

The background of the cover is a close-up photograph of the Slovak flag, showing the red, white, and blue tricolor and the coat of arms. The flag is slightly wrinkled and draped.

Hostile Narrative Brief: War in Ukraine

A Year of Aggression:

A Case Study of Slovakia

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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 Slovakia, 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 Slovak 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 Slovakia: Background

After the start of the Russian invasion, Slovak political representatives immediately condemned it and Slovakia became one of the main supporters of Ukraine. In September 2022, [Slovak aid](#) to Ukraine, in proportion to the national GDP, was in the world's top ten. However, the population's support waned over the year. In polls from February 2023, [46% of respondents](#) claim they would not help Ukraine or only express verbal support. The hesitant approach of Slovaks can be at least partially explained by the more intense impact of the economic crisis than in neighboring countries, as well as the immediate proximity to Ukraine, which heightens the perception of an existential threat and fear of provocation of Russia. The situation is not helped by the political crisis taking place in Slovakia: in the summer, one of the coalition parties Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) left the coalition and in December, the minority government of the conservative Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OĽANO) collapsed. The country will face a snap election in the upcoming fall.

According to latest [polls](#), the snap election would see the victory of parties undermining the support of Ukraine, such as SMER-SD of the former PM Robert Fico. Fico has spoken multiple times against sanctions on Russia and [proclaimed](#) *"if SMER-SD makes it into the government, I will not allow another single bullet to be exported to Ukraine."* The social democrats are also prone to collaborate with far-right parties like the Republic (currently at 9%), whose members belong to political superspreaders of hostile narratives about Ukraine. Such an outcome of the snap election could also complicate coordination of aid for Ukraine on the EU level. Already, the Slovak population is [among the least supportive](#) towards the EU's sanctions against Russia, and financial, military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine – only 47% support the EU's steps, compared to the EU average of 73% (the only country with a lower support is Greece with 46%).

Anti-Refugees

Key Findings:

The topic of refugees was not overly polarized in the online space for the most of the year considering Slovakia shares a border with Ukraine and has seen an influx of Ukrainians fleeing the war. Based on a keyword search and 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. Since the summer, individual posts have tried to sow panic about [big waves](#) of refugees as a result of the oncoming winter and further Russian [bombings](#) of Ukrainian energy infrastructure. Claims that continued aid for refugees will destroy the already struggling Slovak society and occasional claims about ungrateful or [misbehaving](#) refugees appeared, but these were more individual cases than trends. This messaging remained largely confined to ultra-nationalist circles. Attempts to portray support for Ukrainian refugees as an “extremist liberal” agenda being pushed by President Zuzana Čaputová, have received broader support with the main opposition SMER-SD party joining [similar messaging](#) from the ultra-nationalist Slovak National Party. Additional narratives have tried 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. Slovakia is the only country in which over half of the population (52%) have a negative opinion on refugees. These findings caught the attention of both popular mainstream media and also media known for spreading disinformation. Most of the media reported on the poll in a neutral manner or even with [more open disappointment](#) about the Slovak results. However, some outlets known for spreading disinformation [misused the results](#) to support their claims that Central Europe (with special references to the Czech Republic with 25% in the poll) is obviously sick of helping Ukrainians.

Assessed Audience:

far-right supporters, extended to general public based on economic concerns

Current Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Potential Impact:

On Facebook, anti-refugee narratives have largely not resonated among the general public, with the position mainly being promoted by extremist political actors, especially the far-right Republic movement. There were fears that a harsh winter combined with an increase in Russian attacks on civilian centers and infrastructure could result in an influx of refugees to Slovakia exploited by extremists. However, that did not happen due to secured energy supplies and higher winter temperatures than expected.

Although the GLOBSEC opinion poll results did not paint an optimistic picture of Slovak attitudes towards Ukrainians, the poll created an introspection on behalf of many Slovaks and gained a lot of attention, pushing the hostile narratives out of the center of the online debate. Instead, the debate started to focus more [on the reasons](#) for these perceptions and on the possible role of disinformation campaigns targeting refugees have had on these views. A certain [impact of such campaigns](#) can be seen on the number of Slovaks (53%) who think that there are many criminals among the Ukrainian refugees.

All in all, the hostile messaging targeting refugees was fragmented, most commonly relying on claims that the government helps Ukrainians instead of its own citizens. It is more likely that continuing economic woes could increase the resonance of anti-refugee messaging among the general public, since 73% of Slovaks [think](#) refugees are treated better than Slovak citizens, e.g. when it comes to access to public healthcare. This likely development is already supported by the fact that the most [viral post](#) from the monitored year, from a Republic member, claimed Zelensky is ungrateful and does not care if Slovaks lose their jobs because of the incoming Ukrainians. Due to internal political instability and an upcoming snap election, there is however a certain potential for extremist political parties to gain political momentum.

Anti-Sanctions

Key Findings:

Sanctions was the topic with the highest proportion of content that contained potentially hostile messaging at 23.8% of the total articles/posts recorded. Hostile narratives related to sanctions were dominated by members of opposition parties. These have included the far-right Republic movement gaining the most interactions, former PM Robert Fico from the main opposition SMER-SD party, or former speaker of the Parliament Andrej Danko from the ultranationalist Slovak National Party (SNS). The popular anti-sanction narrative was that Slovakia [cannot do](#) without cheap and reliable Russian gas and shutting it off [would be](#) economical suicide. The hostile sources presented sanctions as self-destructive and increased living costs as a result of [poor EU policy](#) decisions. The underlying message was Slovakia should [prioritize](#) its needs and nothing else. However, posts with higher interactions also included the communication of President Čaputová or the Slovak MFA [explaining](#) why sanctions are necessary.

The Slovak National Party exploited the sanctions topic only to [criticize](#) the government for not caring about its citizens and the struggles of citizens related to energy prices. A narrative of [blaming the West](#) for using false pretexts to [slow](#) down economic cooperation and impose sanctions in general also appeared. All in all, sanctions were viewed negatively as an ineffective step that did not and [will not stop the war](#), the only result being harm to the EU itself. These actors also claimed that the

sanctions were always [a US plan](#) forced onto the EU from which only the US is profiting (thanks to rising sales of LNG) and that blaming the ongoing crisis on Russia is just a cover-up.

Assessed Audience:

Supporters of Opposition Parties

Current Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Potential Impact:

Given the appeal of anti-sanctions narratives to a broader spectrum of political positions including the main opposition SMER-SD party on the left and far-right parties such as the Republic and SNS, it has the potential to act as a bridge between the two sides. Heightened fears about the economy as seen at the end of 2022 can further feed these narratives and strengthen support for isolationist or more non-aligned policies. [Polls already show](#) that voters of SMER-SD express a higher share of apathy towards how the war ends — 34% answered “I do not care”.

Sanctions were often included in a more general criticism of the government. Continued criticism of the government and implications that it cares more about Ukrainians than Slovak citizens has the potential to undermine the current government’s policies. This risk is also increased by the current unstable political situation and snap elections on the horizon.

Energy Security

Key Findings:

Of the 220,575 articles/posts that contained references to energy security, 18.6% contained potentially hostile content. Hostile narratives were dominated by the far-right Republic movement which supports the stance that Slovakia [needs](#) Russian gas. In May the movement also used manipulative posts to get attention by informing that Ukraine [stopped](#) the Russian gas supplies coming to Europe while also blaming Ukraine or the West for the energy crisis. Several bittersweet comments appeared

which claimed [Slovaks should look](#) for the money they are missing to pay for energy bills in Ukraine. Authors claimed the EU-imposed sanctions were allegedly [enforced by the US](#) in a plan to profit from the situation. LNG imports from the US were an important part of these hostile narratives. 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. A part of the online debate called for their lifting as the only possible way to solve the crisis. The question of energy security and food security seemed to be equally important in this case.

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, [mainly in the context](#) of approving the new national budget and the allocation of finances for fighting the energy crisis. Towards the end of 2022, attention was also drawn by quality mainstream media such as the weekly TREND or the TA3 Television reporting on the current state of the energy market — prices going back to how they were before the war or the energy supplies being secured for the winter. There was also a development during the monitored period which led to clearer communication of both politicians and [the media](#) on Russia's role in the energy crisis, which was overlooked before. Although accusations came from opposition parties on both the right and the left, claiming that [Slovakia does not](#) know how to face the energy crisis and the government has done nothing or very little to help its citizens, blaming the energy crisis on domestic actors did not resonate among the popular Facebook posts

Assessed Audience:

opposition voters

Potential Risk Assessment: *Medium*

Potential Impact:

All in all, hostile narratives represent a smaller part of the popular online debate on energy security and focus more on criticizing the government than on eroding the help provided to Ukraine. These narratives target and can potentially solidify the positions of long-term anti-West oriented core voters of the opposition, especially the far-right.

However, increasing prices of energy are a matter of concern for almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of Slovaks active online. Almost half (47%) claim the *“highest level of concern”*, a quarter is a *“little less worried”* and 22% are in the middle of the scale, according to a survey from September 2022. A new [poll](#) from February 2023 shows that increased energy prices significantly impacted the lives of 44% of Slovaks, who had to compensate for these costs by limiting other expenses. Although the hostile narratives are now traditionally promoted by far-right and opposition representatives, the impact of the energy crisis on a regular household's energy bills is yet to be seen in full. Therefore, the appeals to *“look for your money in Ukraine”* have a polarizing potential in the future.

Anti-NATO/Military Support

Key Findings:

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. Hostile messaging presented NATO as an [aggressive](#) organization which is definitely not defensive and has been provoking Russia over Ukraine at least since 2014, and continues to do so. 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. This messaging

also included conspiracy theories about the US actually controlling Zelensky or the [Slovak MFA](#). Many popular posts included [appeals](#) to stop the war, mainly the weapon supplies for Ukraine from the West which are not presented as needed aid but as the reason for the still ongoing war.

References to NATO saw an expected spike related to the missile incident in Poland in November 2022 as well as the Alliance's Foreign Ministers meeting in Bucharest at the end of November. Although such events did not increase the share of hostile content in the overall coverage of the topic, they did increase this share among the analyzed top Facebook posts. This was largely driven by representatives of far-right opposition parties such as the Republic or the Slovak National Party who [present](#)

NATO as the real aggressor leading a proxy war against Russia reluctant about Ukrainians. Ukraine is allegedly just strategic material and cannon fodder for NATO's ambitions. The left also engaged in hostile messaging, such as the historian and founder of a left-wing movement called the Socialists Eduard Chmelár. He used the missile explosion in Poland as a pretext to [criticize](#) Kyiv for an alleged dangerous provocation and trying to drag NATO into the war, which is an example of another popular hostile narrative. On the other hand, appeals for putting a stop to military aid for Ukraine were pushed into the background towards the end of 2022 (although what appeared on Facebook were [sarcastic claims](#)¹ that there is nothing more to send to Ukraine since all NATO weapons are already there and in the end, it was NATO who was demilitarized).

Assessed Audience:

supporters of ultranationalism, opposition voters

Current Risk Assessment: *Low*

Potential Impact:

With anti-NATO narratives mainly concentrated on the far-right, significant influence on the opinion of the

general public on NATO is not expected. These narratives are mostly attractive to people already sympathetic to anti-Western perspectives. However, since Slovakia shares a border with Ukraine, Slovaks might question military support for Ukraine out of a more direct fear of involvement in the war, especially in the light of events such as the missile incident in Poland.

Although only 14% of Slovaks [think](#) NATO is to blame for the war, 32% think all sides of the conflict share the blame. The primary anti-NATO messaging that pushes the idea that NATO is more problematic than beneficial for the country could feed into this part of the society that sees partial blame in the West and NATO, with the potential to impact social dialogue on NATO and to undermine support for the 2% GDP commitment. Also, in the future, an eye should be kept on the possibly emerging narrative of Ukraine harboring "all" NATO/Western weapons since it could be connected with claims such as Ukraine terrorizing civilians with NATO weapons. However, this narrative has not been significant so far.

Denazification

Key Findings:

The disinformation about a Ukrainian fascist regime also penetrated the Slovak online space, brought in by both right and left-wing actors. The most popular [post](#) of the year mentioning this topic was from a member of the Republic movement. He also accuses politicians of presenting fascism as good as long as it is Ukrainian fascism. According to the Republic members, modern democratic states are supporters of fascism (or at least they forgive fascist crimes like the bombing of Serbia). Attention was also drawn by former PM Fico who has considerable reach on Facebook and who used the topic to [criticize](#) the government for putting Slovaks in the position of an ally of fascists.

Other far-right and pro-Kremlin actors supported the denazification propaganda line of Russia and used their

Facebook accounts to work on offering visual "evidence" of the fact that Ukraine needs denazification. This included alleged video recordings of Ukrainian [extremists](#) terrorizing senior citizens or [Ukrainian children](#) healing. All in all, these hostile sources presented the events in Ukraine as [a successful revision](#) of history that resurrected Nazism and fascism.

Assessed Audience:

far-right supporters

Current Risk Assessment: *Low-Medium*

Potential Impact:

Narratives and conspiracies such as one about a fascist regime in Ukraine do not have a significant impact on

¹ Source: Facebook page of Bádateľ. The page has since been blocked by Facebook.

societal discourse while they are kept in the far-right and other extremist circles. However, their potential impact increases when politicians like Robert Fico misuse them e.g. in the critique of the government and drag such conspiracies into the more mainstream political debate in attempts to gain political points. [CEDMO polls](#) have recorded that 37% of Slovaks think the Ukrainian authorities

are fascist or Nazi in character (overriding the other researched countries, the Czech Republic and Poland). 45% of Slovaks also think Russia's steps are a response to crimes committed in eastern Ukraine. These numbers show the denazification narrative resonates among Slovaks to a certain extent, and it will be important to prevent exploiting this topic before the upcoming snap election.

Biolabs

Key Findings:

The topic of biological and/or chemical weapons laboratories in Ukraine was mostly popular right after the start of the invasion with another interest spike in July when North Korea accused the US of producing biological weapons in Ukraine. This accusation was reported on by both [gray zone](#) and [mainstream media](#) (mainly tabloids like Nový Čas and Topky.sk). However, the overall popular debate on the topic was divided between hostile sources, consisting mainly of outlets known for long-term spread of disinformation, and sources supportive towards Ukraine, such as Slovak government institutions, and their debunking activities.

Similarly as in the Czech Republic, hostile sources took the words of Victoria Nuland, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, out of context, and [claimed she confirmed](#) that secret biolabs are being run in Ukraine and even that the US is worried Russians will seize them. This was a manipulation [debunked](#) by multiple independent

fact-checkers. This manipulation received attention, but so did President Čaputová's [warnings](#) about Russian propaganda exploiting the topic of biolabs or the debunking conducted by [the Slovak MFA](#).

Assessed Audience:

far-right supporters

Current Risk Assessment: Low-Medium

Potential Impact:

[Polls](#) from June 2022 show 43% of Slovaks think there are US funded laboratories in Ukraine that manufacture biological weapons. This illustrates the potential impact of outlets known for spreading disinformation supporting the conspiracy about secret biolabs. However, it is positive that pre-bunking and debunking efforts of the state also draw attention which can lessen the impact of the conspiracy.

Nuclear Escalation

Key Findings:

The topic of a possible nuclear escalation of the war received the **lowest** number of interactions on Facebook from all the monitored topics. Some outlets [spread pro-Russian propaganda](#) defending Russia, claiming Russia never wanted a war, and it is Zelensky who is challenging the West to join a nuclear war. This line of messaging [attempted](#) to put democratic states in the role of nuclear aggressors and Russia in the defensive.

This topic was also used in anti-government messaging, specifically by the far-right Republic movement. Its members [accused](#) the government of Eduard Heger of treason with the reasoning that they are making Slovakia a target by sending weapons to Ukraine when Putin is threatening with a nuclear war. However, in this instance, the party did not join the narrative about peaceful Russia threatened by Western nuclear aggressors.

The Republic's posts were among those with the highest number of interactions during the monitored year. A [video](#) viewed 394k times also appeared, shared by a nationalistic and Islamophobic activist Ľuboš Hrica, an admirer of Italian extremism. The video presents a two-year-old simulation of a Russian-US conflict escalated into a nuclear conflict. Hrica comments that the risk of nuclear war has increased since the US "along with others" are exploiting the war in Ukraine in order to provoke Russia into World War Three and puts the blame on country leaders.

Assessed Audience:

far-right supporters, possibly extended to broader opposition

Current Risk Assessment: *Low-Medium*

Potential Impact:

Based on the media monitoring data, the topic of nuclear escalation is more limited to (ultra)nationalist circles,

which is also reflected in the *lower* attention such narratives draw in the online space and especially Facebook. A certain risk is posed by the narrative potentially penetrating the anti-government criticism in the more mainstream political debate.

There does not seem to be a recent poll mapping Slovak concerns about a nuclear escalation. At the beginning of March 2022, shortly after the start of the invasion, the concerns were naturally high — [69% of Slovaks](#) were worried about a nuclear conflict. However, already in [August 2022](#), security concerns were overridden by economic concerns about increasing prices and inflation. This perception is also reflected in the highest share of hostile narratives targeting economic issues in the present research. Therefore, the assessed risk of narratives suggesting nuclear escalation or generally any kind of escalation remain in the background of economic concerns.

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.



