuclear weapons. Hostile messages focused on promoting Russian threats to use nuclear weapons and accusing the US and NATO of provoking Putin to use nuclear weapons. Some actors used the fear of a potential nuclear attack to promote false pacifism and reinforce their message about the need to start peace talks, while others spread disinformation about potassium iodide tablets distributed by the Polish government in case of elevated radioactivity levels.

- Again, among the top 10 Facebook pages with the highest number of interactions on this topic were only those categorized as more likely supportive. Although the topic of potential nuclear escalation was present in the Polish news space, the most popular content focused on reassuring the Polish public and criticizing Russia's actions.
- The number of references in the nuclear escalation topic to sites known for spreading disinformation was very limited. Prominent among them are Russian propaganda sources, such as Sputnik Poland and Dziennik Polityczny, used by alternative and extreme pages.

Assessed Audience: Conspiracy followers, general public

Risk Assessment: Low





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