

# **Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine**

## **A Year of Aggression: A Case Study of the Czech Republic**

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# Introduction

February 24, 2023 marked one year since the start of the unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. These events have been accompanied by attempts to undermine support among Ukraine's allies by spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories and generally, hostile narratives towards Ukraine exploiting socially contentious issues. To better track these hostile narratives, the Prague Security Studies Institute researchers joined the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project in their series of reports monitoring the online media space of the Czech Republic, among other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries.

These [Hostile Narrative Briefs](#) have used media monitoring tools such as Pulsar, CrowdTangle, APIs and Python packages to filter and collect articles or posts that mention at least one of the select contentious topics for analysis. 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 from the CEE, keywords that represent general references to the topics were combined with those that are more likely to be used in framing them in a way that could erode support for Ukraine, and are therefore deemed potentially hostile. You can find more about the concept and methodology in the Beacon Project's [report](#) covering 8 countries: Ukraine, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Czech Republic, Germany, Lithuania, and Poland.

The present report delves into the hostile narratives about Ukraine spreading in the Czech information space in the time period of 15 February 2022 – 14 February 2023. The analysis specifically focuses on the most popular Facebook posts based on the number of interactions since Facebook is still the most used social media platform in the country. Beside the main topics of refugees, sanctions, energy security and NATO/military support, the report also touches upon pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives such as denazification of Ukraine, secret biolabs and fear-mongering about nuclear escalation of the war.

## A Case Study of the Czech Republic: Background

After the start of the invasion, the Czech public space and media was dominated by a wave of solidarity and initiatives in support of Ukraine. The governing pro-Western liberal-conservative coalition led by PM Petr Fiala has been actively supportive since the start, including both humanitarian and military aid (by [January 2023](#), over 134.8 million dollars worth of military material), and the [population's support](#) of NATO was the strongest since 1994. However, [by the end of 2022](#), the general interest in the development of the situation in Ukraine lowered by ¼ compared to spring 2022, to less than 60% of the population. Half of the population does not agree with the Czech government's steps in support of Ukraine, with the most significant resistance against providing military material, opposed by 58% of Czechs according to [a poll](#) from January 2023. Due to the economic and energy crisis, the priorities of the population

shifted from post-war reconstruction to solving domestic problems. According to the Czech Ministry of Defense, [strengthened military aid](#) for Ukraine is planned for the upcoming months, but only 36% of Czechs support it, 58% are against extending the aid.

The governing SPOLU (translation: Together) coalition's support [in polls](#) lowered over the year from 29% to 21% and the coalition has been criticized for a slow response to the current economic and energy challenges, not providing enough help to Czech business and citizens, and investing a lot in the aid for Ukraine, on the other hand. The biggest political opposition to helping Ukraine is represented by the far to far-right leaning Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party led by Tomio Okamura who is a loud voice on Facebook, but the party's preferences remain around 10% since the start of the invasion

(although at some points they rose to 13%). There was also recorded an increase in the support of the largest opposition movement ANO led by former PM Andrej Babiš, who probably brought in new voters thanks to his recent presidential campaign, albeit an unsuccessful

one. Nevertheless, ANO's preferences rose from 28% to 32%, and the party tends to exploit the topic of Ukraine in their anti-government narratives. It is precisely the supporters of SPD and Babiš who express [the largest opposition](#) to strengthening military aid for Ukraine.

## Anti-Refugees

### Key Findings:

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 (right to far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy/SPD) and his allies criticize the government for not doing enough to support their own citizens and manage the energy crisis while it ["obviously"](#) has billions to invest in social benefits for refugees. One of the primary narratives was that the refugees are [a financial burden](#) on national services overwhelmed by the growing number of beneficiaries in need of support in the area of energy costs, healthcare, and housing.

This narrative was also revived when the Chamber of Deputies approved the new national budget for 2023 at the end of November. According to [sources](#) using hostile narratives, the Czech government helps Ukrainians more than its own citizens and started to be referred to as "a Ukrainian government" itself. Allegedly, the government is only defending the interests of Washington, Brussels, and Kyiv. The (far) right generally promotes the stance that no more Ukrainian refugees should be accepted while Czechs are struggling to meet basic needs in the current economic situation. Overall, from the 25,379 Facebook posts mentioning refugees, we identified 16.9% of potentially hostile content with Okamura's page receiving by far the most interactions. 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 ANO's leader Andrej Babiš whose populist ANO movement engaged in this criticism.

### Assessed Audience:

*far-right supporters, opposition supporters*

### Current Risk Assessment: **Low-Medium**

### Potential Impact:

Besides potentially lowering solidarity towards refugees, these narratives also undermine the government by attempting to portray it as one that looks after Ukrainian security interests over those of the Czech state and people. 73% of Czechs already [think](#) refugees are treated better than Czech citizens. [Polls](#) have recorded a decrease in support for the governing SPOLU coalition from 28% to 23% over the year while Okamura's SPD is stable at 10% and Babiš's ANO is climbing up. This points to increased potential for political instability which could weaken support for the government's policies, including those in support of Ukraine. [Recent polls](#) show that among the V4 countries, 25% of Czechs perceive Ukrainian refugees negatively, while 73% have a positive attitude towards them. Another poll also [shows](#) that 43% of Czechs believe there are many criminals among the refugees from Ukraine. This could increase political instability with support going to parties that take a more critical or openly hostile stance toward Ukraine.

Although the Czech population's [support of aid](#) for Ukrainian refugees was slightly decreasing throughout the year (from 65% in March 2022 to 53% in October), new [polling](#) from January 2023 showed the support has been strengthened at 60%. A more long-term threat is posed by the misuse of refugees in political in-fighting and anti-government narratives, which relied more on economic proxy topics before.

# Anti-Sanctions

## Key Findings:

Out of the 14,388 Facebook posts on sanctions, we identified 22.5% of potentially hostile content. Hostile sources, which dominated the most popular posts about sanctions, called for peace negotiations instead of “destructive” and inefficient sanctions. 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. For example, when Russian oil stopped flowing to the Czech Republic via the Druzhba pipeline in August, also due to energy mix diversification efforts, hostile sources, including [the far-left](#), manipulatively claimed it was the sanctions and/or Ukraine who stopped the oil supplies. Hungarian PM Orbán was also popular among the hostile sources, especially his stances which could be represented by the statement: “*What we need is no more sanctions but immediate peace*” [quoted](#) by Czech right-wing politicians.

Anti-sanctions narratives also relied on a strong anti-government rhetoric. They [blamed](#) the government of Petr Fiala (ODS) for inflation and claimed that his priority is supporting Ukraine and continuing the armed conflict, above Czech interests. This messaging was intensified in response to the [training](#) of Ukrainian soldiers in the Libavá military training area in eastern Czech Republic. Far-right politicians claimed it would cost Czech taxpayers almost a billion Czech Crowns (~€41 million) while Czech citizens and businesses receive no help facing the economic crisis. An alleged lack of support for big businesses in comparison to the neighboring countries was another frequent [line](#) of messaging from extremist politicians. SPD party members accused the government of scapegoating Russia for the price increases for which they blamed misguided government policies. Towards

the end of 2022, the discussion focused more on energy prices, mainly blamed on the current government or the United States.

## Assessed Audience:

*opposition supporters, possibly extended to general public due to general economic concerns*

## Current Risk Assessment: **Medium**

## Potential Impact:

With [polls](#) suggesting that 66% of Czechs think the government does not do enough to address high energy prices, there is a receptive audience to narratives that explain the increased cost of living through sanctions or other Czech government policies, especially when there is also a connection to the sensitive topic of providing military support.

According to [recent polls](#), tackling the energy prices and generally increasing costs of living are the two main topics Czechs want the government to address. Rising prices, inflation, and cost of living ranks as the main issue facing the EU according to [polling](#) in the Czech Republic. Since criticism of the government’s domestic financial assistance policies is widely promoted by opposition parties, 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 labeling Fiala’s cabinet as a proxy Ukrainian government interested in looking after Ukrainian interests over those of the Czech citizens. As the war continues and the financial contribution of Ukrainian allies increases, the potential for political opposition parties to exploit this increases the risk for political instability and further support for Ukraine.

# Energy Security

## Key Findings:

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 and criticizes his lack of help to the people. The most active and interacted with critic was SPD's leader Tomio Okamura. He often [criticized](#) the government for its allegedly insufficient crisis measures while the government continues to provide aid to Ukraine at the expense of Czech citizens. He also claims that the Czech Republic will invest billions in training Ukrainian soldiers while Czech citizens are unable to pay their energy bills. Considering the popularity of his posts, this narrative has the potential to further undermine solidarity of Czech right-wing voters with Ukraine. His posts dominated the online debate by blaming the government for the energy crisis due to the government's alleged neglect of Czech citizens or slow and insufficient crisis measures compared to neighboring countries, or [using the budget](#) required for solving the crisis for Ukrainians instead. This narrative was also revived in connection to the January presidential elections when Okamura [criticized](#) the newly elected president Petr Pavel for wanting to visit Ukraine instead of focusing on helping Czech citizens during an energy crisis supposedly caused by the government.

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](#). Okamura calls for an end to the European Green Deal and "the climate-hysterical madness" of the European Union. The cause of the energy crisis is also allegedly the ideological stand against coal and nuclear power. Along with the Green Deal, the Emissions Trading System and Czech participation in the European Energy Exchange were among the most frequently named causes of the energy crisis with appeals to an isolationist Czech energy policy.

However, there was also a different development caused by a noticeable shift in reporting from major media outlets, like the public broadcaster Česká televize (translation: Czech Television), which placed the blame more directly for the current energy crisis on Russia's

aggression. One campaign that sought to bring Putin's role in the energy crisis to people's minds was a [goblin-like statue](#) of Vladimir Putin tightening a gas valve that was placed in Prague and received noticeable media attention. Popular posts on Facebook also included [communication of government members](#) explaining the crisis help provided by the state.

## Assessed Audience:

opposition supporters, general public

## Current Risk Assessment: *Medium*

## Potential Impact:

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. [Only a quarter](#) of the population think that the help coming from the state is sufficient. However, the positive development of major media emphasizing the connection between Russia's war of aggression and energy issues is significant and could diminish the impact of more hostile narratives. The need for further promoting the connection between Russian actions and energy concerns is illustrated by a study that showed two-thirds of Czechs [did not see](#) the connection between the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine. Therefore, they do not think that the eventual end of the conflict will end the crisis.

The above described frequent narratives carry a two-fold potential impact on the right-wing voters, not only on their solidarity with Ukraine but also on the support or openness to green energy and renewables. These narratives attempt to incite support for an unrealistic independent energy policy scenario considering the Czech resources, advocating for cutting off from EU and Western partners rather than from Russia. In [November 2022](#), polls showed the issue of Russian energy supplies divided the population approximately in half – 48% wanted to stop them, while 47% did not. On the other hand, support for stopping the Russian energy supplies was growing.

# Anti-NATO/Military Support

## Key Findings:

Among the total 16,173 posts mentioning the topic, we identified almost 22% of potentially hostile content. Anti-NATO narratives primarily attempted to portray NATO as a Russophobic organization that has dragged the Czech Republic into a war that is not theirs and [prolongs](#) it through its military support of Ukraine. Using the attack on the Kerch bridge but also references to Yugoslavia as an example, NATO was also portrayed as a supporter of [terrorism](#). The underlying message was that the most direct [threat](#) to the Czech Republic is not Russia, but NATO and the government due to supposedly aggressive international politics. The anti-NATO narratives are also further supported by calls for peace and fear-mongering about the possibility of nuclear escalation.

The narrative accusing of warmongering was also revived following the errant missile that fell in Poland in November 2022 when opposition parties [criticized](#) both the government and Ukraine for calling for retaliation on Russia without all the evidence being reviewed. This was portrayed as confirmation that they are seeking to escalate the conflict and incite direct military involvement of NATO. This fed into a more general narrative which blames the West for trying to start World War Three. Attention was also drawn in November by information about [the training](#) of Ukrainian soldiers in the Libavá military training area. Opposition parties [presented](#) this as dragging Czechs into a war that is not theirs, while at the same time unreasonably spending taxpayers' money.

This topic also entered domestic politics before the [January presidential elections](#). One of the final two candidates and ex-PM Andrej Babiš built his campaign before the second round of the elections on the claim that electing his opponent, a retired general and former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Petr Pavel, will mean dragging the Czech Republic into the war in Ukraine. This was also a popular narrative on the Czech disinformation scene and a topic of several hoaxes targeting Petr Pavel before the elections (viral screenshot of a fake text message from the candidate declaring mobilization etc.). Overall, any candidate considered “democratic” and publicly supported by the pro-Western government coalition was a target of fear-mongering about their alleged plans to lead the Czech Republic into a war. However, this topic resonated offline (via billboards and televised presidential debates) more than in the online space (based on interactions).

## Assessed Audience:

far-right and far-left supporters

## Current Risk Assessment: **Low**

## Potential impact:

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%. Newer [polling](#) from January 2023 found 28% of Czechs have a pro-Western stance supporting activity in the war in Ukraine, i.e. at least redeployment of NATO soldiers to the borders of Ukraine and Russia. However, almost a quarter of the population (24%) expressed a pro-Western stance, but supported a more passive stance vis a vis the war, i.e. rejecting the activity of NATO soldiers. But most importantly, there is a bigger group of 34% Czechs who are uncertain and wish for a centric position in the future. This group could be swayed by hostile narratives in the future. With economic hardship expected to continue and support for opposition parties expected to remain or increase there is a potential for key defense policies like the 2% GDP contribution target to be undermined and general support for NATO to weaken. More than half of Czechs [fear](#) that the current war in Ukraine will spill over into a global conflict, with supporters of opposition parties, mainly SPD and ANO, being most fearful.

There is a potential threat of increased distrust towards the government and overall official communication about the war, also because of cases like the rushed statements after the explosion in Poland. Generally, the topic of military aid is sensitive and feeds into a wide manipulative pacifist narrative of peace at any cost, as could be seen with the case of announcing the training of Ukrainian soldiers in Libavá. SPD was also [trying to](#) exploit it politically given that they were the only parliamentary party that voted against the training. As support for the governing party coalition, SPOLU, [decreases](#) and anxiety and fatigue about the war grows, there is a greater opportunity for political parties less supportive of Ukraine to gain political momentum and put pressure on the government to change its course vis-à-vis Ukraine. It is also visible that military support remains and grows as a sensitive topic: while 61% Czechs supported such steps in [March 2022](#), in January 2023, only 36% [agree](#) with intensification of this kind of aid. But towards the end of 2022, the anti-NATO discourse lowered in intensity and hostile narratives became more focused on economic and energy issues.

# Denazification

## Key Findings:

The topic of Nazism and fascism in connection to Ukraine gained the most attention right after the start of the invasion. Hostile sources, including the SPD MEP Ivan David, [repeated](#) Russian propaganda narratives about Ukraine being run by Nazis and carrying out a genocide on the Russian minority in Ukraine. The narratives put emphasis on the fact that Ukrainians, including their political representatives and diplomats, allegedly [openly defend](#) Nazism and are actually proud of their stances. Besides the “usual” hostile suspects like members of the SPD party, fringe movements like the Alliance of National forces joined in on posting alleged [visual evidence](#) of these claims. Attention was also drawn by claims that the Ukrainian fascists are terrorizing civilians (whether Ukrainians or the Russian minority) who are actually seeking asylum in the “bloodthirsty” Russia.

The online debate acquired a domestic aspect when the hostile sources started [pointing out](#) the alleged servility of the Czech PM Fiala to Ukraine when he stayed quiet after Ukrainians political and diplomatic representatives allegedly publicly defended Bandera killing Czechs among many other people. Similarly, the US and NATO were also [accused](#) of supporting fascists in Ukraine or being fascist actors themselves. The West has allegedly overlooked the fascist Russophobic tendencies in Ukraine for a long time.

All in all, hostile sources present the designation of Russia as the aggressor as just a ridiculous “story”. These sources imply that people are being misled by this story of a black and white situation between a “peaceful” Ukraine and the West versus a “bloodthirsty” Russia to obfuscate and dilute Russia’s responsibility for the war. Additionally, Russia was painted as [a victim](#) of hate by the hostile sources while they claimed it is the West supplying Ukraine with weapons and being bloodthirsty.

## Assessed Audience:

supporters of the far-right and far-left

## Current Risk Assessment: Low

## Potential impact:

These denazification related narratives spread mainly in extremist and fringe circles and gained significant attention only after the beginning of the war, which makes their reach lower compared to e.g. economic and energy related topics. However, a certain impact is still perceptible in Czech society – according to [CEDMO polling](#) in June 2022, 26% Czechs agreed that the Ukrainian authorities are fascist or Nazi in character and 31% agreed that the war is Russia’s response to crimes committed in eastern Ukraine.

# Biolabs

## Key Findings:

Conspiracies about biological and chemical weapons laboratories in Ukraine went through a similar development to the denazification narrative, with even less attention, concentrated in the beginning of March 2022 and gaining minimal interactions for the rest of the monitored period. The most popular posts included reposts of the conservative American Fox News channel which [allegedly confirmed](#) that secret biolabs are being run in Ukraine and even that the US is worried Russians will seize them. This was 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. Manipulated TV reports and [Russian documentaries](#) were used multiple times

as evidence for the existence of US biolabs in post-Soviet countries, gaining the highest amount of interactions and shares. Another [popular post](#) from the first half of 2022 claimed biolabs were built in Ukraine in order to directly threaten Russian security and provoke it into an aggression against Ukraine.

## Assessed Audience:

supporters of the far-right and far-left

## Current Risk Assessment: Low

## Potential Impact:

Once again, in the online space, these narratives spread mainly in far-right and [far-left](#) circles and gained

significant attention only after the beginning of the war. When it comes to the impact, [CEDMO polling](#) from June 2022 found 27% of their respondents agree there are US funded laboratories in Ukraine that manufacture

biological weapons. The impact is not completely minimal but can be expected to continue to be overrun by economic concerns.

## Nuclear Escalation

### **Key Findings:**

Fears about escalation of the war into a nuclear conflict spiked right in the week after the start of the invasion. This topic was used by the opposition, like SPD, in their [anti-government narratives](#) supported by warnings that the government will lead the Czech Republic into a nuclear war. These statements also resonated in September and October when political actors like SPD and the far-left mobilized their voters into anti-government protests.

The hostile sources supported the claim that the Czech society and the West is not taking the nuclear threat seriously enough. Sharing the claims of Pink Floyd's Roger Waters [given to RT](#) supported this angle. Hostile actors from the national-conservative political scene attempted [to link aid for Ukraine](#) to the issue of nuclear escalation as a scenario that needs to be considered before any type of aid is provided. The SPD leader Okamura also drew attention while [sharing](#) a statement of the Croatian president Milanović asking what will be the price of beating a nuclear power conventionally and

who will pay it, insinuating expected abandonment by the US.

### **Assessed Audience:**

opposition supporters

### **Current Risk Assessment: *Low-Medium***

### **Potential Impact:**

This narrative was used to support more general hostile trends, mainly by opposition members who used the argument of nuclear escalation in their general anti-government or anti-aid narratives in the fight for political points, which can broaden the audience of such narratives among opposition voters. A [poll from January 2023 shows](#) that even though uncertainty, concern, and fear are dominant among Czechs when looking back at 2022, these feelings stem mainly from a perceived bleak state of society and an increase in material difficulties, rather than from potential (nuclear) escalation of the war in Ukraine. There does not seem to be recent polling mapping Czech concerns about nuclear escalation in particular.

*Hostile narrative research is conducted with the support of the International Republican Institute's Beacon Project. The opinions expressed are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of IRI.*





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