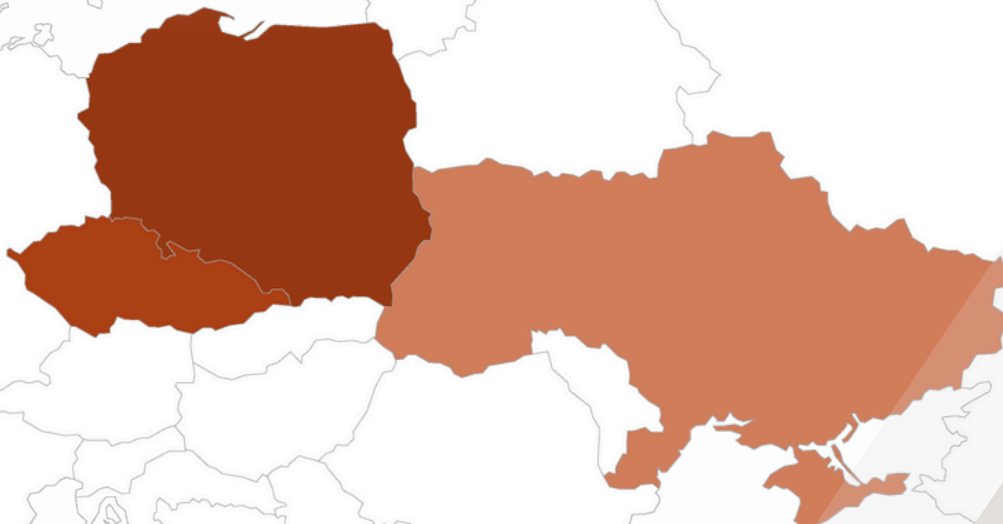


UNDERMINING UKRAINIAN EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

DISCREDITING ATTEMPTS IN THE
INFORMATION SPACE OF POLAND
AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC



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Introduction

While waging large-scale armed aggression against Ukraine, Russia is also actively undertaking a hybrid war against the rest of the democratic world, particularly Europe. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which frequently take the form of information and psychological operations, are one of Russia's primary tools in its hybrid war against European countries.

One of the main goals of Russian informational influence in European countries is to discredit the idea of EU enlargement. Moscow sees the European integration of countries that were hysterically in the area of its geopolitical influence as a mortal danger to its imperial ambitions. That is why, despite the lack of prospects for strategic success in the war against Ukraine, the Kremlin does not give up hope of pushing Kyiv off the European path.

A successful European Ukraine poses an existential threat to the Putin regime, which is why Moscow has spent years directing its information resources to discredit Ukraine and Ukrainians in the European media. Russia has traditionally placed special emphasis on undermining Ukraine's bilateral relations with neighboring EU countries through speculations on the topics of national memory and economic competition.

Today, in times of war, Kyiv's relations with neighboring countries are an important factor in the resilience of Ukraine's economy and the constancy of military supplies. That is why Moscow attaches particular importance to undermining Ukraine's bilateral relations with neighboring countries through the means of propaganda. By exerting an informational influence on European audiences, the Kremlin is trying to undermine the determination of EU governments to provide aid to Ukraine.

Therefore, within the framework of this analytical note, the vulnerabilities of the information space of Poland and the Czech Republic were analyzed. The authors assess the activities of political actors in Poland and the Czech Republic that are engaged in spreading anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Also, the limits of the potential penetration of anti-Ukrainian narratives into public opinion in Poland and the Czech Republic were determined on the basis of sociological surveys.

Within the framework of the analytical note, specific cases of the spread of anti-Ukrainian narratives are highlighted. In particular, attempts to discredit Ukraine in the context of Ukrainian refugees and the issue of the export of Ukrainian agricultural products were analyzed.

Key aspects of Poland and the Czech Republic support to Ukraine

Poland and the Czech Republic have been providing significant support to Ukraine and Ukrainians who have been forced to flee their homes since the full-scale invasion began. As of today, approximately 957,000 Ukrainians have sought refuge in Poland and 346,000 in the Czech Republic¹. Only Germany accepted a larger number of Ukrainian refugees. Thus, Poland and the Czech Republic are leaders in the humanitarian sphere of aid to Ukraine by providing shelter and jobs to Ukrainians who were forced to leave their homes as a result of Moscow's aggression. It is important to note that Poland and the Czech Republic provide competitive working conditions for Ukrainians. According to the Ministry of the Interior and Administration of Poland, the level of employment of Ukrainian refugees in Poland is the highest among EU countries, and is 67%².

In the Czech Republic, a similar figure of 51% applies, which is higher than in most other EU countries. According to a survey conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) in April 2024, 66% of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the Czech Republic are somewhat or completely satisfied with their current living conditions in their new country³.

In terms of economics, Poland is a key transit country for Ukrainian goods entering the EU. However, over the last year, bilateral economic relations have suffered significantly as a result of Poland's imposition of an embargo on the import of certain agricultural products from Ukraine beginning in 2023. Polish farmers and transporters' campaigns to block the Polish-Ukrainian border have had a negative impact on Poles and Ukrainians' mutual understanding. It is worth noting that, despite a number of agreements reached between Polish farmers and the Polish government, as well as intergovernmental consultations, the issue of Ukrainian agricultural product export and transit remains vulnerable to the spread of anti-Ukrainian narratives in the Polish information space.

Poland and the Czech Republic have made significant contributions to Ukraine's energy security in response to Russia's barbaric attacks on civilian infrastructure. Following the resumption of Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy sector in the spring of this year, Poland and the Czech Republic supplied Ukraine with energy equipment to mitigate the effects of the energy shortage.

Currently, Poland is exporting electricity to Ukraine, which has become vital following the destruction of power generation facilities due to Russian attacks. According to press reports, Poland may increase its electricity exports to Ukraine from 340 MW to 1,200 MW.⁴ In March 2024, Ukraine and Poland signed a memorandum of cooperation on energy. The document calls for the development of joint programs and projects of common interest aimed at restoring the war-damaged energy infrastructure, as well as steps to improve energy market integration. Thus, we can confirm Polish companies' interest in restoring Ukraine's energy sector.

¹ Ukraine Refugee Situation, URL: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>

² В яких країнах Європи найбільше працевлаштованих біженців з України, URL: <https://rb.gy/f2587i>

³ Survey of Ukrainian refugees in Germany, Poland and Czech Republic: Satisfaction with life abroad, return to Ukraine, interest in the situation in Ukraine, URL: <https://rb.gy/9yuiqk>

⁴ Збільшення лімітів імпорту електроенергії: є невеликі зрушення, URL: <https://rb.gy/lftvks>

In turn, the Czech Republic has provided Ukraine with three dozen cogeneration units to generate electricity and heat. In addition to energy, the Czech Republic prioritises drinking water purification and healthcare during wartime. In this regard, Prague has provided a water treatment plant, which will help provide water to approximately 100,000 people, as well as a variety of medical equipment.

Of course, in the thick of a full-scale war, the dynamics of European integration between Kyiv and Brussels are inextricably linked to Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression. Therefore, since February 2022, Poland and the Czech Republic have made significant contributions to military aid to Ukraine. Both countries have provided Ukraine with large volumes of armored vehicles, artillery, air defense systems, anti-tank weapons, and other equipment. Initiatives have been launched to work together with Ukraine on military-industrial complex projects.

Poland has a strategic position for the logistics of arms supplies to Ukraine. Poland became the first country to supply the Armed Forces of Ukraine with a significant number of tanks—approximately 325—accounting for more than half of all tanks provided by Western countries. According to the Polish Foreign Minister, Poland provided Ukraine with 44 packages of military support⁵. Since the start of the full-scale war, Poland has supplied Ukraine with nearly \$3.5 billion in military aid. The total cost of Polish government support in the first two years of the war amounted to approximately 9 billion US dollars⁶.

In contrast, the Czech Republic has led the "ammunition coalition" for Ukraine. Under Czech President Petr Pavel's initiative, European countries are set to supply the Ukrainian army with over 800,000 rounds of ammunition (a figure that has since been increased to more than 1.5 million)⁷. The Czech government's announcement of this initiative in early 2024 provided critical moral support for Ukrainians in the face of American aid delays. Furthermore, between 2023 and 2024, 8,000 Ukrainian Armed Forces personnel will have received training in Czechia⁸.

Thresholds of Susceptibility to Russian Propaganda: Poland and the Czech Republic

This study attempts to synthesize the issues emerging in the Polish and Czech information space that may be perceived as threats or obstacles to Ukraine's efforts towards EU membership.

Sociological surveys on support for Ukraine should be considered one of the most important indicators for defining the boundaries of potential anti-Ukrainian narratives' penetration into the consciousness of European societies. These indicators reflect more than just ordinary citizens' empathy for Ukraine. The attitude toward the question of Ukraine's European future identifies areas of public opinion that are receptive to the skeptical sentiments about Ukraine and Ukrainians spread by Russian propaganda.

⁵ Information of Minister of Foreign Affairs on Polish foreign policy tasks in 2024, URL: <https://rb.gy/xkqm30>

⁶ Minister of Foreign Affairs: Poland has provided military aid to Ukraine worth 9 billion USD, URL: <https://rb.gy/3kf049>

⁷ Ukraine Is Benefiting From Ammunition Pledge, Czech Envoy Says, URL: <https://ur0.jp/uC5Sc>

⁸ Czech Republic to Accept 4,000 Ukrainian Soldiers for Training, URL: <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/czech-republic-to-accept-4-000-ukrainian-soldiers-for-training/>

Of course, disagreement (to varying degrees) with the policy of aiding Ukraine does not directly reflect Poles' or Czechs' willingness to follow Kremlin propaganda. However, in the political sphere, the parameters of support for Ukraine and Ukrainians indicate the size of the electoral field in which local political players sow doubt about Ukraine's European prospects or openly call for a review of existing forms of support for Ukraine on its path to a united Europe.

In this context, it is critical to examine the parameters of Ukrainian support in the war with Russia, as well as the concept of Ukraine's European integration, through the eyes of Polish and Czech society.

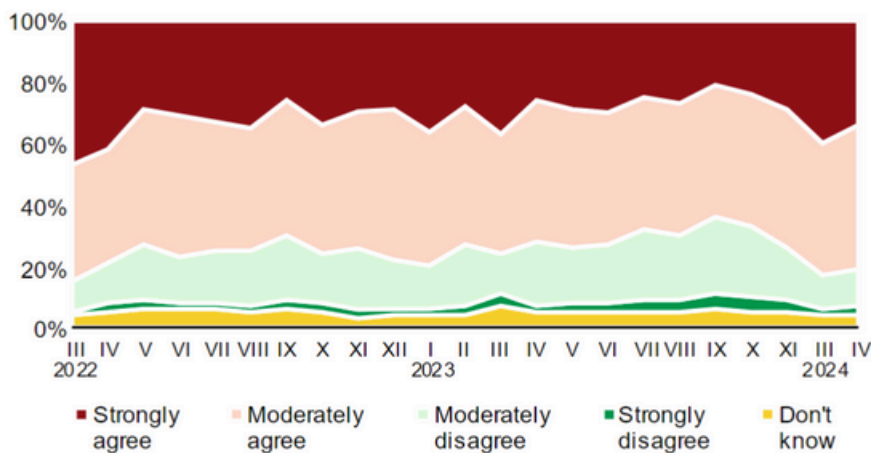
Analyzing the Polish information space in terms of narratives hostile to Ukraine should be preceded by a general introduction to the current attitudes of Polish society towards the Russia-Ukraine war and Ukrainians, compared to other European countries. The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) February 2024 survey⁹ provides an opportunity for this. The study offers a good insight into the broader social context that forms the basis for the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of narratives hostile or harmful to Ukraine in a given country.

Several Poland-related results from this analytical brief are worth mentioning:

- Poles are more likely to believe (17%) that Ukraine will win the war than the average from the study (10%)¹⁰.
- When asked how Europe should support Ukraine, Poles are at the forefront and are the most likely to declare that Europe should support Ukraine in reclaiming territories occupied by Russia (Sweden 50%; Portugal 48%; Poland 47%). The average for this response in the study is 31%.
- Poles are also significantly above average when assessing whether people from Ukraine pose more of a threat or an opportunity to the country. In Poland, 40% of respondents indicated that these people pose a threat, the highest percentage among the surveyed countries. This places Poland ahead of Hungary (37%) and Romania (35%).

The Polish public's strong support for Ukraine in the war against Russia stems from a history of opposing Russia's expansionist ambitions. Since the Kremlin's full-scale invasion, the percentage of Poles who believe the war threatens Poland's own security has remained consistently high. According to infographics from the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS), this concern has been increasing since the autumn of last year, and it is now still comparable to the levels seen at the beginning of Russia's 2022 invasion¹¹.

Do you agree that the war in Ukraine is a threat to the security of Poland?



Source: <https://www.cbos.pl/EN/publications/reports.php>

⁹ Wars and elections: How European leaders can maintain public support for Ukraine, URL: <https://ecfr.eu/publication/wars-and-elections-how-european-leaders-can-maintain-public-support-for-ukraine/>

¹⁰ The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) survey was conducted in 12 countries (Austria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, and Sweden).

¹¹ Jonathan Scovil. Wojna w Ukrainie a NATO, URL: <https://shorturl.at/zTZQZ>

At the same time, surveys show that Poles are divided on whether the current level of support for Ukraine by their national government is sufficient. While 45% believe their country is providing enough support, and nearly the same percentage believe it is providing too much. To some extent, the disparity between the level of support for Ukraine and the assessment of Warsaw's contribution to meeting Kyiv's defense needs stems from public misunderstandings of the war in Ukraine as a result of a multi-month dispute targeting Ukrainian agricultural imports.

It is worth noting that the Polish public generally supported the demands of farmers and transporters who have been repeatedly blocking the Polish-Ukrainian border since October 2023. During the peak of the events, public opinion polls showed that up to 77% of Polish citizens supported the protesters' demands. In light of this, the Polish public's trust in the Ukrainian leadership, particularly President Zelensky, has declined significantly over the last year. The Pew Research Center reported a 22-point drop (in 2023, 70% trusted Zelensky, yet 48% in 2024)¹³.

It should be noted that disillusionment with Ukrainian authorities in general has had no effect on support for Ukraine's EU accession. According to a More in Common think tank study, 53% of Poles believe that Ukraine should join the European Union in the coming years. Whereas, nearly one-sixth of respondents (17%) have no opinion on Ukraine's EU accession, while 16% are opposed.

According to Adam Traczyk, director of More in Common Polska, "There is widespread solidarity and support for Ukraine's European ambitions [...] We conducted the study after information about disputes over Ukrainian agricultural imports had spread in society. As a result, despite some differences in interests, the majority of Poles believe Ukraine belongs in the European Union."¹⁴

Simultaneously, according to research¹⁵ conducted by the Polish Center for Public Opinion Research, 60% of Polish citizens declare a favorable attitude towards accepting and helping refugees from Ukraine. This level is lower than during the first year of the war (80%, and over 90% at the start of the invasion), but the downward trend appears to have halted.

Simultaneously, respondents' political views have a significant impact on their attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees. In response to the question, "In your opinion, should Poland accept Ukrainian refugees from conflict areas?" The majority of voters (51%) from the far-right party Confederation (Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość) said "no." Furthermore, one-third of supporters of the main opposition party, the conservative Law and Justice (PiS), are opposed to accepting refugees from Ukraine. Only 17% of voters from the ruling political Party Civic Platform (PO) responded negatively¹⁶.

The indicated above survey's results seem to confirm that Polish society correctly perceives the war in Ukraine as a threat to Poland's security. However, this does not necessarily align with support for other issues related to Ukraine. These differences have already become evident in the Polish-Ukrainian dispute over grain and the protest by Polish transport companies, which slowed down the entry of Ukrainian truck drivers into the EU through the Polish border. The source of these contradictions is fear based on the economic situation of various social and professional groups.

¹² Sondaż: Zdecydowana większość Polaków popiera protestujących rolników, URL: <https://shorturl.at/3PoQT>

¹³ Confidence in Zelenskyy and support for Ukraine, URL: <https://shorturl.at/97n4i>

¹⁴ Ważny sygnał dla naszego społeczeństwa". Chodzi o przyszłość Ukrainy w UE, URL: <https://ur0.jp/VcMQc>

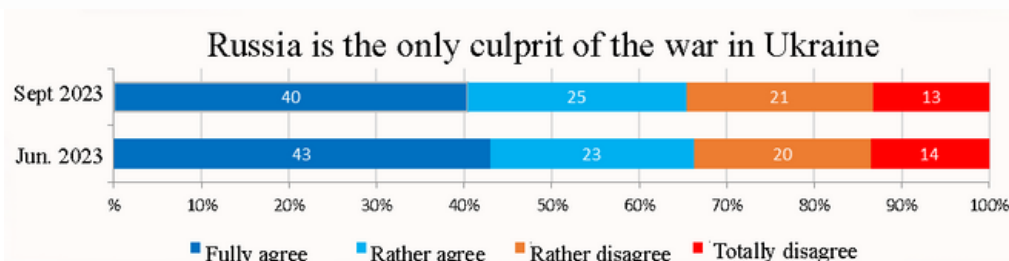
¹⁵ Jonathan Scovil. Wojna w Ukrainie a NATO, URL: <https://shorturl.at/zTZQZ>

¹⁶ "Ważny sygnał dla naszego społeczeństwa". Chodzi o przyszłość Ukrainy w UE, URL: <https://ur0.jp/VcMQc>

These emotions are fertile ground for actors using various manipulative techniques and elements of hybrid warfare (primarily disinformation). They are also a means for building mobilization and support by some politicians and political parties in Poland.

This fear and its instrumentalization will likely remain a constant factor influencing Polish society's reception and resistance to disinformation. It will also remain a resource that some political groups (like Confederation) will draw on to build their position on the political scene.

Regarding the perception of the Russia-Ukraine war among Czech society, there is a certain ambivalence. On one hand, as sociological surveys show, the majority of Czechs hold Russia responsible for the conflict in Ukraine. On the other hand, these same surveys indicate that public opinion is dominated by the position that the war should be ended as soon as possible, even at the cost of losing some Ukrainian territories. This trend is generally explained by fatigue from the prolonged war.

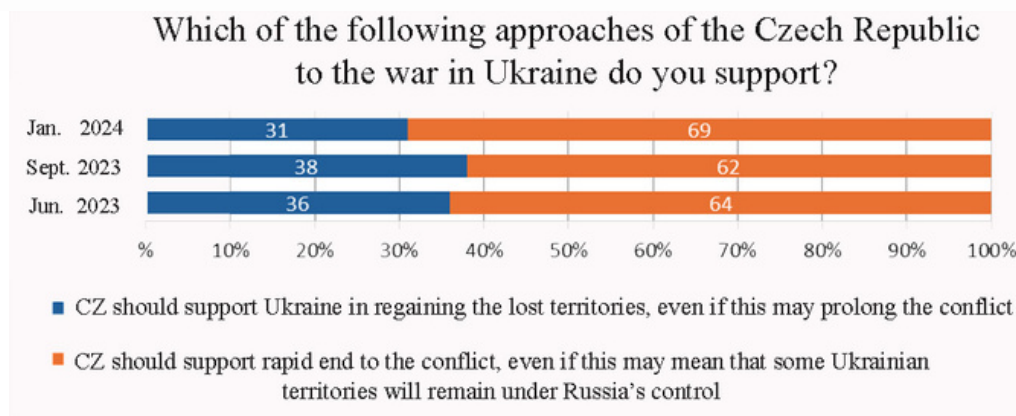


Source:
<https://www.stem.cz/cesi-nepolevuji-v-podpore-uprchliku-z-ukrajiny/>

According to Jaromír Mazák, director of research programs at STEM, the opposite view is held by people who fundamentally accept the Russian interpretation of the war (14%, according to surveys)¹⁷.

Following the data from the sociological group STEM, 65% of respondents believe that the Czech Republic should strive for a quick end to the war, even if it means Russia retains some of the occupied territories. Consequently, according to a March survey, 54% of Czechs are against supplying weapons and military equipment to Ukraine.

It is worth noting that the share of those who agree to support Ukraine until the lost territories are reclaimed is somewhat higher among the youth—on average, by five percentage points.



Source:
<https://www.stem.cz/cesi-nepolevuji-v-podpore-uprchliku-z-ukrajiny/>

¹⁷ Češi nepolevuji v podpoře uprchlíků z Ukrajiny, URL: <https://shorturl.at/rudZ2>

When it comes to Ukrainian Euro-integration, 61% of respondents are opposed to negotiations for Ukraine's EU accession. Only 26% of Czechs support Ukraine's rapid accession to the EU. Thus, of the four Visegrád Group countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), the Czech Republic has the least support for Ukraine's rapid accession to the European Union.

At the same time, according to data from the Bratislava-based non-governmental Institute for Public Affairs (IVO), the Czech Republic has the highest proportion of residents among the V4 countries who believe Ukrainian refugees are a burden on their economy (69%)¹⁸. Pre-war refugees who sought temporary refuge in the Czech Republic, on the other hand, have consistently received Czech support. According to STEM data, at least half of the public believes that the Czech Republic should keep the Ukrainian refugees it has accepted so far.

As a result, analyzing the cross-section of public sentiments in Poland and the Czech Republic on the issue of Ukraine's Euro-integration, the following can be stated:

- Poland leads other Central European countries, including the Czech Republic, in terms of support for Ukraine's EU membership. However, it is worth noting that there is ambivalence in certain segments of Polish society, with some respondents opposing Ukraine's membership in the EU yet supporting Kyiv in its fight against the Russian aggressor.
- In Czech society, there is also strong support for Ukraine in the war. However, empathy for the victim country of aggression rarely extends to the topic of European integration for Ukraine.
- It is also worth noting that Poles' and Czechs' political preferences influence how much sympathy they have for Ukraine and Ukrainians (including refugees in EU countries). Thus, right-wing populist audiences like the Confederation (Konfederacja) and the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) are the most vulnerable to anti-Ukrainian narratives.

The main narratives of anti-Ukrainian disinformation in Poland

The approximate scale of Russian disinformation in Poland is highlighted in the 2023 report by the Institute of Media Monitoring and the Demagog Association. According to the report, in 2023, there were "289,000 posts and comments deprecating Ukraine and Ukrainians"¹⁹. This confirms that Ukraine and the war remain one of the most pressing issues in Polish media.

One of the most important entities specializing in combating disinformation in Poland is the state-run National Academic Computer Network—State Research Institute (NASK). In the NASK report prepared in cooperation with the FakeHunter service, operating under the Polish Press Agency (PAP), since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the number of keywords monitored by NASK in the context of the war has increased by 346% (the report summarizes 2022–2023). Currently, the database of keywords under monitoring is 1,225. During this time, NASK reported 825 harmful informational materials to state authorities with recommendations for quick reactions. NASK also notes that over 90% of the monitored accounts (there are over 1,600) focus on promoting Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives, and over 85% publish content critical of the aid provided to Ukraine by Western countries and societies.

¹⁸ Češi v rámci V4 nejméně podporují vstup Ukrajiny do EU, uprchlíky mají za zátěž, URL: <https://shorturl.at/FdeRy>

¹⁹ Raport Demagoga i IMM: Antyukraińska propaganda w 2023 roku, URL: <https://ur0.jp/FBa7W>

Russian propaganda is parasitizing on issues that influence the perception of Ukraine's EU-integration in Poland: integration of Ukrainian refugees, memory politics, and economic rivalry between Poland and Ukraine in domestic and foreign markets.

Regarding dimension of historical memory Russian propaganda aims to highlight the problematic aspects of Ukrainian-Polish relations. The historical theme was especially relevant for Russian propaganda during the first year of the full-scale war. Through the fantastical fake of Warsaw's desire to annex Western Ukrainian territories, the Kremlin tried to justify its geopolitical revanchism, shifting the responsibility to other countries, in particular Poland²⁰. At the same time, Moscow attempted to incite revanchist sentiments among the Polish far right in order to reclaim Western Ukrainian lands for Poland. For example, in September 2022, Russian media reported, citing Polish politician Konrad Rękas, that „Poles want to return the property lost during World War II in Western Ukraine and have filed more than 1,500 lawsuits in courts”²¹. For sure, the target audience for statements about Poland's preparations for “annexation” of western Ukrainian regions is, on the other hand, Western European audiences, who are especially susceptible to narratives about direct NATO-Russia confrontations.

However, since February 2022, Ukrainian refugees have become Russia's main target in the Polish information space. These narratives are as follows: “Government is caring about Ukrainian refugees more than their own citizens”, “Ukrainian refugees are a burden on the economy”, “refugees from Ukraine are in fact economic migrants, who take all the jobs from the Poles, Ukrainians violate social norms, behave badly, and spread the radical ideology of Ukrainian nationalism”²².

Russia inflates and magnifies anti-Ukrainian sentiments in the Polish media by disseminating statements from specific actors or news about political actions via its own media outlets. The activities of pro-Russian figures who speculate on historical topics, use hate speech, and fuel the narrative of "Ukrainian dominance", (for instance Marek Halasza, Leszek Sikulski, Confederation politicians) have been systematically covered by the Russian media. Kremlin media actively covered the activities of the so-called "Polish Anti-War Movement," which launched a campaign of street actions and public events under the slogan "To nie nasza wojna" ("This is not our war") in the spring of 2023. ("The movement's leader," Leszek Sykulski, is portrayed in Russian media as "a force that does not agree with his country's authorities' anti-Russian policy"). Similarly, the Russian press routinely highlighted critical statements about Ukraine and Ukrainians made by Rafal Mekler, a representative of the Confederation Party, who organised actions on the Polish-Ukrainian border²³.

Russia's media promotion tactics, which target specific Polish figures through its own media outlets, have had limited impact on the Polish audience due to language barriers and a general distrust of Russian sources of information. Despite this, Russia uses social media tools, particularly Telegram, to provoke and stoke animosity between Poles and Ukrainians over economic issues (such as Ukrainian agricultural exports) and everyday conflicts (such as living conditions and refugee rights).

²⁰ Shoigu pushes the Kremlin narrative of Poland's occupation of Ukraine. But why?, URL: <https://ur0.jp/6cKQk>

²¹ ФЕЙК: Поляки требуют в украинских судах вернуть квартиры, утраченные во время Второй мировой войны, URL: <https://ur0.jp/863BR>

²² DIVIDE AND CONQUER: Russia's information war against Ukrainian-Polish relations, URL: <https://ur0.jp/rzH0s/>

²³ Рафал Меклер назвал экономическую блокаду Украины "воспитательной работой избалованного ребёнка", URL: <https://news-kharkov.ru/society/2023/11/28/70510.html>



The campaign of the Polish Anti-War Movement, February 2023. Source: wyborcza.pl

The party promoting anti-Ukrainian narratives in the Polish information space

Poland shares a common problem with other EU countries: political actors who use anti-Ukrainian messages to mobilize support and build their political positions on narratives often align with Russian narratives. The most prominent example is the far-right party Confederation (Konfederacja). This party comprises various groups. Therefore, the messages of the Confederation are not always consistent.

The established presence in the Polish parliament has partially shifted Confederation towards the political mainstream, as seen after the 2023 parliamentary elections. However, due to the participation of extremely radical groups, this party remained the main conduit for anti-Ukrainian content during the campaign for the European Parliament elections in June 2024 (although the Ukraine-related issues were not present to a large extent during the campaign).

This directly stems from the experiences of the 2023 election campaign, in which the Confederation polarized Polish society by using messages hostile to the growing presence of Ukrainian citizens in Polish society. In the election year 2023, the Confederation initially exploited anti-immigrant content, which only partially concerned Ukrainian citizens and was more focused on Muslims and African countries. This situation changed in the third quarter of 2023. The Confederation gradually reduced the use of the anti-migrant narrative in favor of an anti-Ukrainian (anti-refugee) narrative. This change was related to the renewal of the Polish-Ukrainian dispute over Ukrainian grain, which was supposed to be exported by Poland to target markets worldwide but often ended up on the Polish market, contributing to a decline in Polish grain prices and causing losses for Polish producers. Additionally, some of the grain from Ukraine was of low quality and not intended for the food industry (so-called technical grain)²⁴.

²⁴ More about the anti-immigrant narrative during the electoral campaign in Poland in 2023 see in the report written by the author of this analysis: Social media monitoring during the 2023 Polish Election. Immigration as a threat to national security and identity, URL: <https://ur0.jp/T7rkh>

The Confederation used the grain dispute to attack the United Right government, focusing solely on an anti-refugee message directed at Ukrainians. This situation slightly changed when, in the summer of 2023, the affair related to selling visas to citizens of Asian and African countries came to light, involving high-level officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a result of the investigation, information reached the public that during the PIS government, over 100,000 visas might have been sold to citizens of other countries in this way. Against this background, the Confederation changed its use of the anti-immigrant narrative, emphasizing the discrepancy arising from PIS's declared anti-immigrant stance and the scandal that allowed a large number of citizens from foreign countries to enter Poland.

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This shifting of emphasis and greater concentration on the anti-immigrant or anti-Ukrainian narrative, depending on the current political context, demonstrated the Confederation's skill in using various narratives and instrumentalizing different processes to build its political position.

In the Confederation's anti-Ukrainian message, two main threads can be distinguished. The first, more general one, is primarily built on emotions surrounding the slogan "Stop the Ukrainization of Poland." This thread includes content opposing the presence of Ukrainian citizens in Poland as such, which threatens Polish sovereignty. Historical references to controversial events in Poland and Ukraine (the Volhynia issue) also appear here. This thread has been exploited for a long time, primarily by one of the most radical wings of the Confederation - the Confederation of the Polish Crown (KKP) – and its leader, Grzegorz Braun, currently a currently MEP.

The second thread is more nuanced and attempts to describe specific problems related to the increased presence of refugees in Poland. This thread makes mention of the threat that rising Ukrainian imports pose to Polish agriculture as well as social policy-related issues and their costs to the Polish state budget. In this regard, opposition to cash benefits for every child in a family (currently PLN 800, previously PLN 500 until the end of 2023) appears. Other wings of the Confederation, such as the leader of the National Movement, MP Krzysztof Bosak, are active in this thread. Examples of content from both threads from the 2023 election campaign are shown below.



"Zero social support for Ukrainians in Poland". A post was published by the Confederation during the electoral campaign of 2023.



"Stop the Ukrainization of Poland". A post was published by the Confederation of the Polish Crown during the electoral campaign of 2023.

The volatile border:

How have the protests affected Polish support for Ukraine's European integration?

Issues related to agriculture and social policy will remain carriers of anti-Ukrainian content in Poland. For example, in May 2024, Krzysztof Bosak used the vote in the Polish Sejm on continuing financial aid for Ukrainian citizens in Poland to present this as "privileges" (implied to be unjustified) for Ukrainian refugees. He explained his position as opposed to the mainstream parties²⁵.

In the first half of 2024, the Confederation's messages regarding Ukraine were not as sharp and polarizing as during the 2023 election campaign. However, in the statements of individual politicians from this group, Ukraine appears in a broader context. An example is issues related to the construction of port infrastructure needed to handle the increased amount of goods imported to Poland. Justifying the need for such investments, the Confederation uses various arguments, among which the problem of Ukrainian grain still appears, describing it as "flooding the Polish market," causing huge problems for Polish agriculture²⁶.

A significant context here is the farmers' protests that took place in Poland and other EU countries in the first half of 2024. Although the main axis of farmers' opposition in this case was the proposed solutions of the EU's climate policy under the European Green Deal, they created the right conditions for weakening Ukrainian EU membership narratives. Competition from Ukrainian farmers will be presented as an additional threat to Polish agriculture, which cannot be agreed upon in the face of increasingly restrictive EU climate policy. The experience of Poland's path to the EU suggests that issues related to the Common Agricultural Policy will remain a point of contention and, from Ukraine's perspective, may prove to be a significant obstacle on the road to membership. During Poland's accession to the EU, some Western European countries raised concerns about threats to their agricultural sectors from Polish food producers and applied various restrictions, such as not opening the labor market to Polish workers in the initial years of Poland's EU membership.

It is worth noting that in the context of challenges for Polish agriculture in the face of Ukraine's EU membership, disinformation activities may mix with normal information policy and media activities (there is a risk of misinformation). This is due to the fact that all media, not just those in the industry, are and will be heavily discussing the subject. Examples from 2024 show how narratives are built based on the widespread creation of a sense of threat, (which generates more Internet traffic). Both mainstream and right-wing media feature headlines in the context of Ukraine's EU membership, such as "huge threat"²⁷, "Polish agriculture may lose out on Ukraine's EU accession," and "accession of Ukraine means not only gains but also costs."²⁸ It is worth adding that the content of these articles is not generally anti-Ukrainian. Both experts and agricultural communities cited in media materials support Ukraine's EU accession and point to it as a decision with no alternative. They also argue that the Polish agricultural sector must adapt to the new situation by becoming more competitive and technologically advanced.

²⁵ URL: <https://www.facebook.com/100044167702312/posts/994196778729236/?mibextid=r540aB7S9Ucbxw6v>

²⁶ URL: <https://ur0.jp/19VbS>

²⁷ An example of the mainstream media, URL: <https://ur0.jp/0iIFJ> and industry-specific web portal <https://ur0.jp/hEOsH>

²⁸ An example of the right-wing media, URL: <https://ur0.jp/VmR61>

The main narratives of anti-Ukrainian disinformation in the Czech Republic

Support for Ukraine became a focal point in the 2023 presidential elections in the Czech Republic, with candidates taking varying stances on the war. Ultimately, the victorious candidate, Petr Pavel, advocated for steadfast support of Ukraine and prompt integration into the European Union.

In the context of the war, various narratives have emerged from disinformation actors, including portraying the violent acts as a "special operation" and emphasizing the need for "denazification of Ukraine." According to the annual report regarding the disinformation scene in the Czech Republic for the year 2023, the most common narratives also portray Ukraine as a corrupted, fascist country that acts in the interests of the West (especially the USA)²⁹. Moreover, the narratives were trying to evoke fear over the possibility of a nuclear escalation of the war or deepen the negative sentiment towards Ukrainian refugees.

Unlike some other V4 countries, the Czech Republic has taken a few measures in response to disinformation. For instance, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, a number of disinformation websites were taken down by the web provider to curb the spread of false information. In this regard, alternative sources of information, mainly social networks, have grown increasingly vocal and assertive in their dissemination of information.

Russia originated narratives focus on devaluing sexual minorities and demonizing NATO, the EU, or the Green-Deal. On the other hand, the Kremlin shows a level of support to governments led by Eurosceptic politicians, such as Victor Orban or Robert Fico.

Fortunately, there has been a notable rise in journalistic and activist efforts aimed at countering falsehoods and challenging misleading claims. The proliferation of alternative information is primarily facilitated through social media platforms such as Facebook, X, TikTok, and Telegram, with the content often sourced from various media websites.

Of particular interest is a recent revelation from Czech intelligence services, which uncovered deliberate efforts by Russian proxies to engage with aspiring Czech politicians and prominent individuals in an attempt to sway the outcome of the 2024 European Parliament elections.

Some of the most notorious "disinformation companies" include a propaganda network in the EU called "Voice of Europe." In March 2024, intelligence services from several EU countries, including Poland and the Czech Republic, uncovered a Kremlin-funded spy network that used the website Voice-of-Europe.eu to spread disinformation. The Prague-based news portal was aimed at spreading narratives that persuaded the European Union to cease aid to Ukraine. The media outlet was active on social networks such as Facebook and X, where it has over 180,000 followers.

²⁹ Annual report on the state of the Czech disinformation scene for 2022, URL: <https://ur0.jp/Bu8Gp>

The Czech Security Information Service (BIS) identified that a pro-Russian propaganda network was engaged in activities with "serious consequences for the security of the Czech Republic and the EU." "Voice of Europe" actively campaigned against the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and independence of Ukraine³⁰.



Source: rferl.org

In particular, this site was used to covertly fund pro-Kremlin candidates for the June 2024 European elections. It has been reported that Hungarian, German, Belgian, French, Dutch, and Polish politicians received money from Russia³¹.

Since 2023, the Czech Ministry of Interior constantly monitors activities falling under pro-Russian hybrid influence and strives to analyze their origins. The police emphasize that the goal of such actions is to undermine and weaken the foundations of the country's democratic system.

Alternative media stakeholders have engaged in discussions regarding the motives behind Russia's purported interest in influencing election outcomes, with skepticism raised about the veracity of such information. Moreover, concerns have been raised about the Czech Republic's preparedness to respond to potential Russian actions, given the perceived inadequacies in the state of the Czech army and equipment supplies.

Furthermore, even though the Czech Republic does not have specific anti-disinformation laws, it does have regulations against disseminating alarming messages or inciting violence against any cultural group. These regulations have been used against individuals promoting violence against Ukrainians or spreading fake news about crimes committed by Ukrainians.

Sometimes pro-Kremlin actors achieve their local goals by conducting public anti-Ukrainian provocations, which are then amplified by Russian media outlets. For example, during 2023 several anti-governmental demonstrations took place in Prague under the banner "Czech Republic Against Poverty". Among the protesters were individuals clearly associated with the "Russian world," identified by symbols of "Z" and chevrons of the "Wagner" Private Military Company (PMC), openly expressing approval of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. However, these occurrences are episodic. Russian propaganda is primarily concerned with disseminating information through digital channels rather than street performances.

³⁰ Under Investigation Across Europe, Pro-Kremlin Voice Of Europe Has Deep Balkan Ties, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-voice-of-europe-czech-information-war/32904006.html>

³¹ Eurovolby rozhodne migrace či bezpečnost. Změnit se může i Green Deal, URL: <https://ur0.jp/d6Yz9>

The theme of Ukraine's European integration does not rank high on the overall list of narratives that Russia attempts to incorporate into the Czech Republic's information space. Attempts to discredit the concept of Ukraine's European integration are embedded in mainstream anti-Ukrainian narratives that criticize the national government's policies toward Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.

However, amidst the protracted nature of the war in Ukraine concerns have been raised regarding the expedited process of Ukraine's integration into the EU. Various perspectives have emerged, including warnings of potential challenges such as increased migration and the need for careful consideration of the implications of Ukraine's EU candidacy. It is evident that Ukraine's bid for EU membership holds symbolic significance at present, particularly as the geopolitical landscape evolves with upcoming events such as the U.S. presidential elections.

Ukrainian refugees in the Czech Republic under Ru- propaganda attack

The ongoing support for Ukraine emerges as a central theme³² in alternative media narratives. While European integration of Ukraine may not be a primary narrative, the influx of Ukrainian refugees and its impact on Czech society remain a pressing issue. The Russia-Ukraine war has had ripple effects, with rising prices of goods on the global market and continued warfare prompting scapegoating and blame-shifting. Ukrainian refugees have been unjustly targeted³³ in narratives that accuse them of various transgressions, such as job theft and exploitation of Czech resources for personal gain.

In the Czech Republic, the manipulation of public perception regarding Ukrainian refugees has been notably influenced by prominent figures like Tomio Okamura. Okamura, the leader of the right-wing populist party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), has been vocal in the media, asserting that Ukraine and Ukrainians are "unnecessary" for the Czech Republic. He often frames this narrative as a financial burden, claiming that Czech taxes are being diverted away from Czechs to support Ukrainians, which furthers resentment and hostility.



"Pensions for Czechs, not Ukrainians" – an example of SPD campaign materials on the eve of the 2024 European Parliament elections

³² Under Investigation Across Europe, Pro-Kremlin Voice Of Europe Has Deep Balkan Ties, URL: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-voice-of-europe-czech-information-war/32904006.html>

³³ Eurovolby rozhodne migrace či bezpečnost. Změnit se může i Green Deal, URL: <https://ur0.jp/d6Yz9>

The theme of Ukraine's European integration does not rank high on the overall list of narratives that Russia attempts to incorporate into the Czech Republic's information space. Attempts to discredit the concept of Ukraine's European integration are embedded in mainstream anti-Ukrainian narratives that criticize the national government's policies toward Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.

Ethnic conflicts have also become more widespread in the Czech Republic given that a considerable number of Roma people live on its territory³⁴. On June 10, 2023, a case involving the killing of a Roma individual by a Ukrainian national was reported in the Czech Republic. The Confederation Party serves as the mouthpiece for anti-Ukrainian narratives in Poland's information space.

According to the Czech publication "Romea," which cites police, the altercation that resulted in injuries and death began on public transportation. According to some witnesses, the Ukrainian man addressed a larger group of Roma youth who were loudly listening to music and shouting inside the tram. The situation escalated into a physical altercation, in which the Ukrainian man allegedly used a knife for self-defense³⁵.

The peak of dissatisfaction triggered open threats. On July 18, during protests in the Czech cities of Brno and Krupka, slogans nearly turned into attacks on Ukrainian refugees' housing. Protesters (mostly Roma) chanted, "Ukraine, get away from here". "Get out! Leave!" Video footage from the event shows the crowd chanting slogans such as "It is our home here," "Wretched Ukrainians", and "Glory to Putin" in an area populated by Ukrainian refugees³⁶.

The main tool of Russian propaganda against the Roma community is the demonization of Ukrainian refugees in Europe. They intend to reinforce existing disinformation, which the Kremlin strategically disseminates throughout the free world, identifying and capitalising on each society's "pain points" to achieve the most effective polarisation.

³⁴ According to the government's qualified estimate for 2021-2030, approximately 262,000 Roma live in the Czech Republic (2.5% of the total population), making it the largest minority in the Czech Republic.

³⁵ Why are relations tense in the Czech Republic between the Romani and Ukrainian minorities?, URL: <https://ur0.jp/oSOMF>

³⁶ Russian Hydra in Europe: Czech Republic Under Attack, URL: <https://ur0.jp/Ue1fs>

Conclusions

One of the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been the increased scale of disinformation in the Polish and Czech information spaces.

The main area of penetration of Russian narratives into the Polish information space is social media. Aside from Russian attempts to influence the situation in Poland, right-wing domestic politicians use anti-Ukrainian messages to rally support for their parties. This is particularly noticeable peak election campaigns periods. Poland is currently halfway through a multi-year election cycle, that will end in 2025 with the presidential elections.

Poland essentially bears responsibility for countering disinformation and weakening narratives that could harm Ukraine on its path to EU membership. This applies to state institutions, politicians, security structures, and the broadly understood civil society. Strengthening political relations between Poland and Ukraine can also prove effective a. Ukrainian politicians and the expert community in Ukraine must be aware of how critical messages (e.g., regarding support provided by Poland to Ukraine) can support Polish circles in building their position on anti-Ukrainian narratives. At the same time, resolving as many contentious issues as possible at the political level will deprive these groups and circles of political fuel.

The Czech Republic, like other countries in the Visegrad Group (V4), boasts a vibrant scene of alternative media that frequently shapes public opinion on topics such as the European Union, NATO, COVID-19, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Czech Republic lacks a comprehensive strategy for combating these influences, including strategic communication and a regulatory framework. Moreover, it is not just alternative media that disseminates misleading information, but also politicians leveraging it for personal gain.

The influence of disinformation in the information space of the Czech Republic poses a significant threat to Ukrainian European integration efforts. The spread of false narratives and propaganda not only misleads the public but also undermines the principles of democracy and freedom. It is essential for the Czech Republic to develop a comprehensive strategy to combat disinformation, including implementing regulatory frameworks and strengthening strategic communication efforts.

To effectively counter the disinformation campaigns and propaganda efforts, the Czech Republic must work towards enhancing media literacy programs, those that promote fact-checking initiatives, and foster critical thinking skills among the general public. Additionally, collaborative efforts with other European countries and international organizations should be prioritized to address the root causes of disinformation and misinformation. By taking proactive steps to combat disinformation, the Czech Republic can contribute to the stability and security of the region while supporting the European integration efforts of Ukraine.