

HOSTILE NARRATIVE BRIEF

WAR IN UKRAINE

A Year of Aggression

Chapter 6 : Czech Republic





About The Beacon Project

The Beacon Project seeks to counter the Kremlin's aggressive campaign to weaken democracies by polluting the information space and eroding confidence in public institutions. Beacon addresses disinformation primarily as a political problem and bolsters vulnerable democracies' ability to track and identify narratives injected by malign actors, conducting extensive quantitative and qualitative public opinion research and media-monitoring focusing on vulnerabilities to disinformation narratives in Central-Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, among others. IRI uses this data to inform policymakers and develop integrated responses.

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Czech Republic



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Top Line Summary

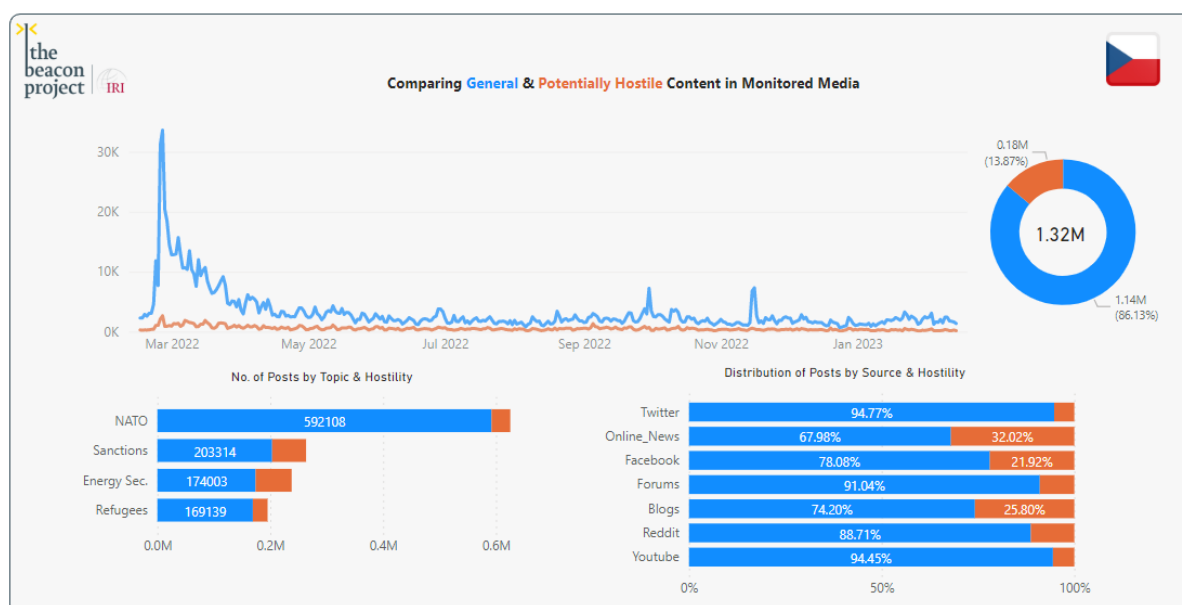
While the public remains largely supportive of Ukraine, it is possible to see signs of war fatigue especially related to the worsening economic situation and uncertain future prospects. The percentage of Czech citizens fully supporting the European Union's (EU) measures, such as sanctions and provision 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

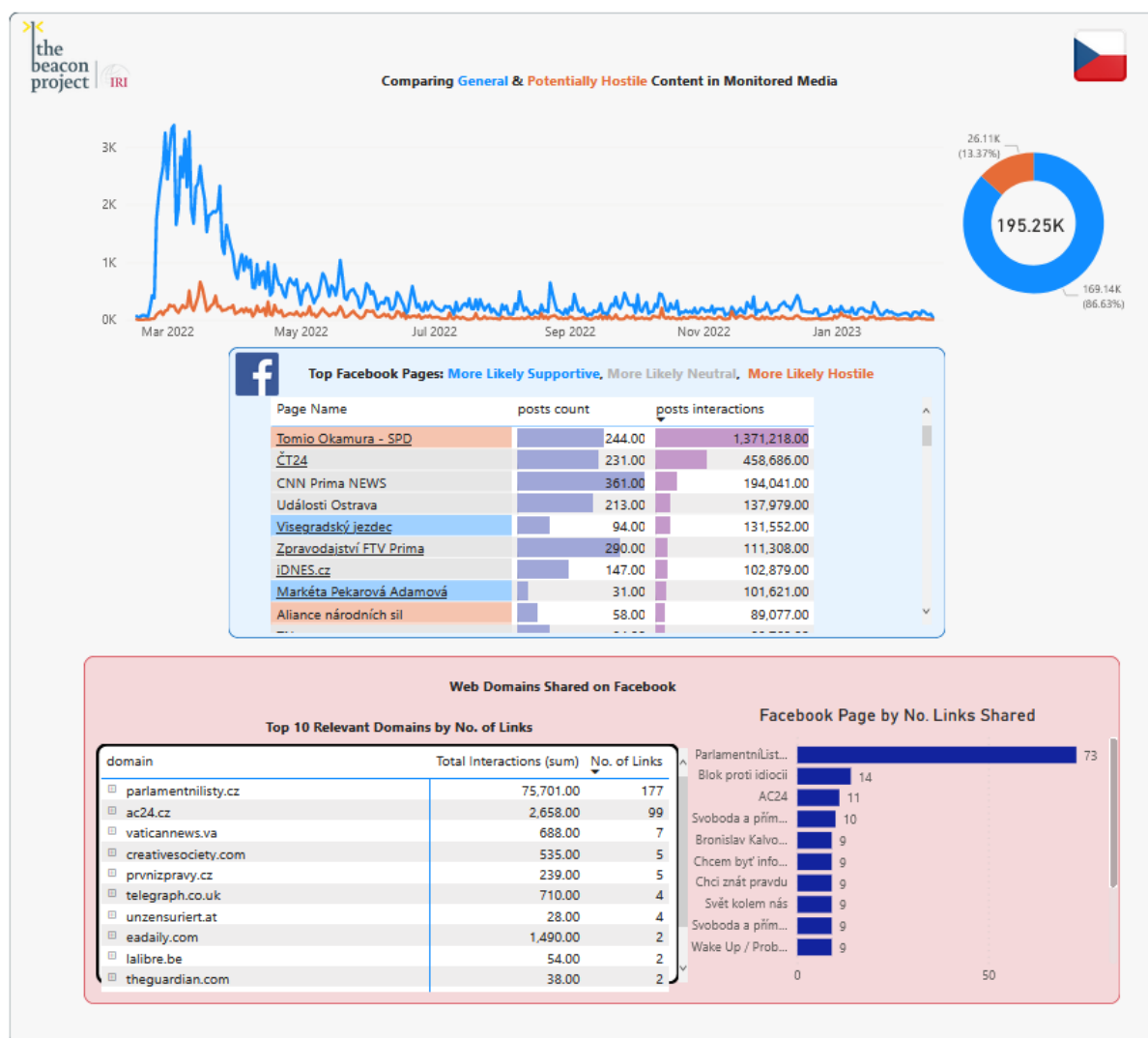
of raising energy prices on the Czech economy and blamed the Czech government for following the EU's policies on sanctions and sustainable energy over national interests. SPD party members openly accused the government of scapegoating Russia for the price increases for which the party blamed on misguided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

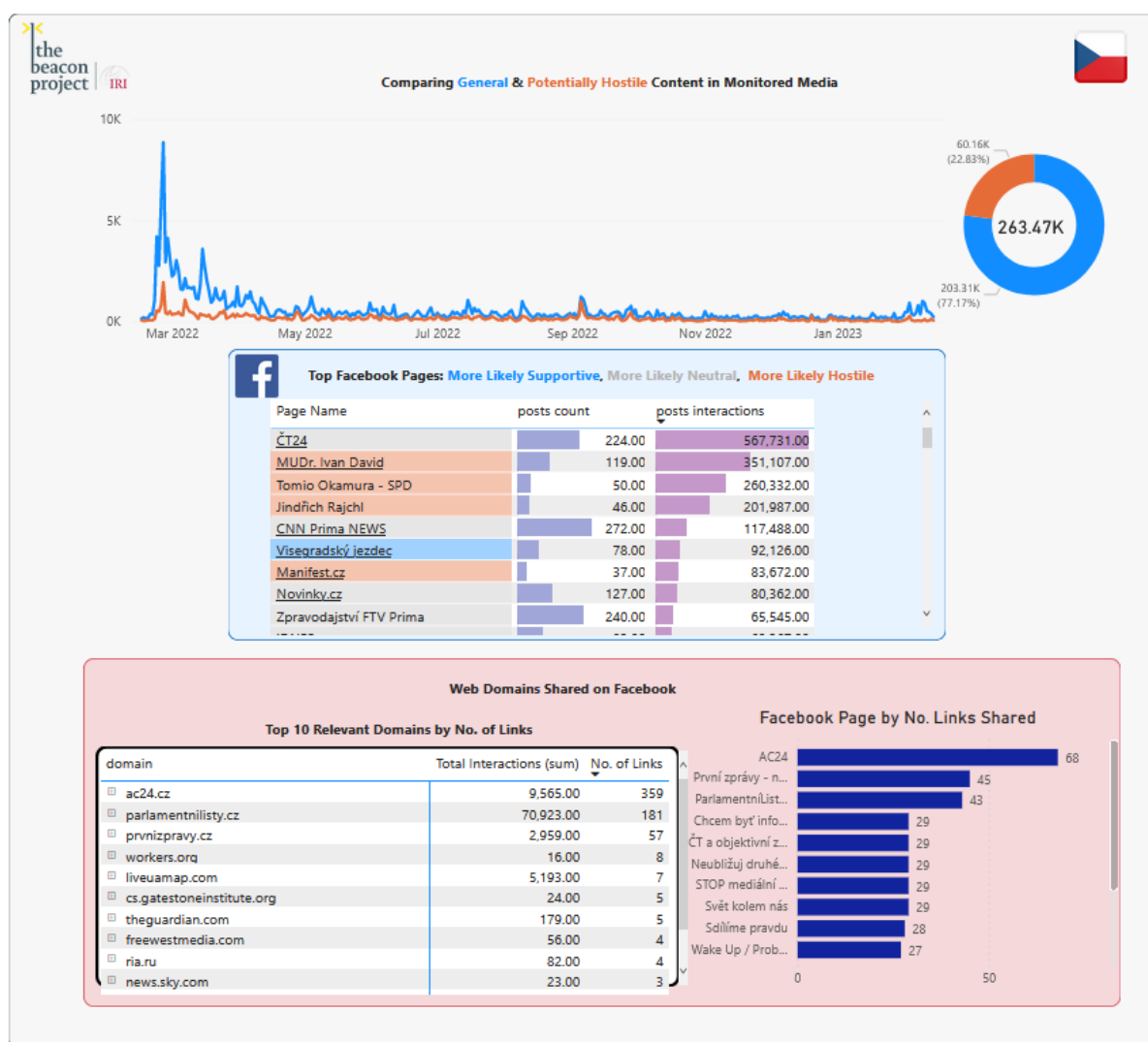
- Highlighting the potential reach of the hostile messaging on Facebook, the 1.4 million interactions from Tomio Okamura's page was more than three times that of the next highest page, the Czech public broadcaster (ČT24) which received 458,686 interactions on their posts referencing refugees. The high 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.

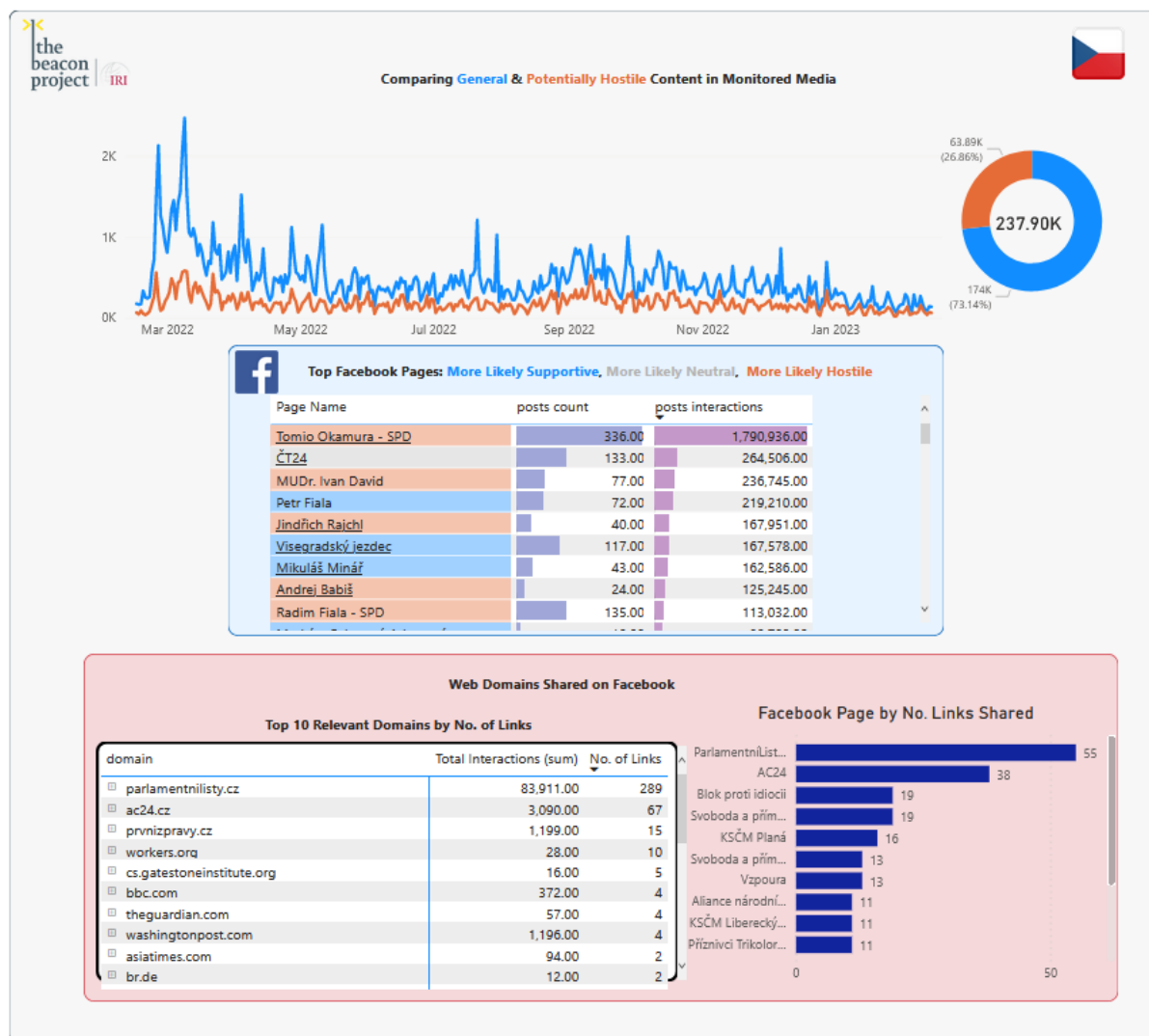
- Although the most prominent Facebook page belonged to the public broadcaster Czech TV and its objective coverage of the topic of sanctions, 4 out of the top 10 pages belong to antisystem actors such as SPD's Ivan David and Tomio Okamura, the new aspiring face of the antisystem scene Jindřich Rajchl 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,

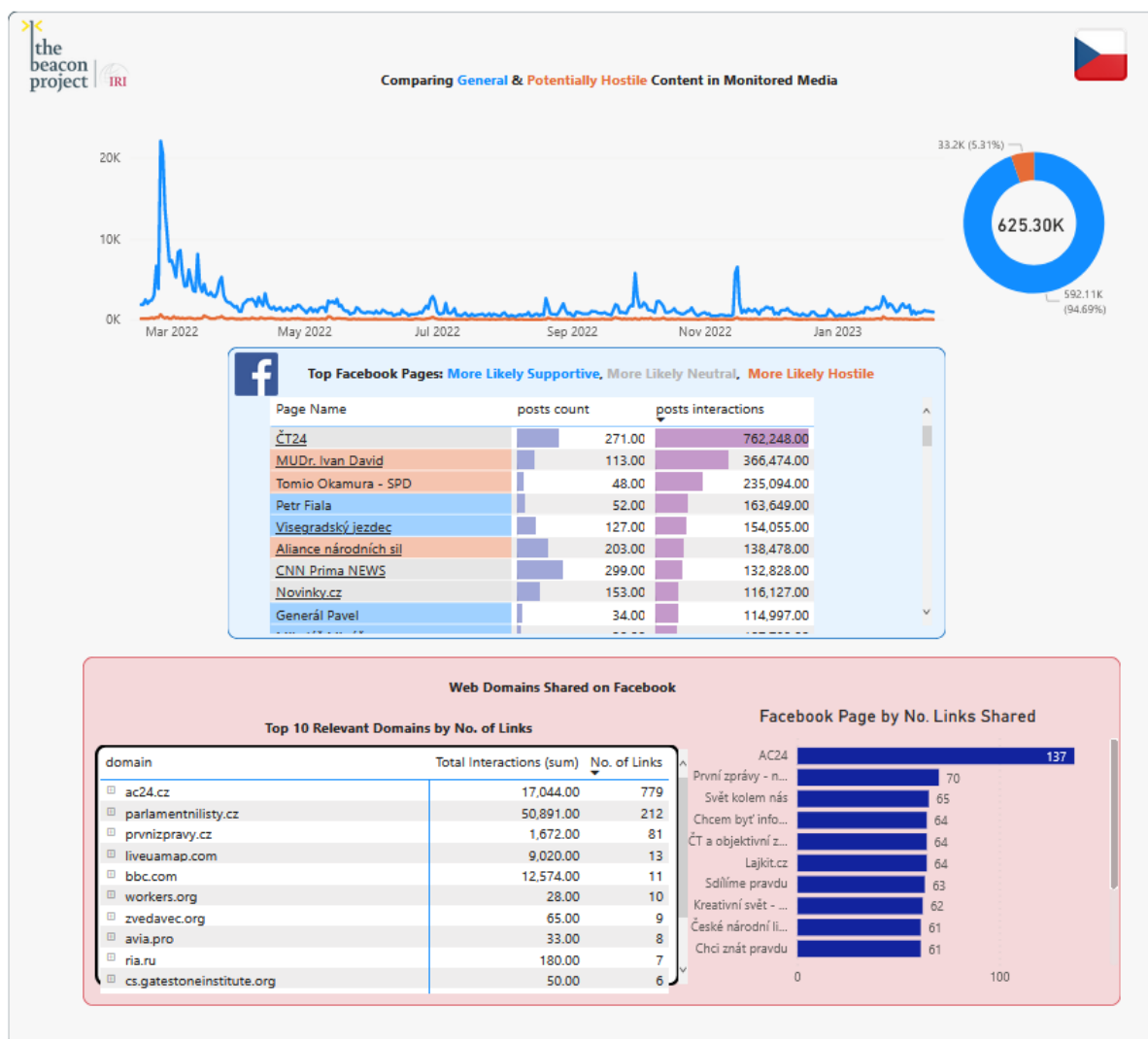
- Once again, SPD's leader Tomio Okamura attracted over 1,5 million more interactions than the second most prominent page belonging to the Czech Television (public broadcaster). Other SPD members, aforementioned antisystem politician Rajchl and also the former PM Andrej Babiš, leader of the strongest 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).

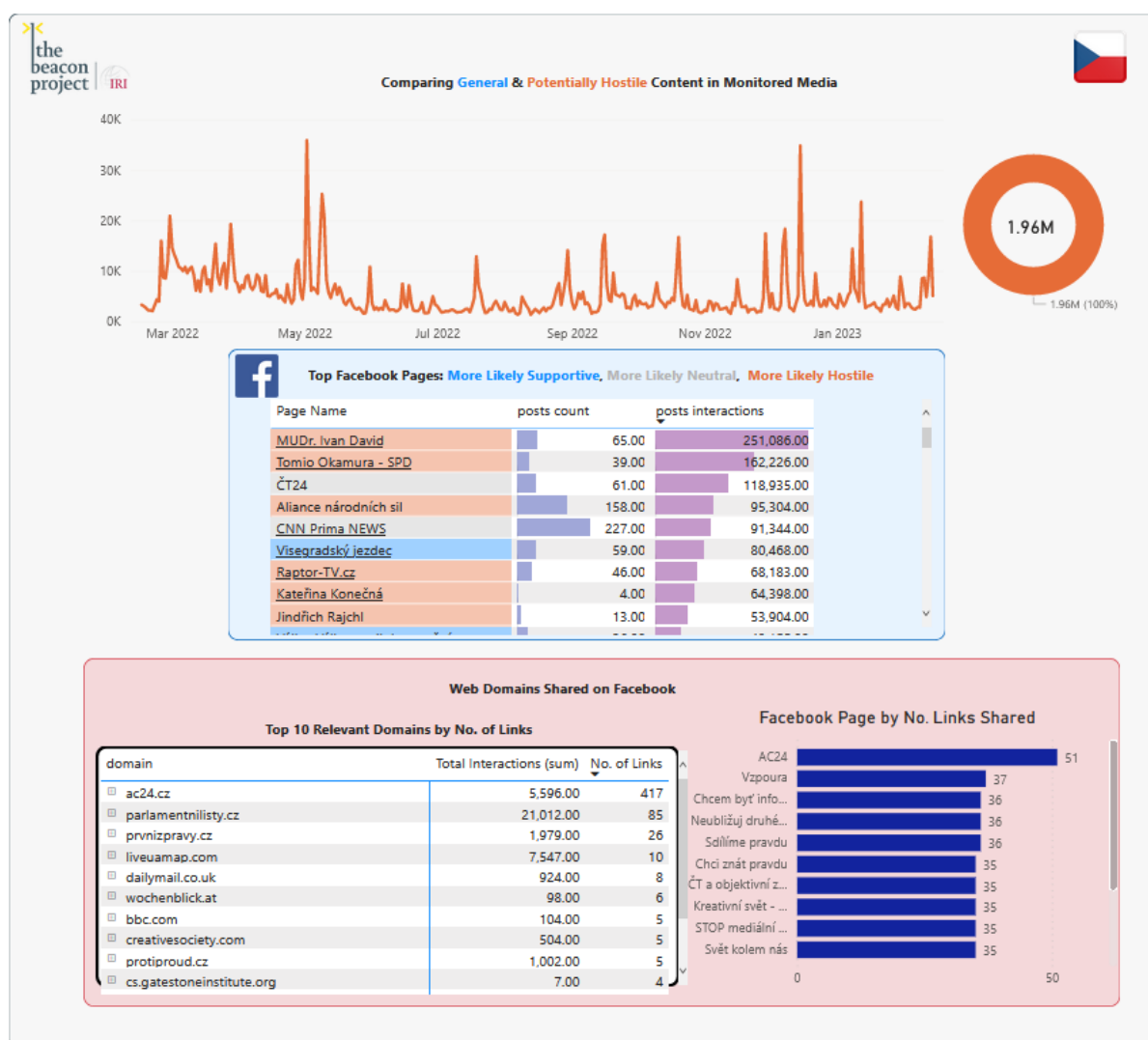
- The top10 Facebook pages are dominated by supportive politicians and activists (PM Fiala, president elect Petr Pavel, the Visegrad Rider) and neutral mainstream media outlets such as the Czech TV (the most prominent page), major commercial CNN Prima News or the most visited internet server novinky.cz. 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*





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